REVIEWS

Anything is possible

Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, preface by Alain Badiou, trans. Ray Brassier, Continuum, London and New York, 2008. viii + 148 pp., £16.99 hb., 978 0 826 49674 4.

Philosophical speculation can regain determinate knowledge of absolute reality. We can think the nature of things as they are in themselves, independently of the way they appear to us. We can demonstrate that the modality of this nature is radically contingent – that there is no reason for things or 'laws' to be or remain as they are. Nothing is necessary, apart from the necessity that nothing be necessary. Anything can happen, in any place and at any time, without reason or cause.

Such is the ringing message affirmed by the remarkable French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux in his first book, *After Finitude*, originally published by Seuil in 2006. Against the grain of self-critical and self-reflexive post-Kantian philosophy, Meillassoux announces that we can recover 'the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers', the utterly 'foreign territory' that subsists in itself, independently of our relation to it. And when we begin to explore this foreign land that is reality in itself, what we learn is that

> there is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise.… Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing.
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> Neither events or laws are governed, in the end, by any necessity other than that of a purely 'chaotic becoming – that is to say, a becoming governed by no necessity whatsoever'. (Meillassoux, 'Potentiality and Virtuality', *Collapse* 2, March 2007, p. 59)

For Meillassoux, as for Plato or Hegel, philosophy's chief concern is with the nature of absolute reality, but as Meillassoux conceives it the nature of this reality demands that philosophy should think not 'about what is but only about what can be'. The proper concern of a contemporary (post-metaphysical, post-dogmatic but also post-critical) philosophy is not with being but with *may*-being, not with *être* but with *peut-être*. If Meillassoux can be described as a 'realist', then, the reality that concerns him does not involve the way

things are so much as the possibility that they might always be otherwise.

It is the trenchant force of this affirmation, no doubt, that accounts for the enthusiasm with which Meillassoux's work has been taken up by a small but growing group of young researchers exasperated with the generally uninspiring state of contemporary 'continental' philosophy. It's easy to see why Meillassoux's *After Finitude* has so quickly acquired something close to cult status among some readers who share his lack of reverence for 'the way things are'. The book is exceptionally clear and concise, entirely devoted to a single chain of reasoning. It combines a confident insistence on the self-sufficiency of rational demonstration with an equally rationalist suspicion of mere experience and consensus. The argument implies, in tantalizing outline, an alternative history of the whole of modern European philosophy from Galileo and Descartes through Hume and Kant to Heidegger and Deleuze. It is also open to a number of critical objections. In what follows I reconstruct the basic sequence of the argument (also drawing, on occasion, on articles published by Meillassoux in the last few years), and then sketch three or four of the difficulties it seems to confront.

The simplest way to introduce Meillassoux's general project is as a reformulation and radicalization of what he on several occasions describes as 'Hume's problem': that pure 'reasoning a priori' cannot suffice to prove that a given effect must always and necessarily follow from a given cause. There is no reason why one and the same cause should not give rise to a 'hundred different events'. Meillassoux accepts Hume's argument as unanswerable, as 'blindingly obvious': 'we cannot rationally discover any reason why laws should be so rather than otherwise.' Hume himself, however (along with both Kant and the main thrust of the analytical tradition), retreats from the full implications of his demonstration. Rather than ditch the concept of causal necessity altogether, he affirms it as a matter of 'blind faith'. Whether this belief is then a matter of mere habit (Hume) or an irreducible component of transcendental logic (Kant) is, as far as Meillassoux is

concerned, a secondary quarrel. Ever since, analytical philosophers have tended to assume that we should abandon ontological speculation and retreat instead to reflection upon the way we draw inductive inferences from ordinary experience, or from ordinary ways of talking about our experience.

In keeping with a tactic he deploys elsewhere in his work, Meillassoux himself quickly turns Hume's old problem into an opportunity. Our inability rationally to determine an absolute necessity or sufficient reason underlying things, properly understood, can be affirmed as a demonstration that there *is* no such necessity or reason. Rather than try to salvage a dubious faith in the apparent stability of our experience, we should affirm the prospect that Hume refused to accept: there is no reason why what we experience as constant laws should not break down or change at any point, for the simple reason there is no such thing as reason or cause. The truth is not just that a given cause might give rise to a hundred different effects, but that an infinite variety of 'effects' might emerge on the basis of no cause at all, in a pure eruption of novelty *ex nihilo*.

The vision of the acausal and anarchic universe that results from the affirmation of such contingency is fully worthy of Deleuze and Guattari's appreciation for those artists and writers who tear apart the comfortable normality of ordinary experience so as to let 'a bit of free and windy chaos' remind us of the tumultuous intensity of things:

> If we look through the aperture which we have opened up onto the absolute, what we see there is a rather menacing power – something insensible, and capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, yet also of never doing anything, of realizing every dream, but also every nightmare, of engendering random and frenetic transformations, or conversely, of producing a universe that remains motionless down to its ultimate recesses, like a cloud bearing the fiercest storms, then the eeriest bright spells, if only for an interval of disquieting calm.… We see something akin to Time, but a Time that is inconceivable for physics, since it is capable of destroying, without cause or reason, every physical law, just as it is inconceivable for metaphysics, since it is capable of destroying every determinate entity, even a god, even God.

Without flinching from the implications, Meillassoux attributes to such 'time without development [*devenir*]' the potential to generate life *ex nihilo*, to draw spirit from matter or creativity from stasis – or even to resurrect an immortal mind from a lifeless body.

Rational reflection encourages us to posit the absence of sufficient reason and to speculate about the potentialities of this absolute time: it is only our experience, precisely, that holds us back. Our ordinary sensory experience discourages us from abandoning a superstitious belief in causality. Conversion of Hume's problem into Meillassoux's opportunity requires, then, a Neoplatonic deflation of experience and the senses. However far we might push such deflation, though, it obviously remains the case that the world we experience is not chaotic but stable. How might we explain everyday empirical consistency on the basis of radical contingency and the total absence of causal necessity? If physical laws could actually change for no reason, would it not be 'extraordinarily improbable if they did not change *frequently*'?

This question frames a second stage in Meillassoux's argument. Since the earth so regularly rotates around the sun, since gravity so consistently holds us to the ground, so then we infer that there must be some underlying cause which accounts for the consistency of such effects. Meillassoux claims to refute such reasoning by casting doubt on the 'probabilistic' assumption that underlies it. An ordinary calculation of probabilities – say, the anticipation of an even spread of results from a repeated dice-throw – assumes that there is a finite range of possible outcomes and a finite range of determining factors, a range that sets the criteria whereby a given outcome is more or less likely in relation to others. At this point, following Badiou's example, Meillassoux plays his Cantorian trump card.

> It is precisely this totalization of the thinkable which can *no longer* be guaranteed a priori. For we now know – indeed, we have known it at least since Cantor's revolutionary set-theory – that we have no grounds for maintaining that the conceivable is *necessarily* totalisable.

Cantor showed that there can be no all-inclusive set of all sets, leaving probabilistic reason with no purchase on an open or 'detotalized' set of possibilities: '*laws which are contingent, but stable beyond all probability, thereby become conceivable*' ('Potentiality and Virtuality').

On this basis, Meillassoux aims to restore the rights of a purely 'intelligible' insight – that is, to reinstate the validity of pre- or non-critical 'intellectual intuition' and thereby challenge the stifling strictures of Kant's transcendental turn. Rather than elaborate a merely 'negative ontology', he seeks to elaborate 'an ever more determinate, ever richer concept of contingency', on the assumption that these determinations can then

be 'construed as *so many absolute properties of what is*', or as so many constraints to which a given 'entity must submit in order to exercise its capacity-not-to-be and its capacity-to-be-other'.

A first constraint required by this capacity entails rejection of contradiction. The only law that survives the elimination of causal or sufficient reason is the law of non-contradiction. A contradictory entity would be utterly indeterminate, and thus both contingent *and* necessary. In order to affirm the thesis that any given thing can be *anything*, it is necessary that this thing both be what it is here and now, and forever capable of being determined as something else. In other words, where Kant simply posited that things-in-themselves existed and existed as non-contradictory, Meillassoux claims to deduce the latter property directly from the modality of their existence.

What does it mean, however, to say that such things exist? Meillassoux's approach to this question circumscribes a second, more far-reaching determination of contingency: absolute and contingent entities or things-in-themselves must observe the logical principle of non-contradiction, and they must also submit to rigorous mathematical measurement. Here again, Meillassoux's strategy involves the renewal of perfectly classical concerns. In addition to an affirmation of the ontological implications of the scientific revolution, it involves the absolutization of what Descartes and then Locke established as a thing's primary qualities – those qualities like its dimensions or weight, which can be mathematically measured independently of the way an observer experiences and perceives it – that is, independently of secondary qualities like texture, colour, taste, and so on. But whereas Descartes conceived of such qualities in geometric terms, as aspects of an extended substance, Meillassoux takes a further step, and isolates the mathematizable from extension itself, so as then

> to derive from a contingency which is absolute, the conditions that would allow me to deduce the absolutization of mathematical discourse [and thus] ground the possibility of the sciences to speak about an absolute reality …, a reality independent of thought. ('Speculative Realism', *Collapse* 3, 2007, p. 440)

Meillassoux admits that he has not worked out a full version of this deduction, but the closing pages of *After Finitude* imply that his approach will depend on the presumption that 'what is mathematically conceivable is absolutely possible', coupled with an appreciation for the absolutely arbitrary, meaningless and contingent nature of mathematical signs qua signs (e.g. signs produced through pure replication or reiteration, indifferent to any sort of pattern or 'rhythm'). Perhaps an absolutely arbitrary discourse will be adequate to the absolutely contingent nature of things ('Time Without Becoming', talk at CRMEP, Middlesex University, May 2008).

The main obstacle standing in the way of this anti-phenomenological return 'to the things themselves', naturally, is the widely held (if not tautological) assumption that we cannot, by definition, think any reality independently of thought. Meillassoux dubs the modern currents of thought that accept this assumption 'correlationist'. A correlationist humbly accepts that 'we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other', such that 'anything that is totally a-subjective cannot be'. Nothing can be independently of thought, since here 'to be is to be a correlate'. Paradigmatically, to be is to be the correlate of either consciousness (for phenomenology) or language (for analytical philosophy).

Kant is the founding figure of correlationist philosophy, of course, but the label applies equally well, according to Meillassoux, to most strands of post-Kantian philosophy, from Fichte and Hegel to Heidegger or Adorno. All these philosophies posit some sort of fundamental mediation between the subject and object of thought, such that it is the clarity and integrity of this relation (whether it be clarified through logical judgement, phenomenological reduction, historical reflection, linguistic articulation, pragmatic experimentation or intersubjective communication) that serves as the only legitimate means of accessing reality. The overall effect has been to consolidate the criteria of 'lawful' legitimacy as such. Correlationism figures here as a sort of counter-revolution that emerged in philosophy as it tried, with and after Kant, to come to terms with the uncomfortably disruptive implications of Galileo, Descartes and the scientific revolution. Post-Copernican science had opened the door to the 'great outdoors': Kant's own so-called 'Copernican turn' should be best understood as a Ptolemaic attempt to slam this door shut.

How, then, to reopen the door? Since a correlationist will assume as a matter of course that the referent of any statement 'cannot possibly exist' or 'take place [as] non-correlated with a consciousness', so then Meillassoux claims to find the Achilles heel of correlationism in its inability to cope with what he calls 'ancestral' statements. Such statements refer to events or entities older than any consciousness, events like the emergence of life, the formation of Earth, the
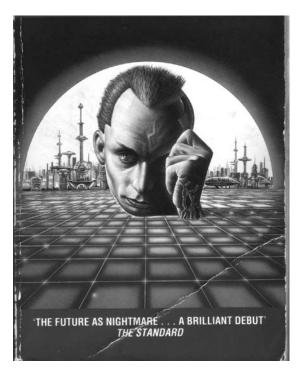
origin of the universe, and so on. In so far as correlation can only conceive of an object that is given to a subject, how can it cope with an object that pre-dates givenness itself?

Now Meillassoux realizes that in order to overcome the Ptolemaic–correlationist counter-revolution it is impossible simply to retreat from Kant back to the 'dogmatic' metaphysics of Descartes, let alone to the necessity- and cause-bound metaphysics of Spinoza or Leibniz. He also accepts that you cannot refute correlationism simply by *positing*, as Laruelle does, a mind-independent reality. In order to overcome the correlational obstacle to his acausal ontology, in order to know mind-independent reality as non-contradictory and non-necessary, Meillassoux thus needs to show that the correlationist critique of metaphysical necessity itself enables if not requires the speculative affirmation of non-necessity.

This demonstration occupies the central and most subtle sections of *After Finitude*. The basic strategy again draws on Kantian and post-Kantian precedents. Post-Kantian metaphysicians like Fichte and Hegel tried to overcome Kant's foreclosure of absolute reality by converting correlation itself, the very 'instrument of empirico-critical de-absolutization, into the model for a new type of absolute.' This idealist alternative to correlationist humility, however, cannot respond in turn to the 'most profound' correlational decision – the decision which ensures, in order to preserve the ban on *every* sort of absolute knowledge, that correlation too is just another contingent fact, rather than a necessity. As with his approach to Hume's problem, Meillassoux's crucial move here is to turn an apparent weakness into an opportunity. The correlationist, in order to guard against idealist claims to knowledge of absolute reality, readily accepts not only the reduction of knowledge to knowledge of facts: the correlationist also accepts that this reduction too is just another fact, just another non-necessary contingency. But if such correlating reduction is not necessary then it is of course possible to envisage its suspension: the only way the correlationists can defend themselves against idealist absolutization requires them to admit 'the impossibility of giving an ultimate ground to the existence of any being', including the impossibility of giving a ground for this impossibility ('Speculative Realism').

All that Meillassoux now has to do is absolutize, in turn, this apparent failure. We simply need to understand 'why *it is not the correlation but the facticity of the correlation that constitutes the absolute.* We must show why thought, far from experiencing its intrinsic *limits* through facticity, experiences rather

its *knowledge* of the absolute through facticity.' In knowing that we know only contingent facts, we also know that it is necessary that there be *only* contingent facts. We know that facticity itself, and only facticity itself, is not contingent but necessary. Recognition of the absolute nature or absolute necessity of facticity then allows Meillassoux to go on to complete his deduction 'from the absoluteness of this facticity those properties of the in-itself which Kant for his part took to be self-evident' – that is, that it exists (as radically contingent) and that it exists as non-contradictory. By affirming this necessity of contingency or 'principle

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of factuality', Meillassoux triumphantly concludes, 'I think an X independent of any thinking, and I know it for sure, thanks to the correlationist himself and his fight against the absolute, the idealist absolute' ('Speculative Realism', p. 432).

Unlike Meillassoux, I believe that the main problem with recent French philosophy has been not an excess but a deficit of genuinely relational thought. From this perspective, despite its compelling originality and undeniable ingenuity, Meillassoux's resolutely absolutizing project raises a number of questions and objections.

First, the critique of correlation seems to depend on an equivocation regarding the relation of thinking and being, of epistemology and ontology. On balance, Meillassoux insists on the modern '*ontological* requisite' which stipulates that '*to be* is to be a correlate' of thought. From within the correlational circle, 'all we ever engage with is what is given-to-thought, never an entity subsisting by itself.' If a being only *is* as the

correlate of the thought that thinks it, then from a correlationist perspective it must seem that a being older than thought can only be 'unthinkable'. A consistent correlationist, Meillassoux says, must 'insist that the physical universe could not *really* have preceded the existence of man, or at least of living creatures'. As far as I know, however, almost no one actually thinks or insists on this, apart perhaps from a few fossilized idealists. They don't think this because correlationism as Meillassoux defines it is in reality an epistemological theory, one that is perfectly compatible with the insights of Darwin, Marx or Einstein. There's nothing to prevent a correlationist from *thinking* ancestral objects or worlds that are older than the thought that thinks them, or indeed older than thought itself; even from an orthodox Kantian perspective there is little difference in principle between my thinking an event that took place yesterday and an event that took place six billion years ago. As Meillassoux knows perfectly well, all that the correlationist demands is an acknowledgement that when you think of an ancestral event, or any event, you are indeed thinking of it. I can think of this lump of ancient rock as ancient if and only if science currently provides me with reliable means of thinking it so.

Genuine conquest of the correlationist fortress would require a reference not to objects older than thought but to processes of thinking that proceed without thinking, or objects that are somehow presentable in the absence of any objective presence or evidence – in other words, processes and objects proscribed by Meillassoux's own insistence on the principle of non-contradiction. This is the problem with using a correlationist strategy (the principle of factuality) to break out of the correlationist circle: until Meillassoux can show that we know things exist not only independently of our thought but independently of our thinking them so, the correlationist has little to worry about. Anyone can agree with Meillassoux that 'to think ancestrality is to think a world without thought – a world without the givenness of the world.' What's less obvious is how we might think such a world without thinking it, or how we might arrive at scientific knowledge of such pre-given objects if nothing is given of them.

Along the same lines, Meillassoux's rationalist critique of causality and necessity seems to depend on an equivocation between metaphysical and physical or natural necessity. The actual target of Meillassoux's critique of metaphysics is the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason. He dispatches it, as we've seen, with a version of Hume's argument: we cannot rationally demonstrate an ultimate reason for the being of being;

there is no primordial power or divine providence that determines being or the meaning of being to be a certain way. What Meillassoux infers from this critique of metaphysical necessity, however, is the rather more grandiose assertion that there is no cause or reason for *anything* to be the way it is. This inference relies on a contentious understanding of the terms 'reason', 'cause' and 'law'. It's been a long time since scientists confused 'natural laws' with logical or metaphysical necessities, and it is perfectly possible, of course, to reconstruct the locally effective reasons and causes that have shaped, for instance, the evolution of aerobic vertebrate organisms. There was nothing necessary or predictable about this evolution, but why should we doubt that it conformed to familiar 'laws' of cause and effect? What does it mean to say that the ongoing consequences of this long process might be transformed in an instant – that we might *suddenly* cease to breathe oxygen or suffer the effects of gravity? Although Meillassoux insists that contingency applies to every event and every process, it may be that the only event that might qualify as contingent and without reason in his absolute sense of the term is the emergence of the universe itself.

Meillassoux's acausal ontology, in other words, includes no account of an actual process of transformation or development. There is no account here of any positive ontological or historical force, no substitute for what other thinkers have conceived as substance, or spirit, or power, or labour. His insistence that anything might happen can only amount to an insistence on the bare possibility of radical change. So far, at least, Meillassoux's affirmation of 'the *effective ability* of every determined entity' to persist, change or disappear without reason figures as an empty and indeterminate postulate. Once Meillassoux has purged his speculative materialism of any sort of causality he deprives it of any worldly historical purchase as well. The abstract logical possibility of change (given the absence of any ultimately sufficient reason) has strictly nothing to do with any concrete process of actual change. Rather like his mentor Badiou, to the degree that Meillassoux insists on the *absolute* disjunction of an event from existing situations he deprives himself of any concretely mediated means of thinking, with and after Marx, the possible ways of changing such situations.

The notion of 'absolute time' that accompanies Meillassoux's acausal ontology is a time that seems endowed with only one dimension – the instant. It may well be that 'only the time that harbours the capacity to destroy every determinate reality, while obeying no determinate law – the time capable of destroying,

without reason or law, both worlds and things – can be thought as an absolute.' The sense in which such an absolute can be thought as distinctively *temporal* is less obvious. Rather than any sort of articulation of past, present and future, Meillassoux's time is a matter of spontaneous and immediate irruption *ex nihilo*. Time is reduced, here, to a succession of 'gratuitous sequences'. The paradigm for such gratuitous irruption, obviously, is the miracle. Meillassoux argues that every absolute 'miraculous' discontinuity testifies only to the 'inexistence of God' – that is, to the lack of any metaphysical necessity, progress or providence. It may be, however, that an argument regarding the existence or inexistence of God is secondary in relation to arguments for or against belief in this quintessentially 'divine' power – a supernatural power to interrupt the laws of nature and abruptly reorient the pattern of worldly affairs.

The argument that allows Meillassoux to posit a radically open miraculous time depends on reference to Cantor's 'de-totalization' of every attempt to close or limit a denumerable set of possibilities. A still more absolute lack of mediation, however, characterizes Meillassoux's appeal to mathematics as the royal road to the in-itself. Cantor's transfinite set theory concerns the domain of pure number alone. The demonstration that there is an open, unending series of ever larger infinite numbers clearly has decisive implications for the foundations of mathematics, but Meillassoux needs to demonstrate more exactly how these implications apply to the time and space of our actually existing universe. In what sense is our material universe itself infinite? In what sense has the evolution of life, for instance, confronted an actually infinite (rather than immensely large) number of actual possibilities? It is striking that Meillassoux pays little or no attention to such questions, and sometimes treats the logical and material domains as if they were effectively interchangeable.

Admittedly, you can make a case for the equation of mathematics and ontology in the strict sense, as Badiou does, such that post-Cantorian theory serves to articulate what can be thought of as pure being-qua-being (once being is identified with abstract and absolute multiplicity, i.e. a multiplicity that does not depend on any preliminary notion of unit or unity). Such an equation requires, however, that ontological questions be strictly preserved from merely 'ontic' ones: as a matter of course, a mathematical conception of being has nothing to say about the material, historical or social attributes of specific beings. A similar 'ontological reduction' must apply to Meillassoux's reliance on Cantorian mathematics. Here again he seems to equivocate, as if the abstract implications of Cantorian detotalization might concern the concrete set of possibilities at issue in a specific situation – for example, in an ecosystem or in a political conflict. He seems to think that the Cantorian transfinite – a theory that has strictly nothing to do with any physical or material reality – might underwrite speculation regarding the 'unreason' whereby any actually existing thing might suddenly be transformed, destroyed or preserved.

In short, Meillassoux seems to confuse the domains of pure and applied mathematics. In the spirit of Galileo's 'mathematization of nature', he relies on pure mathematics in order to demonstrate the integrity of an objective reality that exists independently of us – a domain of primary (mathematically measurable) qualities purged of any merely sensory, subject-dependent secondary qualities. But pure mathematics is arguably the supreme example of absolutely subject-*dependent* thought – that is, a thought that proceeds without reference to any sort of objective reality 'outside' it. No one denies that every mathematical measurement is 'indifferent' to the thing it measures. But leaving aside the question of why an abstract, mathematized description of an object should be any less mind-dependent or anthropocentric than a sensual or experiential description, there is no eliding the fundamental difference between pure number and an applied measurement. The idea that the meaning of the statement 'the universe was formed 13.5 billion years ago' might be independent of the mind that thinks it only makes sense if you disregard the quaintly parochial unit of measurement involved (along with the meaning of words like 'ago', to say nothing of the meaning of meaning *tout court*). As a matter of course, every unit of measurement, from the length of a metre to the time required for a planet to orbit around a star, exists at a fundamental distance from the domain of number as such. If Meillassoux was to carry through the argument of 'ancestrality' to its logical conclusion, he would have to acknowledge that it would eliminate not only all reference to secondary qualities like colour and texture but also all conventional primary qualities like length or mass or date as well. What might then be known of an 'arche-fossil' (i.e. a thing considered independently of whatever is given of it, including its material extension) would have to be expressed in terms of pure numbers alone, rather than dates or measurements. Whatever else such (neo-Pythagorean?) knowledge amounts to, it has no obvious relation to the sorts of realities that empirical science tries to describe, including realities older than the evolution of life.

After Finitude is a beautifully written and seductively argued book. It offers a welcome critique of the ambient 'necessitarian' world-view, that *pensée unique* which tells us 'there is no alternative', and which underlies both the listless political apathy and the deflating humility of so much contemporary philosophy and critical theory. In the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment and of ideology-critique, Meillassoux launches a principled assault on every 'superstitious' presumption that existing social situations should be accepted as natural or inevitable. His insistence that such situations are actually a matter of uncaused contingency, however, offers us little grip on the means of their material transformation. The current fascination with his work, in some quarters, may be a symptom of impatience with a more traditional conception of social and political change – not that we might abruptly be other than we are, but that we might engage with the processes whereby we have *become* what we are, and might now begin to become otherwise. A critique of metaphysical necessity and an appeal to transfinite mathematics will not provide, on their own, the basis upon which we might renew a transformative materialism.

Peter Hallward

The geek code

Christopher Kelty, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2008. 378 pp., £51.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 978 0 82234 242 7 hb., 978 0 82234 264 9 pb.

Is programming software a mode of public speech? Christopher Kelty's *Two Bits* provides an answer carefully integrated with a proposal, in this cultural anthropology of an important series of historical developments that have been inadequately studied outside their specific domains. Surveying debates around 'open', 'free' or 'shared' software, Kelty's answer is that free software, as privately developed but publicly shared code, has its own specific subjects, material resources and commons. Its citizens are those he characterizes as 'geeks' who 'get it'; its resources, software development, sharing and use; its commons, any medium (paper or digital network) through which software and the discourses enabling its use and re-use are shared, along with the resources thus archived. His central proposal is that geeks' construction of a contingent, constantly modulated software commons results in a 'recursive public' emerging in the building, sharing, usage and revision of free software, a public now considerably broadened beyond its historical origins in shared UNIX code and commentaries, and including explicit engagements with legal discourses, organized advocacy, and interface or database design for archiving, revising and accessing potentially any form of scholarly knowledge as shareable 'source code'.

This notion of a 'recursive public' underwrites what are broad claims about the cultural significance of a movement Kelty chronicles from roughly the early 1970s to the present. Why does free software impact everything from email to social networking sites, the production of 'traditional knowledge', music downloading, identity theft, and the licensing of HIV/AIDS medicines? Kelty's reasoning is that the issues each of these disparate epistemological domains raise were first 'figured out and confronted' by historical actors in the free software movement. Free software is never simply a matter of operational, binary code; its historical significance is that it prioritizes getting code developed while reflecting a shared 'moral and technical' order, a social imaginary. It thus becomes something along the lines of a historical force that disrupts relations of power and knowledge in particular socio-technical configurations. Not all Internet publics are 'recursive publics', then, not all recursive free software publics have relied on Internet-based distribution, nor are all 'open software' projects 'free'. Free software precisely emphasizes freedom; it's an interventionist mode of building and facilitating code as a kind of socio-technical speech, a 'collective, technical experimentation'. So while the free software movement approximates something like a historical force, disrupting hierarchies of knowledge production, Kelty's description also gives free software the force of a futurity – as long, that is, as software gets programmed, shared and revised.

It makes sense, then, that in Kelty's analyses of his informants' stories, the meanings of 'technology' or 'software code' change from one informant or context to the next, and that these historical mutations in meaning provide both the rationale for his study and the form of his argument. Kelty's case studies begin with interviews with contemporary 'geeks', and then

loop back towards a historical reconstruction of the unauthorized distribution of Xeroxed copies of Ken Thompson's UNIX code with accompanying commentary in Australian comp-sci classrooms, discussions of Richard Stallman's and Linus Torvalds's respective contributions, finally ending with ongoing efforts to redefine copyright licences at the Creative Commons project, and to provide free online scholarly texts, for potentially any conceivable academic domain, at the Conexions project (in which academic texts are considered as source code, producing a distinct model of online scholarly content and access from, say, projects like Wikipedia). These comparisons are among the most interesting materials in *Two Bits*. The narrative trajectory also registers Kelty's own entry into the world of free software production. *Two Bits* begins with his education by 'geeks', and closes with Kelty's description of his contributions to Creative Commons and Conexions. Overall, it's an elegant formulation. The histories he recounts are often fascinating in their contradictions, and his own participation in Conexions provides the appropriate happy ending of an observer transformed into a participant, an evangelized geek who 'gets it' and starts building. Taking cultural anthropology beyond participant observation, *Two Bits* supplies a syllogistic demonstration of the power of a 'recursive public' and the virtuous circle of free software development broadened far beyond its historical origins.

Yet can the 'moral and technical' order that Kelty describes be both the origin and the output of changes as diverse as he suggests, to the extent of informing, for example, the logics according to which the propertized outputs of global pharmaceuticals industries were situationally de-licensed? While Kelty at times limits the applicability of his notional 'recursive public', his commitment to it, and the ways many of the transitions he describes turn on notional or conceptual shifts, he asserts this public's power to encompass entire regimes of transactions which are dependent on far more complex historical factors. Licensing and de-licensing of HIV/AIDS drugs arguably has had rather more to do with conflicts around sovereignty and territoriality, conflicting regimes of human rights and state responsibilities, global movement by human agents, and careful, failed or radically irresponsible health-care policies by nation-states. It's more likely that such larger conflicts and dynamics inform those of the free software movement, rather than the other way around.

Kelty's concluding discussion of software, law, culture and digital publicity is timely, because many adherents of 'open software' refuse the notional reorientations by which he treats, say, software commentary or scholarly texts as constitutive of free software's 'source code'. This allows him to emphasize vibrant publicity as one of free software's defining characteristics. However, I found three claims essential to his description of the discursive dynamism and productivity of free software, as the commons of a recursive public, particularly troubling.

First of all, Kelty warns his reader that she'll find little of the conventional cultural anthropological materials and methods instantiated here. 'Nearly everything [relevant] is archived', he claims, so that free software as an anthropological resource provides its own 'self-documenting history'. This claim relieves Kelty of the need to historicize and theorize important conceptual notions informing his descriptions of free software's 'moral and technical' social imaginary. For example, his frequent use of the term 'bootstrapping' supports the self-evidentiality of free software's socio-technical dynamism. In fact, however, 'bootstrapping' was a pragmatic *and* theoretical term discussed by figures like Douglas Engelbart, who theorized 'bootstrapping' as a 'third way' of institutional organizational design. Engelbart's ideas about organizational theory originated in part with concerns about potential Soviet dominance in information technology. But in *Two Bits*, what are often terms and concepts central to the postwar development of US cybernetic communication networks are embedded into Kelty's observations as innocent, descriptive terms.

The other side of the historical coin is that the only expression of networked public expressivity Kelty imagines for the history of the Internet/web are those predicated on, or conceivably inspired by, the rhetorics and histories of the 'software-code-as-speech' paradigm which he prefers. There's no mention of other networking projects of the 1970s wherein activists tended to identify social needs without regard to data or software, configuring whatever was technologically available around expressing those needs, and filling in whatever was required to pull the project off with human insight, discussion, specialized labour and coordination – not software – in order to 'release' human or social 'potential' more in terms of an explicitly politically conceived mode of participation than of a moral and technical mode of software production as participation. Such experiments were more plentiful than we might imagine reading many contemporary histories of networked sociality, including this one. And while Kelty is probably correct in locating a particularly powerful dynamism in the free software

model, it seems crucial to me to at least wonder why earlier alternatives no longer seem dynamic, even viable, especially in the US context. The movement from a much broader range of mid-twentieth-century social projects configuring technology around social needs, to late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century projects configuring sociality around building software code and negotiating legal code, may well suggest that what Kelty is describing as a resistant, restive social imaginary is rather a reflection of a dominant, techno-logical and legal imaginary which has subsumed prior and more varied historical imaginations of technics and sociality. This question isn't raised specifically in *Two Bits*, because Kelty's discussions often turn discursive lions like 'bootstrapping' or 'social imagi-nary' into rhetorical lambs; and because, if 'nearly everything is archived' online which matters now, he feels no need to consider models beyond what 'geeks' are willing to believe about software's digital publicity. Kelty's geeks 'get it', and 'it' is a credo: affirming that software development and the discourse of knowledge as software define the participatory subjectivity for those Kelty thinks are most engaged in contemporary knowledge production, and so reaping its gains, in one form or another.

Kelty's characterization of the subject of free soft-ware's recursive public is a second concern. He clari-fies in a substantive footnote that corporealities such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, matter less than the credo of 'getting it'. Yet recent surveys of teen usage of the Internet/web contradict Kelty's argument that the primary public productivity of the Internet/web lies in the public distribution of knowledge as modifiable software code. (See the Pew Internet and American Life Project at www.pewinternet.org.) As of 2006, the most popular Internet/web activity among online US teens was finding entertainment that they neither created nor modified. Girls have also outpaced boys at creating their own website content; US girls not only post more personal photos than boys but are more restrictive in determining who can see the photos they post. We could hardly have a stronger statement about the use and necessity of both non-programming publics and categorically anti-recursive expressivity in Internet/web-mediated sociality determined around a factor – gender – which Kelty explicitly discounts.

The same survey shows that 79 per cent of black teens online in the USA are likely to search for web-based information about colleges and universities on the Internet/web compared to 55 per cent of teens overall. My guess is that these teens are looking for a viable transposition in lifeworlds even as they operate a mode of recursive sociality: the web as medium helps them design their potential locability within physical sites of knowledge production, sociality and growing up. The Internet/web can't provide this in and of itself, suggest-ing lessons for academics and pedagogues distinct from the distance-learning models provided by websites like Conexions, where the contribution and revision of 'scholarly texts' proceeds according to the integration of database design and legal permissions. The simplest generalization to be made here may be that a model of recursive publics which subsumes social imaginar-ies into technological and jurisprudential imaginaries

may be undescriptive, or possibly outdated. Kelty's study offers much for consideration, but it collapses a range of concerns around technicity and mediality, and emphasizes more a technosocial than a socio-technical mediation of knowledge production. It may well be that recursive publics of geeks work differently, and may be defined through exclusions rhetorically maintained around, say, the ability to code, but in fact they are subtly substantiated in terms appropriated from larger gender, sexuality, national, racial, ethnic or dis/ability imaginaries.

My third concern has to do with the responsibilities of the cultural anthropologist for observation of media or technology histories. Glaring errors of observation about mass media history appear in the text. For example, while summarizing his discovery that geeks everywhere from New England to Berlin can be characterized as those who 'get it', he refers to a *Funkturm*, or radio tower, standing behind Berlin's Alexanderplatz station. This reference must be to the *Fernsehturm*, the television tower built by Scandinavian engineers under contract to produce a functional monument to the DDR's command over East Berlin, a marker of mediological dominion over a contested geopolity, and a warning about its territorial violation. (Berlin's *Funkturm* is in fact located in the former West Berlin, having been rebuilt there after it was bombed in World War II. Meanwhile Alexanderplatz's *Fernsehturm* has been retrofitted for both digital television broadcast and tourism.) Getting the data on the tower's name and function right would have been a minor fact check – but such errors make the book less usable *and* betray a lack of interest in local media histories. *Two Bits* produces a model of software as technicized expression by and for a recursive digital public which can never be verified other than in the dimensions of a 'collective, experimental technical system', that is, those dimensions destined to be expressed in terms of the Internet as 'singularity'. But it's the larger, cumulative dynamics of technics transforming into mass media which constitutes the singularity, and at least *some* of the larger history of this singularity has to be explicated with reference to the often violent histories in which it arises.

I'd appropriate the good bits from *Two Bits*. The notion of a recursive public, when kept in check, allows for a distinction between contributing to a digital commons and simply plagiarizing others' work, while the treatment of scholarly text as source code is a provocative proposal about web-based production of academic knowledge. Discussion of these ideas might prompt consideration of the ways in which technological imaginaries and social imaginaries are routinely overlapped in descriptions of the Internet/web. Yet that discussion requires some additional terms and histories to be introduced, whether from other studies of the Internet's development (Castells's version had four, conflicting governmental, technical, social and economic imaginaries, for example) or from historical or theoretical accounts of corporeality, culture, technics, virtuality, and so forth. For example, in considering why Kelty insists on 'free', as opposed to 'open' or 'shared', software production, one might recall Marcuse's 1966 preface to *Eros and Civilization*: 'I hesitate to use the word – freedom – because it is precisely in the name of freedom that crimes against humanity are being perpetrated.' Not only are the histories and actualities of the production of knowledge determined far beyond the limits of geeks who challenge, say, health-care provisioning by arranging for the outsourcing of its technical functions (with the predictable profit-taking and disillusionment they gain, as Kelty takes care to report), but larger questions need to be raised about shared knowledge conceptualized as the virtuous, private production of shareable 'source code'.

Two Bits collapses the distinction between the technical medium and technical relations of production, rather than upholding a difference between them. On this point, Bernard Stiegler's recent rereading of Marcuse helps explain why any virtuous logic of recursive public knowledge, doubly articulated as software production and intellectual property, may embed a confusion between the technical means of support (the medium) and labouring conditions (the relations of production). 'The supports and the relations of production are in co-evolution', Stiegler believes, but they are primordially discordant. Kelty's geeks' admirable capacity for conceptually redefining software code as discourse in a virtuous and growing circle of knowledge production at times approaches something of a cure-all designed to fill a melancholy gap opened where the logic of a public sphere no longer coheres. But you can't share or revise what sovereign governments or multinationals manage to keep secret, and it might well be that much of the recursive use of the Internet/web has nothing to do with the production of verifiable knowledge as software, fact, proposition, art or critique – at all.

Kelty's virtuous recursive public, when he grants it conceptual powers beyond its historical capacities, invokes an unstated sacrifice. Raising knowledge-as-software-as-intellectual property to the level of a cure

for what ails digital publics also subjects knowledge production to the terms of its encoding as both software code and as (even minimalist) law. Such knowledge, whatever its norms or its relations to power, becomes then doubly compounded in axiomatic complexity even as it is reduced to being a subset of itself: the production of software code made coextensive with digital law. If the larger demand is to guide capital towards a different conclusion than that it can imagine for itself, we'll want to wonder more carefully whether the cure for what ails the hyperindustrial production of the planetary is to warrant now shifting ontologies, epistemologies and ethics with knowledge which becomes productive primarily at the point where knowledge can enact the interoperability of copyright agreements and source code.

James Tobias

Revived

Nicos Poulantzas, *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, ed. and intro. James Martin, Verso, London and New York, 2008, vii + 437 pp., £60.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 978 1 84467 199 1 hb., 978 1 84467 200 4 pb.

Nicos Poulantzas was a virtually obligatory reference point in theoretical discussions of the state in the 1970s and 1980s, by virtue of his debate with Ralph Miliband in the pages of *New Left Review*. Yet he seemed to have died a lingering intellectual death after his suicide thirty years ago in 1978. By the 1990s, there were few who referred to him positively in the Anglophone world, and even then they often did so gesturally. In his adopted academic homeland, France, he was 'disappeared' from intellectual life along with other so-called structural Marxists in the 1980s, and in his native Greece he lives on primarily through an eponymous party foundation linked to the Greek Communist Party.

More recently, however, the work of Nicos Poulantzas is reappearing, not only in the field of state theory but also in terms of his more general writings in Marxist theory and political strategy. The same trend emerged somewhat earlier in relation to one of his theoretical influences, Louis Althusser, where, again, the benefits of distance have led to a rediscovery of the theoretical power and contemporary relevance of a much misunderstood approach to key issues in

historical materialism. The Poulantzas revival can be seen in three recent edited collections on his work and/or that of Miliband: *Paradigm Lost: State Theory Reconsidered* (2003), edited by Aronowitz and Bratsis; *Poulantzas Lesen* (2006), edited by Bretthauer, Gallas, Kannankulam and Stuetzle; and *Class, Power, and the State in Capitalist Society* (2007), edited by Wetherley, Barrow and Burnham; as well as a revised edition of Alex Demirovic's German-language monograph. The present Verso *Reader* is another important contribution to this resurgence of interest in his work.

James Martin has performed a valuable service in gathering, newly translating or republishing, as well as introducing, eighteen essays and interviews that cover the full scope of Poulantzas's intellectual and political interests. The essays range from his humanist existentialo-Marxist early work through his more structuralo-Marxist period to his development of a new relational account of the state and state power influenced not only by Marx, Engels and Gramsci but also by Foucault and Lefebvre. As part of this comprehensive coverage, the editor includes material that highlights the impact of Poulantzas's early studies in law (a legitimate route in the Greece of his student days, especially as his father was a well-known lawyer, to the study of sociology and politics as well as philosophy) and legal philosophy. Likewise, he includes early essays that reveal the significance in the early post-doctoral period of the Italian philosopher and political leader, Antonio Gramsci. Indeed, I suspect that it was their shared interest in Gramsci, on whom Martin has also written extensively, that led him to want to bring the range of Poulantzas's work to a new generation of readers. The influence of Gramsci is often ignored in commentaries that connect Poulantzas mostly to the influence of Althusserian Marxism.

The *Poulantzas Reader* starts with an introduction by the editor which provides much useful background information about political conditions in Greece when Poulantzas was growing up, attended university and served in the Greek navy, before moving to Germany and then, quickly, to Paris. This is important because it helps to locate his enduring interest in issues of state theory, the nature of liberal bourgeois democracy, exceptional regimes and political strategy. Martin also summarizes Poulantzas's later intellectual trajectory, identifying its distinct phases – existentialo-Marxism, so-called structural Marxism, the emergence of a relational approach to social classes and the state through his engagement with contemporary political issues and strategic debates, and the final synthesis and self-proclaimed completion of *the* Marxist theory

of the state. In addition, the editor provides useful contextualization and summaries of the eighteen individual contributions by Poulantzas selected for this *Reader*. I was particularly impressed with Martin's decision to exclude the first exchanges in the Poulantzas–Miliband debate and to content himself with a brief summary of what was at stake. For this debate did much to hinder an appreciation of the true magnitude of Poulantzas's wide-ranging contributions to Marxist theory. Instead he has included the final intervention in the debate by Poulantzas, commenting after an interlude of six years, on lessons learnt, critical ontological and methodological questions, and the importance of adopting a consistently relational approach to the state.

As the subtitle of the *Poulantzas Reader* makes clear, the essays include:

1. Various interventions at different times into contemporary Marxist theoretical and strategic debates among Marxists – including the nature of Marxism and the limitations of alternative approaches to Marxist analysis, such as Sartrean existentialism, economism, humanism, Althusserian structuralism, and empiricism; the specificity of Marxist historical inquiry (covering issues of periodization and class analysis as well as the historical specificity of economic, political and ideological class domination in the development of the English state); the significance of Gramsci as a theorist of hegemony; and both the nature of crises in Marxism and the forms and extent of the contemporary crisis of Marxism in the 1970s.

2. Early work on law – a theme to which Poulantzas would return in one form or another throughout the remainder of his work, whether in terms of the significance of sovereignty, the suspension of liberal democracy and constitutional government in fascism and military dictatorships, the relation between violence and law, the threats posed by authoritarian statism, or the importance of human rights.

3. The question of the state – especially the historical specificity of the capitalist type of state and the possibilities that this opens for what Gramsci called an autonomous theory of politics; the problem of the normal state and exceptional regimes; the growing trend towards authoritarian statism; the distinctive features of political (as opposed to economic or ideological) crisis and the forms of a crisis of the state; the distinctive problems posed by comparative analysis of states, including the dependent state in dependent capitalism; the nature of the state in state socialism; and, lastly, the problems of a democratic transition to democratic socialism.

Although I am familiar with all eighteen essays in this *Reader*, it was still a pleasure to read them in one sitting and to rediscover yet again what an exciting and inspiring theorist Poulantzas was. In particular, these essays reveal the extent to which, however forbiddingly theoreticist his arguments may sometimes appear, they were motivated by political and strategic problems rather than simple academic concerns. In this sense, his key theoretical transitions were never prompted exclusively by theoretical questions but always grounded in pressing political issues. This is especially evident in his interviews and more journalistic pieces rather than in his monographs, and it is therefore good to see two interviews included in this *Reader*. In addition to their intrinsic interest, these interviews also illuminate Poulantzas's understanding of the strategic significance of his work.

Another crucial point that emerges from Martin's *Reader* is the complexity of Poulantzas's thought. He never followed one theoretical current single-mindedly but always sought to synthesize different traditions and to integrate material relevant to different fields of social life so that he could better understand a given theoretical problem or a specific conjuncture. In this sense, his theoretical work cannot be reduced to the successive influences of Sartre, Gramsci, Althusser or Foucault; there is always a distinctive Poulantzasian appropriation of these great thinkers, shaped by his continuing concern with 'an autonomous science of politics' and the specificity of the capitalist type of state. At the same time these essays reveal Poulantzas's growing awareness of the dangers of 'politicism' – that is, a one-sided concern with the capitalist type of state to the neglect of its embedding within a capitalist social formation, its articulation with the social relations of capitalist production, and its overdetermination of other types of social relation. This can be seen in the increasing reintegration of general and specific issues of political economy, class relations, the mental–manual division of labour, the periodization of capitalism, internationalization, new forms of state intervention in the economy, the incompressibility of economic crisis tendencies, and the political mediation of economic crisis-tendencies and struggles through political struggles conducted in and through the institutional materiality of the state. For it was only when Poulantzas returned from the state as a distinctive theoretical object to a more general concern with political economy that he could produce his original synthesis and plausibly claim to have completed the Marxist theory of the state.

Bob Jessop

Tools of thought

Peg Rawes, *Space, Geometry and Aesthetics: Through Kant and towards Deleuze*, Palgrave Macmillan, London and New York, 2008. 256 pp., £45.00 hb., 978 0 230 55291 3.

Geometry is typically associated with the principles of 'scientific' exactitude and management of space, as well as with the kind of 'black-boxed' efficacy and mastery that characterize the discipline in its absolute or universal modality as quintessential exemplar of apodictic knowledge. If *applied geometry* is recognizable by the tools of compass and the ruler, it is such tools which, specifically in their practical deployment, famously serve Kant in making the distinction, in the *Critique of Judgement*, between *a priori* imagination and reflective judgement, and between geometrical construction and the higher geometry. For Peg Rawes, however, it is Kant's dalliance with the basic tools of geometry itself that is, in its way, most telling. In the philosopher's very attention to these utilities lies the basis of the thesis developed in her book.

'We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.' This diagnosis of Foucault resonates with the general proposal made in *Space, Geometry and Aesthetics*. Geometry is given back to the body, or the body back to geometry – nowhere more so than in Husserl's assertion, cited by Rawes, that, rather than being an instance of irrefutable reason, geometry is a 'living science', which is constituted by an internal genetic or 'living "tradition"'.

If this explains the book's main title, Rawes's subtitle, *Through Kant and towards Deleuze*, also proves to be an accurate description of her concerns, albeit in what would seem, initially, to be a more perverse way. For while we get plenty of Kant, we encounter almost no direct discussion of Deleuze at all. The majority of the references to his work appear in footnotes, notably to chapters 3 and 4, and we only ever get the sense that he is indeed on the *horizon* (a moot term which is itself subject to extended exegesis in chapter 6). Accurate though it may be, then, it does lead one to ponder the apparently idiosyncratic inclusion of Deleuze's name here. Closer inspection reveals that this comes down to the author's need to proclaim the influence on her *methodology* of Deleuze's idea of a 'minor' tradition. In Deleuze's case, this tradition is made up of Hume–Spinoza–Nietzsche; in Rawes's case, it is

Proclus and forgotten trajectories of Kant in aesthetic geometric 'sense reason', which are 'to be traced out of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and embodied in the figure of the reflective subject in the later *Critique of Judgement*'.

Rawes, in this context (as frequently elsewhere in the book), explicitly invokes the figure of *anamnesis*, exemplified by her assertion that Kant repeats part of Plato's *Meno* – namely the famous Socratic example of the slave boy with intuitive geometric understanding – and that Proclus, in assigning 'the imagination to a position of mediation between the intelligible and sensible realms', is a precursor to the third *Critique*. The first two chapters make a strong case, on this basis, for revealing a minor tradition of geometric thought within, and in some senses *against*, philosophy, and certainly against orthodox accounts of the functioning of geometry within the dominant tradition. The inspiration for chapter 2 on Proclus, 'Folding–Unfolding', is undeniably Deleuzean, and *The Fold* is clearly not far from the author's mind at this juncture, as well as when she moves towards a detailed engagement with the distinct modalities of expression in Spinoza and Leibniz, as these are articulated, in turn, in chapters 4 ('Passages') and 5 ('Plenums'). In her innovative chapter on Spinoza, Rawes argues that the term 'passages' names the quality of Spinoza's *Ethics*, most notably in the *Scholia*. These passages have a function beyond that of a discursive demonstration of a geometric method, and entail, rather, a performative 'figurational' strategy. The uniqueness of Leibniz's geometric method, Rawes proposes, is, by contrast, his conception of the plenum as a topological figure enabling the paradoxical border of monadic interior and exterior (which is perhaps most succinctly proposed in the late concept of the 'vinculum substantiale', not discussed here) 'rather than a finite limit' between them. Leibniz's role in producing the conditions for a thought of a properly immanent conception of temporality thus prepares the way for the chapter on Bergson's more emphatically topological geometric method. For Rawes, Bergson's specific contribution to the history of sense-reason arises from the fact that 'duration produces topological relations between philosophy and the subject that dramatically reconfigure the nature of science, philosophy and life'.

The Deleuze towards whom the book is steering is not therefore, as the author (with welcome subtlety) demonstrates, to be located at the end of a career, from Proclus to Husserl, of the concept of 'sense-reason'. The inclusion of a final chapter on Husserl, in place of the Deleuze which the book is still supposedly

moving *towards*, is in fact to be explained rather by elements of Husserl's thought which, Rawes argues (largely in footnotes), are compatible with Deleuze. And it is, arguably, true that there is indeed more of an affinity between the two philosophers than might commonly be expected, particularly in their respective concepts of sense (the convergence being most obvious in Deleuze's 1969 book *Logic of Sense* itself).

Rawes, who is a lecturer at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London, writes with a keen eye for connections between architectural design, the visual arts and geometrical minor philosophy (in this regard, there is an especially rewarding paragraph on the importance of *drawing* as 'postulate' rather than 'axiom' in Proclus on page 56). That intention is explicitly announced in her introduction, and the difficult task of giving palpable coordinates to an apparently ineffable and abstract domain allows the book to participate in potentially fruitful exchange with recent books by Rajchman, Massumi, Grosz and Goetz, each of whom has participated in an engagement with space and/or architecture in the movement either to or from a 'Deleuzean' aesthetics. Deleuze, then, is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in particular in this richly suggestive and ceaselessly inventive book – like a kind of wind, as he himself liked to characterize Spinoza's *Ethics*.

Garin Dowd

Life less unexamined

Alastair Morgan, *Adorno's Concept of Life*, Continuum, London and New York, 2007. xi + 163 pp., £65.00 hb., 978 0 826 49613 3.

Given that Adorno's attitude towards *Lebensphilosophie* could be described as, at best, ambivalent, the attempt to construct a philosophy of life out of his work might seem a perversely unrewarding task – a difficulty exacerbated by the fact that, as Morgan acknowledges, where Adorno does deploy a concept of life it is 'not an emphatic concept of life but damaged life as the form of life within capitalism'. Morgan states that his aim is to 'defend Adorno's dialectical philosophy as a means of articulating a concept of life that evades either a biological reductionism or the hypostasization of life as a process beyond the human that requires the dissolution of the human subject'. Yet the attempt to construct a constellation of the different uses of concepts of life within his work is not simply an interesting exercise

for scholars of Adorno. Such a constellation has a profound relevance today – one which Morgan makes present throughout the book.

Central to Morgan's argument is Auschwitz, an event which, for Adorno, 'changes the very nature of any affirmative attempt at thinking the absolute, the core of the metaphysical tradition'. It is one thing to make this assertion, another carefully to consider the nature of this change: Auschwitz represents not only the logical consequence of the dominance of identity thinking, but also a paralysis that changes – or, more specifically, limits – how we are able to think. As such, it is not a culmination but a 'caesura which reveals a latent meaning in all that has gone before'. Morgan addresses the difficulty of accounting for the damage done to life from a subject-position that is itself affected by this damage, considering not only the consequences of suffering for a conception of the subject based on 'a body that thinks', but also the glimpses, within damaged life, of life as it might be lived. These occur most prominently within aesthetic experience, which Morgan initially approaches through discussion of *Aesthetic Theory*, and in particular Adorno's account of the 'shudder': a phenomenon that consists in the subject's recognition, in contemplation of an artwork, of its own limitedness, which results in a process of self-forgetting and disappearing into the work. Such experience constitutes a 'trace of "life" in an emphatic sense, life in the sense of a reconciled relation between subject and object that is non-subsumptive'. This is, however, not a foundational experience, but a 'revealing outcome of a process of experience', a speculative immediacy that represents a potential. The theme is further developed in the five 'figures of exhaustion' set out towards the book's end, in which Morgan analyses the dissolution of subjectivity in Adornian accounts of the experience of literature and music as mimetic rationality opens up the possibility of reconciliation. This dissolution consists in the 'recognition of life as deadened', which in turn produces a sense of loss, confronting the horror of the mimesis of deadened life.

If I have a major complaint regarding *Adorno's Concept of Life* it is that it sometimes reads as if other thinkers have been brought in only so as to plug, as it were, the gaps in Adorno's thought. At times this danger is acknowledged, as is the case with the presentation of John Dewey's account of aesthetic experience. But at other points Morgan seems to move, as if seamlessly, between sources as if they constitute parts of a single oeuvre split between two authors. This is most obviously the case in the material discussing Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life. It is claimed

that Agamben has 'developed Adorno's thinking', or that he 'articulates Adorno's thought', with hardly a word exploring the broader nature of the relationship between their work, or with more than a glancing acknowledgement of the potential problems posed by Agamben's Foucauldian and Heideggerian influences. Instead, what is articulated is more a fleeting juxtaposition than a detailed comparative study. This is illuminating for Adorno's texts, but at the same time slightly unsatisfying, as the combination seems almost overly felicitous. Indeed, perhaps the most disappointing aspect of Morgan's study is that the sections addressing thinkers other than Adorno – among them figures as diverse as Agamben, Dewey, Michel Henry, John McDowell and Emmanuel Levinas – often consist of little more than presentations of aspects of their thought. What is said is always astute and a relevant point of comparison, but they are not on the whole treated with either the critical attention or the intricacy of response afforded to the writings of either Adorno or his direct critics.

This differs starkly from Morgan's discussions of thinkers to whom Adorno makes more explicit reference, whether as an acknowledgement of influence or as an unambiguous critique. Adorno's treatments of Nietzsche, Freud, Lukács, Husserl and Heidegger are presented adroitly so as to draw out the points of interest for the understanding of his concept of life. This adeptness is perhaps at its most visible in the discussions of the work of Walter Benjamin, perhaps unsurprisingly given that Adorno's explicit engagement with Benjamin's work, and the lengthy correspondence between them, make it considerably easier to trace both lines of influence and points of disagreement. He not only recounts which of Adorno's arguments have their origins in Benjamin's thought, but also uses points of influence and subtle disagreement to illuminate the nuances of these arguments – whether through Adorno's insistence, in relation to Benjamin's essay on the artwork, that 'the liquidation of subjectivity in the reception of film cannot be recuperated in terms of a subjective experience, because it has no experience as *Erfahrung* to rely on', or through the observation, in relation to Adorno's account of the dialectical image, that even metaphysical experience is mediated between subject and object, and necessarily contains an ineliminable material moment.

Andrew Bowie has claimed that scholarly work on Adorno tends either to seek to demonstrate, despite the important insights within his work, that his project as a whole is fundamentally flawed, or to attempt to defend the indefensible. Morgan's study avoids both of these

pitfalls, advancing an attentive reading of Adorno's thought that is neither a refutation nor an unthinking defence of every one of his claims. Rather it offers an argument constructed *through* his works, investigating, developing and interrogating a concept of life around, and through, his writings on diverse subjects. It not only provides a diagnosis of some of the problems that we face in damaged life, but also presents possibilities of thinking ways out of it.

Josh Robinson

Sharing

Nick Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Re-thinking Emancipation*, Continuum, London and New York, 2007. 208 pp., £65.00 hb., 978 0 826 49861 8.

Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, Penn State University Press and Edinburgh University Press, University Park PA and Edinburgh, 2008. 224 pp., £60.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 0 271 03449 2 hb., 978 0 271 03450 8 pb.

These two new books addressing the work of Jacques Rancière exemplify opposing strategies for introducing a philosopher's thought: one focusing on the context of emergence in order to explain its motivations and shortcomings, the other obviating that context and developing the thought into territories its author does not. Each book also exhibits effects typical of its strategy. In the case of Hewlett's *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière*, the initial accessibility of the contextual approach runs into difficulties in engaging the thought on the level it demands. In May's *Political Thought of Jacques Rancière*, the possible hermeticism of a 'theoretical' approach nonetheless ultimately enables a critical expansion of the philosopher's initial proposal.

Badiou, Balibar, Rancière introduces its three French philosophers by placing them within 'the intellectual and political tradition which embraces the notion of human emancipation'. It provides a brief and clear presentation of their work (though sometimes inaccurate, as when it asserts the individual character of Rancière's subject or its pre-existence to the political 'event'), explaining the context in which it originated and, on that basis, it identifies perceived limitations in their theories. May's text, rather than presenting Rancière's political thought (as its title suggests), elaborates a model of democratic politics and a notion of active equality by taking as its starting point Rancière's discussion of politics, which it opposes

to liberal political theory and aligns with anarchism. Managing to overcome the oddness of relating these three disparate tendencies (liberalism, anarchism and Rancière), it develops a functioning model of democratic politics, through a critical engagement with Rancière's thought. Hewlett, on the other hand, can only provide an introduction that ultimately strips the three philosophers he discusses of the emancipatory potential he identifies in them.

Despite celebrating Badiou, Balibar and Rancière as 'the most engaged philosophy since Sartre and Althusser', Hewlett identifies their Althusserian origins and the intellectual and political situation in France since the 1980s as part of the reason why the three of them fail in delivering a satisfactory model of political emancipation. Their philosophies necessarily belong to their time and biography, of which they are symptomatic; their positions, as responses to the stagnation of the Left in the face of a liberal conception of democracy, become part of the diagnostic of such stagnation. This failure is further identified by Hewlett as a result of a certain degree of theoreticism – a lack of consideration of 'the rigours of the material world' due to their academic position; a criticism that echoes the one E.P. Thompson made of Althusser. According to Hewlett, the insufficient reference that their works make to the material world results in abstract constructions that are unable to account for or provide models for emancipatory practice. Additionally, for Hewlett, Badiou's 'isolationist purism' (and presumably also Rancière's), manifested in his refusal to engage with 'ordinary activists', results in a position that is 'unrealistic' rather than 'politically appropriate'. This empiricist critique seems to locate access to the real in the descriptive abilities of the social sciences and the practical wisdom of the seasoned activist, though it is unclear whether for Hewlett this can also happen in a third way – through the intuition of acting political subjects. In any case, there is a privileging of an experiential element as the guarantor of the propriety of both theory and practice.

Rancière himself has often warned against sociological, historiographic or biographical accounts of political events and cultural products, as their attempt to explain simultaneously determines and delimits what is possible within politics or culture. His warning is obviously not to be taken as a prohibition against reconstructing his own thought in those terms, but rather perhaps as a simple word of caution. This caution tries to pre-empt not only determinism, but also the interpretive schemas that are implied by a historical/biographical reading, and the demands that are made on their grounds. In Hewlett's assessment of Badiou, Balibar and Rancière, the presuppositions of the biographical approach become apparent: first, the demand for coherence between an author's theories and his or her life (a coherence that, for different reasons, is not present in any of the three); and second, an idea of propriety based on a conception of theory as the suspicious opposite of the real world and the practices that take place within it.

However, in Rancière's work, this opposition between the abstraction of theory and the rigours of the real is not tenable. His philosophy starts with the recognition of practices – in which there are always both discursive and extra-discursive elements – and continues with an attempt to understand the world in a way that can contain those practices and, importantly, allow for new ones. In order to allow for new practices (and not only 'appropriate' ones), theory must identify possible obstructions to their emergence, and conceive of a scenario where obstacles are minimized. This version of Rancière's thought is the one that May takes up in his book.

May starts with an account of the liberal and libertarian political theories of John Rawls, Robert Nozick and Amartya Sen. He continues by opposing to them a notion of active equality based on Rancière's model of democracy, which he then associates with Peter Kropotkin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin's communist anarchism. Here the counterintuitive confrontation of three disparate traditions allows May to illuminate Rancière's thought, test it in specific political contexts, question some of his conclusions, and propose some departures. The key departure – an ethical version of Rancière's democratic politics – is, however, inconsistent with Rancière's conception of politics. May constructs this ethical reading around the notions of sharing and trust, which he obtains through the partial translation of Rancière's *partage* as 'sharing' (rather than the couple 'share/divide' that Rancière insists on) and a mistranslation of *confiant* as 'trusting' (rather than, as the original context demands, 'confident'). For Rancière, any attempt to define a specific attitude and behaviour as the model for politics is also an attempt to keep politics from happening. So, although May's identification of ethical behaviour as essential to the process of political subjectivation responds to the emancipatory goal that, as Hewlett points out, is at the heart of Rancière's philosophy, it responds in a way that, by trying to consolidate emancipation, creates obstacles to it.

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