

REVIEWS

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What is A People?

Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu,
Judith Butler, Georges Didi-
Huberman, Sadri Khiari, and
Jacques Rancière
Trans. Jody Gladding

Columbia University Press, 61 West
62 Street, New York, NY 10023, USA.
www.cup.columbia.edu. 2016. \$24. 176
pp. HB. ISBN 9780231168762.

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) locates the singularity of secrecy as the ontology of becoming a people in his *Literature in Secret*: ‘Forgive me for preferring the secret that binds me to you rather than the secret that binds me to the other other [sic], to each and every other, for a secret love binds me to the one as to the other, and to mine.’ (Derrida, Jacques, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 126).

The anthology under review attempts to make explicit this Derridean singularity of the secret: ‘The best historians are those who contribute most effectively to lifting the lid—the lid of the repression, of the *Unterdrückung*, of the peoples’ (Georges Didi-Huberman, 74). Mechanisms of repression act both in people and in individuals. The contributors to this anthology of essays enact the liberation of *peoples* trapped in ‘capitalism’s workshops’ (Alain Badiou, 23) through ‘depoliticization’ effecting ‘exclusion’ (Kevin Olson, 111) from *the secret* quoted at the beginning of this review.

Every contributor to this volume rightly extols Karl Marx, ‘that great prophet of the future of the classes’ (Alain Badiou, 23) without whom both contemporary philosophy and theology cannot be practised since Louis Althusser’s (1918–90) *epistemological break* has occurred. Dismissal of Karl Marx, that is, *hauntology*, post this *epistemological break* proves that historians have sold out

to archive-fever, that is, as Didi-Huberman shows (70); historians can no longer interpret dreams. Huberman is quoting Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) here. On a reductionist and thus, comprehensible level—the need for comprehension is characteristic of both Nietzsche’s *last men* and overmen; oligarchs are probably Nietzsche’s *last men*—the essayists in this anthology effectively reinstate the primacy of Karl Marx’s theories as that *one* hermeneutic which alone can resist *commodity fetish* and restore humanity to Covenant Love or *hesed*. Scholars who ignore the redeeming powers of Marx and Sigmund Freud do so at the cost of annihilating their own scholarship.

Returning to Derrida; Derrida’s reading of *Genesis* is the touchstone for any discussion of a people post the *epistemological break*. As an aside, Derrida’s reading of *Genesis* is the most powerful reading, and not deconstruction, of that text till date; even exegetes like Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933) cannot match up to Derrida’s gloss. Abraham, Isaac, and God form the triad of secrecy mentioned above and a people of the Covenant, as against the people of a Covenant. Jacques Rancière says:

Because ‘the people’ does not exist. What exist are diverse or even antagonistic figures of the people, figures constructed by privileging certain modes of assembling, certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities: an ethnic people defined by the community of land or blood; a vigilant herding people by good pastureland; a democratic people putting to use the skills of those who have no particular skills; an ignorant people that the oligarchs keep at a distance; and so on ... ignorant masses impressed by the resonant words of the ‘agitators’ and led to extreme violence by the circulation of uncontrolled rumors and contagious fears (102–3).

The people, as against *a* people, can therefore be consciously misconstrued ‘as a kind of

“imagined sovereignty”, one that combines ideas of collectivity and normative force’ (Kevin Olson, 108). This book is a collection of what Bruno Bosteels in his ‘Introduction’ terms ‘interventions’ (1). Bosteels contextualises our interventionists:

Faced with the legacy of Heidegger’s undeniable political compromises, thinkers such as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call for an interruption of the general logic according to which philosophy would be able to lead the way to the resolute appropriation of an authentic destiny, whether by a solitary individual or a historic people. (19).

It is within this *rendering inoperative* of all philosophy that we must situate the six interventions.

To *re-operate* philosophy, the interventionists mention Hannah Arendt (1906–75) five times in this anthology. For instance, George Didi-Huberman refers to Arendt thus:

Hannah Arendt said that we will never manage to think about the political dimension as long as we stubbornly persist in speaking of man (65).

Notice that Huberman refers to *The Divine Irreference of Images* though Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) is mentioned nowhere in this book. Yet Baudrillard’s understanding of images is tautology in all the *interventions*. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu says: ‘The spontaneous sociolinguistics that agents put to work to anticipate the reactions of others and to impose the representation that they want to give of themselves would permit, among other things, an understanding of a good part of what, in linguistic practice, is the object or the product of conscious intervention, individual or collective, spontaneous or institutionalized’ (36). Notice how Bourdieu weaves *representationality* with ‘linguistic practice’. This discussion leads to the notion of the popular within language, and by implication, within society, Bourdieu continues:

The notion of ‘popular language’ is one of the products of the application of the dualist taxonomies that structure the social world according to categories of high and low (‘low’ language), delicate or coarse (coarse words) or crude (crude jokes), distinguished or vulgar, rare or common, formal or casual, in short, categories of culture and nature ... These are the mythical categories that introduce a

distinct cleavage in the continuum of kinds of speech, ignoring, for example, all the overlapping between the casual speech of the dominant speakers ... and the strained speech of the dominated speakers ... and especially the extreme diversity in the kinds of speech that are universally consigned to the negative category of ‘popular language’ (37).

These dyads which are Leibniz’s monads, lead to ‘colonial and capitalist modernit[ies]’ (Sadri Khiari, 88). It is worth noting that for those without adequate employment and housing, modernity has not begun, leave alone postmodernity or even cosmopolitanism. Aijaz Ahmad (b. 1932) discusses this conundrum in a different context in his 1998 essay, ‘Literary Theory and “Third World Literature”: Some Contexts’ (See ‘Literary Theory and “Third World Literature”: Some Contexts’ in Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 43–72).

This reviewer believes that the poor in Africa, South America, and Asia are in a pre-European Renaissance state of being; which is to say quoting Jacques Rancière: the poor are freely circulating capital, ‘a population of workers who can always be sent back home’ (104), from the First World to their Third World nations. This book is slow but rewarding reading since it invites us to miss the march of this retreating world and hunt for ‘the wildest beauty in the world’ (See Wilfred Owen, *Strange Meeting*). This beauty lies in the joy of annihilating ‘sterile offices’, to use Jacques Rancière’s term (103), where coders/executives/businessmen/traditional intelligentsia *do* ‘tamper’ with capital (See W H Auden, *In Memory of W B Yeats*). These new denizens ensure that capital flows to their coffers fuelling a real crisis in the virtual world where resistance to theory is the norm; theorising is trolled as Marxist. This anthology performs its cultural work by attacking the *tel quel* of the ‘gaunt and great, the famed for conversation’ (See W H Auden, *The Quest*). At the end of the book one returns to the specters of Marx, thirsting for more from these *interventionists*.

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