Capital futures


It is now a quarter of a century since István Mészáros had his first big success in Britain with Marx’s Theory of Alienation. In the Preface to the third edition (1971) he promised to complement that masterly work of conceptual excavation with a study of actually existing capitalism and socialism. Other work intervened (notably a study of Sartre), but finally the promise is redeemed. Beyond Capital is the first substantial restatement of the case against capital, and for socialism, since ‘the fall’ (indeed, for a good while longer), and very welcome on that account. In the face of those who preach ‘the end of history’, and the dogma that ‘there is no alternative’, Mészáros remains intransigent. He subjects capital in all its manifestations to merciless critique, exposing the crying contradictions of its apologists and the vacuity of the nostrums of its would-be ‘saviours’. However, it is not just a matter of forcefully restating known truths (such as the fact that capitalism is still founded on an alienated, and alienating, power, consequent on the structural subordination of labour to capital), but pushing the argument further, to overcome the limitations of Marx’s own work and assess the significance of contemporary trends. Here Mészáros has much to offer. Although deeply rooted in the Marxist tradition, his thinking incorporates the new determinants of development in the postwar period.

The title of the present volume must be understood in three senses. First it means ‘going beyond capital as such and not merely beyond capitalism’ (this important idea I will take up later); second, it means going beyond what Marx himself managed to achieve; finally, it means going beyond the original Marxian project, formulated when the full range of capital’s powers of adaptation lay beyond the horizon of its century.

This huge sprawling work has three main parts. Part One analyses the nature of capital and debunks the claims of its apologists (e.g. Hayek). Part Two meditates on the legacy of the Russian Revolution, notably theorizations formulated in its shadow: here History and Class Consciousness is exemplary and we are offered what is virtually a book-length critique of Lukács. Mészáros brilliantly underscores the continuity in the latter’s outlook right up to the late essay on democratization; he also shows that to the end Lukács stuck to the Stalinist shibboleths of ‘socialism in one country’ and ‘the’ party as the sole agent of transformation. Mészáros explores Marx’s theoretical difficulties, highlighting epigraphically an important unnoticed reservation expressed by Marx himself: ‘will revolution in Europe not be necessarily crushed in this little corner of the world, since on a much larger terrain the development of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant?’ Today the world market predicted by Marx is finally being established; for the first time we now live in one world (as Mészáros says, talk of a ‘Third World’ is nonsense), with all the attendant economic, ecological and ideological consequences. Any coherent socialist project must encompass this reality. Accordingly, the crucial question is this: under what conditions can the process of capital-expansion come to a close on a truly global scale, bringing with it necessarily the end of crushed and perverted revolutions, opening thereby the new historic phase of an irrepressible socialist offensive?

Part Three explores the present structural crisis of the capitalist system in detail. Here Mészáros demonstrates the devastating effect of the ‘decreasing rate of utilisation’, including its bizarre manifestation in the military-industrial complex. As he rightly points out, much of the debate over ‘growth’ ignores the relevance of the fantastic wastefulness inherent in the capital system. While the necessity of the socialist alternative is reasserted, the reasons for the collapse of the USSR are not evaded. As Mészáros correctly says, ‘the tragedy of Soviet type post-capitalist societies was that they followed the line of least resistance by positing socialism without radically overcoming the material presuppositions of the capital system.’ In contrast, ‘the radical negation of the capitalist state and the likewise negative “expropriation of the expropriators” was always considered by Marx only the necessary first step in the direction of the required social transformation.’ He insisted that the hegemonic alternative to capital’s
social order can only be an inherently positive enterprise. This is why the socialist revolution could not be conceived as a single act, no matter how radical in intent, but only as an ongoing, consistently self-critical social revolution, as a ‘permanent revolution’ (Marx). The object is to build an economy in the hands of the ‘associated producers’ (self-management), who put qualitative considerations above quantitative measures. As for socialist strategy, Mészáros argues that, since capital is itself an extra-parliamentary force, it would be foolish to restrict radical politics to parliament. A politics from below (‘socialist pluralism’) must generate a global opposition to a global system.

As the title indicates, central to Beyond Capital is the thesis that it is necessary to go not merely beyond ‘capitalism’ but beyond ‘capital’ itself. A lot therefore hangs on the coherence of this distinction. For example, it is used to characterize Soviet-type regimes of production as ‘post-capitalist’, yet still under the sway of ‘capital’. This is outlined in a fascinating chapter on ‘changing forms of the rule of capital’. Mészáros’s analysis of no-longer-existing socialism is of more general importance; for it is clear that the lessons are not specific to the extremities of the Russian situation, but are germane to the theory and practice of transition in general. It is crucial here to recognize that ‘Marx was not concerned with demonstrating the deficiencies of “capitalist production” but with the great historical task of extricating humankind from the conditions under which the satisfaction of human needs must be subordinated to the “production of capital”.’ Capital’s metabolism, based on its domination of alienated labour, on the predominance of exchange over use-value, and on a hierarchical division of labour, is driven by the imperative of expansion. As a system with its own logic and coherence it cannot be changed without tackling this central metabolic order and replacing it; tinkering with surface phenomena (e.g. juridical arrangements) will not change such fundamentals. Thus Mészáros argues that ‘the real target of emancipatory transformation is the complete eradication of capital as a totalising mode of control from the social reproductive metabolism itself, and not simply the displacement of the capitalist as the historically specific “personification of capital”’.

You can overthrow the capitalist but the factory system remains, the division of labour remains, nothing has changed in the metabolic functions of society. Indeed … you find the need for reassigning those forms of control to personalities, and that’s how the bureaucracy comes into existence. The bureaucracy is a function of this command structure under the changed circumstances where in the absence of the private capitalist you have to find an equivalent to that control … very often the notion of bureaucracy is pushed forward as a kind of mythical explanatory framework… [But] the bureaucracy itself needs explanation… [It is said that] if you get rid of bureaucracy then everything will be all right. But you don’t get rid of bureaucracy unless you attack [its] economic foundation…

It is indeed possible to smash the bourgeois state and conquer political power. However, it is quite impossible to ‘smash’ labour’s inherent structural dependence on capital. For that dependency is materially secured by the established hierarchical division of labour. Without the positive transcendence of capital’s metabolic functioning, ‘labour itself self-defeatingly continues to reproduce the power of capital over against itself’, Mészáros concludes.

In one version the distinction between capital and capitalism is already familiar to us; for it is a commonplace that merchants and usurers employed money as capital long before capital seized hold of production and established the modern system of industrial capitalism. But it is novel to argue that capital may survive capitalism. (It should be noted that on Mészáros’s account the USSR was not ‘state-capitalist’, as Tony Cliff among others argues.) So let us look first at his definition of capitalism. Mészáros argues that the capitalist formation extends
over only that particular phase of capital production in which (1) production for exchange is all pervasive; (2) labour power itself is a commodity; (3) the drive for profit is the fundamental regulator; (4) the vital mechanism for the extraction of surplus-value – the radical separation of the means of production from the producers – assumes an inherently economic form; (5) surplus value is privately appropriated by the members of the capitalist class; and (6) following its economic imperative of growth and expansion, capital production tends towards a global integration. It follows from this definition, according to Mészáros, that one cannot ‘speak of capitalism in post-revolutionary societies when out of these essential defining characteristics only one – number four – remains, and even that in a radically altered form, in that the extraction of surplus labour is regulated politically and not economically’. Yet at the same time Mészáros argues that capital maintains its rule in such post-revolutionary societies. What, then, is the definition of ‘capital’ that would be congruent with this survival?

According to Mészáros, the necessary conditions of all conceivable forms of the capital relation – including the post-capitalist forms – are: (1) the separation and alienation of the objective conditions of the labour process from labour itself; (2) the superimposition of such alienated conditions over the workers as a separate power exercising command over labour; (3) the personification of capital as ‘egotistic value’ pursuing its own self-expansion – the bureaucrat is the post-capitalist equivalent of the private capitalist; (4) the equivalent personification of labour whether as wage-labourer under capitalism or as the norm-fulfilling ‘socialist worker’ under the post-capitalist system. ‘Capital can change the form of its rule as long as these four basic conditions – which are constitutive of its “organic system” – are not radically superseded’, Mészáros concludes. Additionally, he maintains that since the inherited social division of labour and the objective structure of production remained in the post-capitalist economies we have witnessed, capital in this sense persisted.

Clearly there is considerable room for discussion about such a definition of capital. But in one respect – namely, that capital is inherently accumulation driven – everyone would agree. Mészáros goes out of his way to argue that this was still true of the USSR:

The imperative of accumulation driven expansion can be satisfied under changed economic circumstances not only without the subjective ‘profit motive’ but even without the objective requirement of profit, which happens to be an absolute necessity only in the capitalist variety of the capital system. … During several decades of Soviet economic development high levels of capital accumulation [were] secured by means of the politically controlled extraction of surplus labour, without remotely resembling the capitalist system in its necessary orientation towards profit.

This seems odd to me; for I would have thought that the accumulation-fetish was not rooted in ‘the metabolic order’ but in the hopes of the controllers, who imposed external ‘targets’, terroristically driven. Moreover, if Mészáros insists that the USSR as a capital system was expansion orientated, how is that compatible with the failure to innovate which led to permanent stagnation? No matter how much political authority, for external reasons of state, tried to coerce or stimulate the producers, the economy responded only sluggishly in quantitative terms, and innovation became completely bogged down. This was politically crucial; for the failure to ‘catch up’ with the West, and the failure to achieve real growth in the Brezhnev years, stripped the system of legitimacy, even in the eyes of its beneficiaries, and brought about its implosion. Mészáros is clearly right to argue that socialist revolution is not merely a matter of political power, or of redistribution, but of changing the fundamental social metabolism established by capital; it means transforming the very structure of material production and abolishing the hierarchical division of labour. He is clearly right that post-capitalist social formations failed to achieve this positive transcendence; and the emergence of ‘the bureaucracy’ is explicable primarily on that basis. His conceptualization of the problem in terms of the survival of ‘capital’ beyond ‘capitalism’ is the most interesting analysis since that of Trotsky, and deserves to be widely discussed.

For me Mészáros pays insufficient attention to the value-form of capital and the positing of expansion inherent in it. I therefore find incoherent the notion of capital without profit. Certainly, if the factory system in which capital materialized itself endures, then one cannot speak of socialism; but, conversely, if the law of value enforced through capitalist competition is no longer operative, we have a clock without a spring. I would argue that in the USSR capital’s metabolism was disrupted without an alternative being established; lacking organic coherence, the system could not survive once the exceptional conditions of revolutionary mobilization, and of war, had passed.

Chris Arthur
Without consent


These two books form an admirably complementary pair. Burgess-Jackson’s is a jurisprudential study of what the crime of rape is, why it is a crime, the forms it can take, and the defences that may be offered. Lees’s is a study of how, in practice, rape cases are handled by the police and the judiciary, from their initial reporting through to the conduct of any eventual trial. Both authors are feminists and both studies provide good reasons to be dissatisfied with the way in which the law does deal with rape. Both write against the background of sustained public debate about what should and should not be regarded as rape at law. This debate has, in Britain, been prompted by a number of celebrated recent cases – most notably, the acquittal of the student Austen Donnellan and the conviction of the solicitor Angus Diggle. It has also been fuelled by claims, mainly made in the conservative press, that men are now being stigmatized as rapists merely for misreading sexual cues in a world where communication between the genders is fraught with difficulties and ambiguities. However, the debate has also heard contributions from feminists worried about the overextension of the term ‘rape’, the representation of women as perpetual victims, and the overdramatization of the offence if unaccompanied by violence.

Both writers regard rape as a sexual crime. This does not imply that it is in some sense a less serious crime. Nor does it imply that rape occupies a place on a continuum of behaviours which extends to consensual sexual interaction. Nor does it imply that sexual pleasure is the sole end of the rapist. Nor does it imply that a number of all too familiar stereotypical assumptions about the sexual character of men and women, and about the nature of heterosexual interaction between men and women, are true. It does mean that rape is other than simple assault. It also requires that the crime of rape be clearly distinguished from all other kinds of sexual encounters, however unwanted, regretted, unsatisfactory, or loveless some of these may be. Evidently, the matter of consent is central to the crime of rape. Rape is unconsented sex. What distinguishes rape from sexual intercourse is lack of consent. However, both books, in their different ways, draw attention to serious problems that attend this simple definition.

Burgess-Jackson in fact disputes the view that there is a single understanding of rape. He argues that there can be – and is – deep disagreement about what is and is not rape, and suggestions that there are several conceptions of rape. The conservative theory construes rape as a trespass upon the property of the man, the wrong done being to he who owns the woman violated. The liberal theory regards rape as an unconsented sexual battery, the wrong done being to the individual woman whose own choices with regard to her body are denied. The radical theory regards rape as but one instance of the subordination of women by men, the wrong done being to the gender as a whole whose entitlement to equal respect and consideration is dishonoured. Burgess-Jackson claims not to endorse any one of these three conceptions (though his sympathies are clearly with the last). He does seek to show how their application yields different conclusions as to whether some act is one of rape, what makes rape wrongful, and what may serve as a defence to the charge of rape. Some of his analyses are exemplary. The chapter on ‘Marital Rape’, for instance, exposes and rebuts, with admirable clarity and conciseness, all of the various arguments that might be offered to the conclusion that a husband cannot be guilty of raping his wife.

A problem with Burgess-Jackson’s approach is that, although he is surely right to display the differences between the views of the conservative, liberal and radical, it is not always clear on his account whether these really do differ about what rape is, or only about what makes it wrong. If rape is unconsented sex, then it is possible to disagree about what is wrong with unconsented sex for being unconsented. And this need not be a trivial dispute. But it is not a dispute about what rape is. We can have a single concept of rape – unconsented sex – and various conceptions of rape. These conceptions can be distinguished in two regards – how they understand consent and its absence; and what it is about the lack of consent which makes rape morally problematic. The liberal may be wrong to think that rape is only wrong for being the violation...
of an individual’s wishes; the radical may be right in seeing each and every such violation as signifying a more general oppression of women. Neither need deny that some sexual act is one of rape only if it is unconsented.

What counts as consent is a separate and further matter of dispute between the liberal and radical. The radical’s view (and Catharine MacKinnon is the most notable protagonist) is that the liberal is prepared to countenance as consensual what she views as compelled or passive acquiescence. Again there is no reason to see this dispute as one over the concept of rape. It is about the concept of consent. The radical is prepared to view ‘normal’ heterosexual intercourse as perhaps no less non-consensual than a paradigmatic instance of rape – because a woman, socialized into the role of passive acceptance of the eroticized dominance that is heterosexuality in our society, cannot be said ‘really’ to consent to any sexual encounter with a man. Burgess-Jackson, it must be said, invokes this understanding without mentioning any of the serious worries that have been expressed about it by many feminist philosophers and jurisprudential theorists.

The problem Sue Lees reveals is that the current system simply does not do justice to women and fails to convict the rapists it should. Whilst the number of reported rapes in England and Wales has trebled in the last ten years, the conviction rate has fallen. A dangerous combination of bad legal practice and general, misogynistic attitudes is exposed. When consent is the central issue at stake, and the complainant is no more than a witness within an adversarial hearing which requires proof beyond reasonable doubt and tolerates the admission of certain kinds of evidence, the stage is set for a shameful display of prejudicial attitudes and procedures which favour the defendants at the cost of humiliating their accusers. Despite all the supposed improvements in law and rules of procedure, Lees’s evidence is damming. Time and again testimony regarding the behaviour, lifestyle, clothing, character and past sexual conduct of women is not only admitted, but seen as bearing directly on the question of whether a rape occurred.

Many of Lees’s recommendations for change are to be welcomed: better training of the judiciary, more stringent controls on the admission of sexual character and sexual history evidence, an acceptance of some forms of corroborative evidence, and – especially in the light of cases of serial rapists who are being acquitted time after time – a greater disposition to admit evidence from several women of similar rapes. However, other of her comments are less welcome. That rules permit misogyny does not mean that the rules are themselves misogynistic. Nor should rules be devised to punish misogynistic. If it is thought proper to allow a woman’s past behaviour some weight in assessing the validity of her charge, it should at least be permitted to count a man’s past behaviour as bearing on the present accusation. However, it is not proper, as Lees suggests, to see his views on women and sex as relevant. Least of all should any revealed ‘sexism’ ‘be seen as evidence for his guilt’ (p. 253).

Both books raise all the right empirical and normative questions about how we define, try, excuse and punish the crime of rape. They do not settle matters. At the end of the day this may be because, although rape just is sex without consent, the law and its tribunals have proved deeply inadequate to the task of understanding what non-consensual sex is. Whether that is the fault of present practice, or is due to the straightforward impossibility of legally regulating sexual conduct, is unclear. But both authors afford an admirable brief for either argument.

David Archard
If a book can be heaped with praise for the scale of its ambition, then this one deserves mountains of it. It aspires to convince the reader of the incapacities of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of philosophy in the fields of ‘epistemology, ethics, mind and politics’, while simultaneously engaging us in a process of renewal and reconstruction. The move we are enjoined to make is from the ‘false universalisation inherent in mainstream philosophy towards a situated abstraction’ (p. 70), particularly in discussions of personal identity and the self.

Mainstream philosophy is ‘represented’ by Williams, Parfit, Nagel and Dennett. Griffiths warns feminists not to expect the work of these philosophers to illuminate their concerns with the question of ‘who or what I am’. In the absence of a credible analysis of their views, her warning amounts to advocating the view of ‘knowledge by testimony’ in traditional terms. But it can also be redescribed as ‘trusting others’ judgements’ in a certain sort of feminist terminology. This supports implicitly a dismissive attitude towards ‘male’ philosophers, disappointing in a book which is duly self-conscious of its diverse audience.

In other contexts, trust, co-operation, love and acceptance are indeed attractive notions from most feminist perspectives and, in this book, form the guiding pattern for a conceptual revision of the notion of self-identity as self-creation. Several good arguments are offered for accepting these notions as political values. The most crucial one is that fear debilitating, and therefore any commitment to increasing autonomy for self-creation must recognize the need for ‘generous patterns of cultural and political life, and the reduction of fear’ (p. 143). To this end, we are provided with an absorbing description of how emotions and feelings are socially and interpersonaly constructed in a politically structured environment, which opens the way for self-creation via a ‘politics of the self’.

This, for me, is where a problem emerges. If politics is about creating public spaces where fearless exchanges can occur between more or less autonomous selves, and these public spaces are constituted by various languages of expression and communication, what exactly is the role of philosophy in this political process? ‘Mainstream/academic philosophy’ is frequently derided in this book, while the author continues to identify herself as one of ‘us argumentative philosophers’. In her terms, philosophy is simply another language, and she inhabits the community of philosophers just as she inhabits other communities. In re-creating herself as a feminist philosopher, she is involved in a politics informed by an understanding of how judgements are validated by a new community and get into circulation. Indeed, it is her view that one is theorizing, in a sense, ‘simply by publishing’.

Is one also doing philosophy simply by publishing? Manifestly not. The mistake lies in identifying philosophy as another language, rather than as an activity of unravelling the grammars of languages. It is the politically structured character of their involvement with these languages that marks the exclusionary/inclusionary features of the philosophical activity of male/female, white/black, Western/Eastern philosophers. It follows that the activity of philosophy cannot be seriously undertaken if one fails to listen to those who have been set up as the Other. Here the Other is the ‘male’ philosopher. Richard Rorty is criticized for valorizing fear and cruelty in self-creation, when the whole point of his work is to show how a liberal ironist can fulfill his only clearly articulated desire of preventing the actual and possible humiliation of others. It may have been more appropriate to differ with him about how the job of opening oneself to the pain of others is accomplished, in particular by questioning his commendation of the private–public division. Ironically, his preference for literature rather than philosophy in forging human solidarity is echoed in Griffiths’ own use of critical autobiography. Moreover, her commitment to vigilance about oppression is not very different from Rorty’s plea that ‘we should stay on the lookout for marginalized people.’

Charles Taylor’s communitarianism is likewise found wanting for its insufficient attention to the political. While it is true that Taylor does not specifically focus on feminist concerns, to extend this charge to the accusation that his view is ‘not about political individuals’ is intriguing. Once again insufficient argument leaves one dissatisfied. Paul Gilroy is quoted with approval; however, the claim to ‘go beyond’ him is made without warrant.

The merit of Griffiths’ constructive arguments is seriously threatened by her brief and ineffective attempts to critique the position of others. Comparable preceding accounts, such as Jonathan Glover’s on self-
creation and Elizabeth Potter’s on moral identity, are surprisingly omitted. A more sustained discussion of the work of other feminists might have added to the appeal of the book. Repetitive and insubstantial references to others’ work can often perplex the uninitiated. A case in point is Pratibha Parmar’s writing on Asian women. We are told that the creation of authentic works of art by black and migrant women asserts both their unity and their difference, without any indication of how this creative process works for these women.

Shortcomings apart, Griffiths’ novel use of autobiographies to illustrate the problems and resolutions to some of the paradoxes of self-identity is a refreshing turn. Her overriding preference for ‘variety, confusion, colour, hotchpotch … of patchwork selves’ has undoubtedly left its mark on the production of this book. It deviates from many norms; how successfully is a debatable matter.

Meena Dhanda

Nietzsche’s French futures


In his *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche referred to the French as ‘charming company’, and he often regretted having to write in German, rather than in a more playful and fluid language like French. He was also conscious of having been ‘born posthumously’, predicting that he would eventually find his true readers amongst the philosophers of the future. As Schrift notes in passing, Nietzsche’s French incarnation was for a long time a cultural-literary one, and it was sustained by a variety of literary writers from Malraux and Camus to Klossowski, Blanchot and Bataille; oddly, no mention is made here of the Gide of *Fruits of the Earth* (1897) and *The Immoralist* (1902). During the years when French philosophy was dominated by alternative imports such as the ‘three H’s’ (Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger), Nietzsche remained a shadowy and even suspect figure. It was, it is generally agreed, Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962) that turned him into a French philosopher. Henceforth Nietzsche’s future appeared to be both French and solidly assured.

Schrift’s concern is not with the rectitude of the many interpretations of Nietzsche’s work that have been proposed in France. He is concerned, rather, with what might be termed Nietzsche’s use-value within recent French philosophy, and with the way in which Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Cixous have made use of him in developing their own projects. Neither Deleuze’s pioneering study, Derrida’s *Spurs*, nor Foucault’s essays on Nietzsche are dealt with here. Schrift further restricts his field of enquiry by ruling himself incompetent to deal with the philosophical projects of Bataille, Blanchot or Irigaray. His modesty sounds genuine rather than feigned, and the admission is refreshingly honest. More refreshing still is Schrift’s lucidity and clarity of expression. He is no vulgarizer, but his readings of the more abstruse pronouncements of Deleuze and Derrida in particular are happily free of the clogged prose that obscures so many accounts.

The primary use-value of Nietzsche for the so-called ‘poststructuralist’ generation (Schrift’s delicate inverted commas are a timely reminder that ‘French poststructuralism’ is largely an Anglo-American construct) is that he offers an alternative both to the phenomenological privileging of subjectivity and to the anti-subjectivism of structuralism. Nietzsche makes it possible, that is, to raise new questions about individual agency without relapsing into either voluntarism or scientism. The attraction for those wishing to escape the codified confines of academic philosophy was irresistible. As Foucault once remarked, some things are more fun to think about than others. And for a long time, Nietzsche was certainly fun.

For Derrida, Nietzsche’s rejection of the binary logic of ‘good or evil’ opens up a new line of approach that avoids a history of philosophy replicating binary divisions and choices. At this level, Nietzsche is a talisman, a guarantee of otherness rather than an author to be expounded in any detail. Similarly, for Deleuze, Nietzsche often stands for symbolic deterritorialization; his aphorisms are always elsewhere, always resistant to codification. In the case of Cixous, the link seems more tenuous, and her proposal that gift-giving can provide the foundations for a feminine libidinal economy, as opposed to a masculine economy predicated on a desire to possess, appears to owe more to Derrida’s passing comments on Nietzsche than to Nietzsche himself. Schrift’s reading of Cixous does, however, demonstrate just how widely Nietzsche was disseminated in the 1970s, albeit in a sometimes indirect manner.
Schrift does not always avoid the obvious danger inherent in an essay like this, and at times tends to ascribe a little too much influence to his subject. That Deleuze’s notions of desire as a productive force and of the perpetual nature of becoming are indebted to the Nietzschean will to power is not in dispute. But one would like to learn more about how Deleuze’s Nietzscheanism relates to the Bergsonian rhizomes that sprout throughout his work. With Foucault, matters may be more complex still. Thus, the Nietzschean genealogy of his theory of power as a network of relations of force, rather than an object to be taken, held or lost, may have been filtered through Canguilhem’s work on vitalism, and Canguilhem himself often claimed to be a Nietzschean. To disentangle that line of descent would no doubt require a new book, and it is to be hoped that Schrift will write it.

In his final chapter, Schrift argues that Nietzsche’s French future is over for the moment, and that he is now little more than another figure in the history of philosophy. For Descombes in his influential Modern French Philosophy, for Ferry and Renault in their French Philosophy of the Sixties, as for Lyotard, the rallying cry ‘We are not Nietzscheans’ has become one of the main slogans of a turn away from – and against – poststructuralism. Kant appears once more to be the only (or last) good German philosopher, as he was fifty years ago. This is in part no doubt a banal generational quarrel and a critique of a marginality that has become an orthodoxy. More worryingly, it signals a rejection of relativist perspectivism in the name of a return to ‘Republican values’ and a ‘universalism’ that is in fact disturbingly Gallic in flavour. The new binary choice appears to be: either Kant and the Republic, or Nietzsche and barbarism.

Schrift is, however, optimistic about Nietzsche’s next French future, and suggests that the critique of nationalisms and identity politics made in Human, Too Human has considerable contemporary relevance. It is hard to disagree. ‘Supposing truth to be a woman – what?’, asks Nietzsche. Sections of the French media currently suppose a young Arab woman with a veil to be a threat to the Republic. And supposing that she has something to say about the truth of Republicanism – what?

David Macey

Beyond the flesh


Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds, Posthuman Bodies, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995. x + 275 pp., £27.50 hb., £13.50 pb., 0 253 32894 2 hb., 0 253 20970 6 pb.

There is growing interest in the human body as a subject of investigation within philosophy. Although primarily driven by the traditions of phenomenology and poststructuralism, significant contributions have been made by radical feminists and in the developing queer literature.

The Cyborg Handbook, however, is really concerned with the relationship between the body and new cybernetic and prosthetic technologies like virtual reality. For the evolution of technology renders the possibility of substituting physical operations and attributes, to restore and enhance the functioning of the body. This is achieved by assembling synthetic appliances and modifying individual competencies through facilities contrived to heighten human effectiveness. The technologized body is thus furnished with a redesigned exterior made up of precisely modelled electronic instruments, robotics and machinic devices. Not surprisingly, there has been a considerable amount of fascination with the philosophical significance of cybernetic organisms, or cyborgs, which began with Donna Haraway’s powerful essay ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’ (1985). Since then, cyborgism has become a central concept for many postmodern, ‘cyberfeminist’ philosophers and cultural critics like Anne Balsamo, Allucquere Rosanne Stone and Sadie Plant.

The Cyborg Handbook is a collection of articles which attempt to define and explore these questions. It brings together the most important historical and theoretical documents on cyborgs, particularly with respect to their development in space, warfare, medicine, politics, anthropology and the technological imaginary. It suggests that there is not just one type of cyborg but many different types, ranging from the merely ‘restorative’ (i.e. replacing lost functions/limbs) through to the ‘enhanced’ jet pilots of the Gulf War. The editor argues that the distinction between humans and machines is now almost imperceptible. Indeed, for him, humanity is on the threshold of a new stage of human-machine evolution; a stage which brings with it
not only cybernetic technologies but also vastly altered linguistic capabilities and sense perceptions. 

Posthuman Bodies, by contrast, is specifically concerned with how the body, in conjunction with various reproductive and cinematic technologies, impacts upon feminist and queer cultural politics and identities. The book is an assortment of articles that relate to disparate postmodern cultural confrontations with the rationality of the technologized body. The argument of the editors is that ‘the posthuman condition is upon us, and that nostalgia for a humanist philosophy of self and other, human and alien, normal and queer is merely the echo of a battle that has already taken place’ (p. vii). Posthuman Bodies is an exhortation to employ a wide range of corporeal forms that supplant both the human and the humanities. Halberstam and Livingston suggest that such an undertaking arises out of the knowledge that the licence that these singular identities pretend to advance is extortionate, since it makes valueless much of what matters to them. The pieces included draw on a variety of disciplines, including film and literary studies, cultural studies of science and science fiction, feminist and queer studies. Whilst there is no posthuman manifesto on offer, the contributors do ally themselves with a variety of hyphenated (post-, sub-, inter-, trans-, etc.) methodological principles.

The body is now firmly on the agenda. But a number of theoretical problems remain. First, there is an underemphasis in both these volumes on defining the modern body and its history. Second, there is no attempt to define what a postmodern body might be: is it a ‘body without organs’ (Deleuze and Guattari)? A body without a self? A self without a body? Certainly, the posthuman body seems to have the capacity to become monstrously Other when, as White puts it in Posthuman Bodies, ‘the menagerie within’ is let loose on celluloid, as in Inoshiro Honda and Eiji Tsuburaya’s Attack of the Mushroom People. Third, neither of these books contributes significantly to the development of a critical theory of technology, although The Cyborg Handbook does at least highlight the fact that immanent cyborgization also presages alarming mutations that may possibly transform human beings into mere automatons. Posthuman dilemmas are multiplying daily. Unfortunately, it is clear that our understanding of the moral implications of technologized bodies is not going to be enhanced by a postmodern philosophy which is devoid of ethical foundations, let alone ethical prescriptions.

John Armitage

The measure of some things

Cairns Craig, Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and British Culture, Polygon, Edinburgh, 1996. 240 pp., £11.95 pb., 0 7486 6082 8.

This is a thoughtful analysis of conflicting modern cultural identities written from a Scottish perspective. Craig lectures on English literature at Edinburgh University, and this collection, largely a reprint of essays in Cencrastus and Radical Scotland from 1981 to the early 1990s, is notable for its informed discussions of a shelf-full of classic Scottish (and other) novels and books.

It is a mark of the rapid movement of debate and recovery of cultural self-confidence in Scotland that the early essays already have a slightly dated feel to them. Do we still need to be lectured on ‘parochialism’, for example, or told that ‘Scottish culture has cowered in the consciousness of its own inadequacy’ (p. 11)? The core of the book, however, is a fascinating essay entitled ‘George Orwell and the English Ideology’ which ranges widely over the themes of English poetry, self-image, and their resonances in popular politics in Britain. The cultural Right in England, from T.S. Eliot to C.S. Sissons, is seen as employing a model of tradition based on assumed continuities of language and landscape. Its echoes in Edwin Muir’s Scott and Scotland (1936) give it a relevance to Scottish self-perceptions. The English Left from Orwell on, so Craig argues, implicitly accepted this idea of continuity, theorizing for example about the distinctive ‘patience’ and ‘fundamental decency’ of the common people. The older ‘New Left’ writers (Raymond Williams or E.P. Thompson) thus popularized culture-specific English ‘traditions’ to counter both the rival traditionalism of Eliot, and the crude and suspect ‘internationalism’ flowing from the Soviet Union. In this way, following Marx’s foregrounding of the development of English capitalism in the nineteenth century, they prioritized English history in a kind of unwitting cultural imperialism. Even their critics in the New Left Review prioritize England, Nairn in The Break-up of Britain (1981) seeing Scottish popular culture as peculiarly ‘deformed’ in comparison with England’s.

More questionable is Craig’s final essay, ‘Posting Towards the Future’. It is hardly a model of clarity. Craig imperceptibly blends in exposition of others’ views with his own argument, and deals in vague, ill-defined contrasts. He begins by contrasting Marxism
(in its Soviet ‘Histmat’ version) with a Nietzsche-inspired ‘postmodernism’, and ends by suggesting that both overvalue a Western idea of history at the expense of other perspectives. This last point, in so far as it tells against Marxism, was made with considerably greater clarity by John MacMurray in the 1930s.

In the section on ‘postmodernism’, the abandonment of England as the yardstick of all historical development becomes an excuse for an unwarranted rejection of the rationality of historical analysis per se. Thus we are told: ‘though we may wish to fight for the truthfulness of our discourse, in the last analysis we have to accept that if one discourse succeeds in replacing another it is only as a function of the “will to power”, or as a shift in some deep-structure of our social organization that we cannot control, not as a function of its superior value’ (p. 212). Yet when a newspaper owner replaces the ‘discourse’ with a left-wing journalist like Paul Foot on the Daily Mirror with ‘alternative discourses’, this is surely not merely an expression of the ‘will to power’ outside of our ‘control’. It is better – more accurate – to speak of something essential (e.g. the control of public space by capital) occurring behind superficial appearances. According to Craig, by contrast, ‘The “postworld” is a world in which it is impossible to distinguish appearance from reality, because appearance is the only reality’ – an argument illustrated as follows: ‘bolt art nouveau decorations on to modernist tower blocks and they will cease to be unacceptable prisons to their tenants. The style is the meaning’ (pp. 212–13). Never mind fuel poverty, dampness or poor design then: Protagoras lives.

As for the Scottish literary criticism, we might wish at times that Craig took his own advice and validated perspectives other than those of the political-cultural activist. Moreover, admiration for the ‘liberation of the voice’ in modern Scottish fiction and poetry is less than convincing when accompanied by neglect of what the ‘liberated’ voice actually says. All in all though, Out of History represents a sustained and closely argued effort, from a liberal standpoint, to nurture a vital literary culture in Scotland.

Stephen Cowley

The last laugh


With few translations available, Italian feminist philosophy has received little attention in the Anglophone world. This welcome addition helps redress that situation and also demonstrates the inadequacy of the still popular classification of feminist philosophy into either French or Anglo-American branches. For, whilst it is true that the influence of Luce Irigaray pervades her book, Cavarero is by no means an acolyte or imitator; to think so would be to ignore the mutual exchange of ideas that Irigaray has enjoyed with Italian feminists over the years. Furthermore, the influence of Irigaray nestles here amongst many others (Le Dœuff, Arendt, Kristeva, Clément, Cixous, Daly, Lispector, and no doubt several Italians whom I did not recognize), making this work the very embodiment of feminist intertextuality.

Cavarero starts from the assumption that the mythic figures of any given culture represent the ‘symbolic order’ which has shaped it, and that through these figures a culture may recognize and understand itself. What the mythic figures of ‘western culture’ reveal, then, is a symbolic order in which ‘a male subject claiming to be neutral/universal declares his central position, disseminating a sense of the world cut to his own cloth’. This culture, so Cavarero argues, lacks any female mythic figures not constructed according to patriarchal codes, figures in whom a woman could
recognize herself as ‘a female subjectivity capable of taking shape within her own symbolic order’. To accede to the demand of such a female or feminine (the Italian does not differentiate) subjectivity, new figures are needed; but, rather than creating them from scratch, Cavarero’s strategy is to steal. Each of the four sections of the book is named after a female figure ‘stolen’ from Plato’s dialogues and relocated within a ‘feminine symbolic order’, which gives them new life and us the possibility of new mythic identifications. To that end, the book is probably written for the woman reader, the active ‘female feminist’ reader identified in Rosi Braidotti’s useful foreword to the English edition.

Lest this encourage the tendency to marginalize feminist philosophy, it must at once be pointed out that there is much in Cavarero’s book which ought to make the non-feminist mainstream of philosophy sit up and take notice too. This is particularly evident in the section which centres on the figure (in Plato’s Theaetetus) of the Maidservant from Thrace who laughed at Thales when, too busy gazing at the heavens, he neglected to look at his feet and fell into a well. For Plato the Maidservant illustrates the inability of simple folk to appreciate the concerns of the genuine philosopher. Cavarero, by contrast, uses the woman’s laughter as the starting point for a rigorous and compelling reading of the philosophical relationship between Parmenides and Plato, a critique of their dualistic distinction between being and appearance, and an invigorating account of the way in which Platonic philosophy was able to conceal the fact of sexual difference with the idealization and false universalization of ‘Man’. So, whilst it is true that sexual difference is Cavarero’s theme, such an intelligent and interesting analysis of Plato ought to be of concern to more than just ‘feminist’ philosophers.

In the other sections, Cavarero has Penelope illustrate the intertwaving of the intelligence and the senses, and Diotima’s speech from the Symposium is exposed as the mimetic device by which Plato ambiguously attempts to justify the exclusion of women from philosophy. Demeter’s refusal to generate life becomes the inspiration for an understanding of motherhood as choice and act rather than natural function, an understanding in which the phenomenon of chosen abortion is invoked to illustrate the power of ‘maternal subjectivity’ to act outside of patriarchal control.

Of course there is much to take issue with in Cavarero’s thought. Recurrent references to the ‘Great Mother’ and the unexplained assumption of the ‘feminine symbolic order’, for example, will understandably worry some readers. It would be easy to say of Cavarero’s work, as is sometimes said of feminism more generally, that it is less successful in its reconstructive, ‘positive’ aspects than as a critical discourse. But this would probably be to make an overly rigid distinction. As the mocking laughter of the Thracian maid gets louder and louder, pointing to the sheer phenomenological implausibility of Platonic idealism, the philosophical analysis simultaneously picks apart the dualistic system on which it is based, until the laughter and the philosophical voice of the text merge. Much satisfaction is to be had from the sisterly complicity, but Cavarero’s fine readings of Plato are accessible without it.

Stella Sandford

Turning ethical


Much has been made of deconstruction’s supposed ‘ethical turn’. But not enough, according to Bill Martin – at least not in a practical sense. This book is a spirited, lucid, often highly polemical attempt to ‘think’ a deconstructive politics which can be engaged at a practical level. Martin’s main opponents in this enterprise are those on the Left who would dismiss Derrida’s work as a politically irrelevant species of idealist posturing and wordplay, and those in the deconstructive camp who play straight into the hands of this caricature by presuming that there is nothing more to do than tinker with texts.

The book has three main parts. In the first, Martin examines the relevance to deconstruction of traditionally Marxist preoccupations (class, history, the concrete nature of social change). He criticizes existing deconstructionist treatments of the political (namely, conceptions of the ‘unavowable’ or ‘inoperative’ community in Blanchot and Nancy), for their rejection of the very idea of a political ‘project’, and their consequent ‘gloomy nihilism’. Deconstructive talk of ‘the other’ and ‘the margins’ is rendered vacuous unless supplemented by some sort of analysis of the workings of capitalist imperialism. At the same time, Marxism cannot begin to confront deconstructive themes, or ‘the possibility of justice’, without shedding its more crudely positivistic aspects. A concern for the other is hard to ground in classical historical materialism. It needs something more: Martin seeks ‘a praxis that strives toward the good within the open-ended

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structure of the infinite’ (p. 42) – and suggests that it lies in an interweaving of Marxist and deconstructive concerns.

Part 2 explores the trajectory of the humanist ideal from Descartes, via Kant, down to Habermas and Rorty. For Martin the promise of humanism has been almost entirely hidden by its practice. There is a tension between Cartesian, ‘calculating’, positivistic humanists (for example, Hobbes, Mill and present-day utilitarians) and those, like Kant and Derrida, for whom the key aspiration is the concern for the other. (Marx, incidentally, moves between these two strands.) Unsurprisingly, Martin has strong objections to Habermas’s depiction of Derrida as a ‘Young Conservative’, and suggests that Habermas’s own emphasis on communication as the vehicle of emancipation is both internally problematic and reductively Eurocentric: not the universalism he might think. Rorty, too, comes in for extended criticism. Martin finds that, for all his freewheeling anti-foundationalism and prioritization of imagination and poetry over social theory, Rorty deals in a domineering and chauvinistic instrumental rationality which seeks to assimilate other cultures into that of the contemporary bourgeois West, without any self-questioning of the violence that this involves.

Finally, Martin looks at Derrida’s treatment of the language of humanism in *The Other Heading*. For Derrida, as for Kant, thinking is condemned to struggle with metaphysics, and they are equally committed to pursuing the ‘infinite task set by the thinking of justice’, which ‘will provide the kind of totalizing ideal that is both necessary to and resistant to closure’ (p.129). Martin rejects Alex Callinicos’s ‘orthodox Marxist’ challenge to Derrida for presuming that he takes no concrete political positions and is unaware of the claims of materiality. In fact, Derrida poses questions about the nature of the humanist project which point not in the direction of political detachment but, on the contrary, towards a politically indispensable rethinking of what he calls the ‘idea of Europe’ and thus the idea of humanism itself.

Martin pursues his arguments with great passion and inventiveness. His marshalling of Derrida’s texts is impressive, if selective, and his quest to forge a link between the ethical insights of deconstruction and a sort of Kantian-Marxist political commitment is both shrewdly conducted and highly readable. Whether it works is another question. At one stage Habermas is accused of giving up on the goal of a participatory socialist society. Has Derrida ever had such a goal? The humanistic continuum between Kant and Derrida is vigorously asserted, but Martin never quite connects it to a Marxist-deconstructionist political project. A stated aim (in the back-cover blurb) is ‘to make sense of the politics of deconstruction for those outside the academy’. I’m not sure that Martin succeeds in this, but his book is a worthy attempt.

**Gideon Calder**

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**Anxious times**


Although translated from different original German titles, both English volumes contain much identical material. The former is longer and contains a greater amount of qualification and elaboration. Each appears to have been written in an attempt to address at least some of the diverse critical reactions prompted by Beck’s *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992; reviewed by Caroline New, *RP* 66, Spring 1994). It is frustrating that they read very much as collections of essays rather than as sustained arguments. The reader has to work hard to reconstruct the underlying thread of Beck’s argument, and is often forced to ask how each isolated skirmish fits into some overall framework of analysis. Criticism has come at him from many directions, and he appears overly concerned to address all his detractors at once. Nevertheless, it is possible to recognize three major sources of underlying controversy which may help to structure a reading of his latest work.

Is our heightened sense of insecurity in ‘risk society’ the result of a greater consciousness of self-generated ecological risk? Or, conversely, is our sense of heightened ecological risk the result of greater social insecurity (as Mary Douglas suggests in her commentary on Beck in *Risk and Blame*, 1994)? Beck wants to go beyond the either/or; to accept that increasing risk consciousness is bound up with a deficit of trust in authoritative institutions and the break-up of ‘traditional’ forms of social solidarity, while still maintaining that society is increasingly confronted with the very real threat of self-annihilation.

A second question might be posed as follows: does nature still grow on trees, or is ‘nature’ the social construction of our technological interventions...
and/or our ideological representations? Many of Beck’s German reviewers felt he was too uncritical towards claims about nature made by the environmental movement. The naturalistic fallacy of a pure nature, ‘out there’, underlies both romantic, deep-ecological theories of ‘equilibrium’ and instrumentalist-technocratic approaches to the ‘ecological crisis’. Nevertheless, Beck’s rejection of a pure nature is tempered by a distrust of knee-jerk social constructivism: ‘Ecology is guilty of forgetting about society, just as social science and social theory are predicated on the forgetting of ecology’ (Ecological Politics, p. 40). Beck argues that it is through the growing contradictions within technocratic modernity that the weaknesses of our sense of ‘coherence’, both of natural and social order, increasingly impinge upon our senses. 

Finally, how can ecological politics hope to reappropriate the same rational resources of modernity (science, technology and bureaucracy) which are so central to the ecological crisis in the first place (a criticism of Beck made by Zygmunt Bauman in his book Postmodern Ethics)? Can ‘reflexivity’ save modernity from itself? Beck seeks to demonstrate the force of modern technocracy’s own contradictions in undermining its rationality claims. The nuclear industry’s own worst enemy is itself, and not the marginal protesters at the gate. Reflexivity emerges from within. Beck’s revolution without a subject, ‘which the prevailing conditions have instigated against themselves with the objectified power of the industrial momentum’, seems to suggest that a deterministic technological dynamic may undermine itself and set us free.

These three issues help mark out the territory ‘at stake’ in the current debate over ‘risk’ and ‘modernity’. No doubt they will remain hotly contested; not simply because of disagreements with what Beck writes, but over interpretations of what he means.

Matthew David and Iain Wilkinson

Radical democracy

William E. Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995. 243 pp., $49.95 hb., $19.95 pb., 0 8166 2668 5 hb., 0 8166 2669 3 pb.

The Cold War is over and democracy, we are told, has won; the end of history has arrived and all that remains is to drag the few remaining holdouts into the light of reason. Yet the ‘victory’ of pluralist democracy has left us with a paradox. Acting in the name of unity – what Michael Walzer might call ‘shared understanding’ – pluralism exacerbates disunity.

In his collection of essays, William Connolly addresses the paradox in terms of the relationship between fundamentalization and pluralization. Every doctrine rests on some set of foundational assumptions. Fundamentalism is a political strategy to protect those assumptions from interrogation. It defines its critics as possessing all those defects which ‘God, nature, reason, nation or normality’ dictate must be eradicated. There is a creative tension between fundamentalization, which seeks to fortify and defend boundaries, and pluralization, which challenges and enlarges them. Every challenge risks adopting the strategy of its counterpart and may become ‘fundamentalized’ itself. Connolly attempts to break this cycle, using the techniques of genealogy and deconstruction to expose the hidden contingency and contestability of any set of ontological presuppositions that claim absolute authority.

Though indebted to the ‘postmodernists’, Connolly departs from them in his opinion that a viable alternative is available. The contestability of all foundational claims – he calls them ‘ontopolitical’ rather than ‘ontological’, to avoid the implied singular logic of the latter – opens a space of ambivalence in which political action may occur. Here an ‘ethic of critical responsiveness’ and an air of ‘agonistic respect’ may be cultivated. Such an ethos may be said to obtain when an individual or group is aware of both the contingent nature of his/her/its identity and of the exclusions thereby imposed. This enables the individual or group to respond to difference not with hostility, but with respect for that which allows his/her/its own identity to be consolidated. Such responsiveness is anticipatory, critical and self-revisionary. It responds to pluralization before the constituency in question is consolidated into a positive identity. It asks whether this emergent constituency will attempt to impose its identity as predominant and punish those who transgress it. According to Connolly, the task of ethics is to disallow any single moral code to dominate the field. It is self-revisionary in that those responding to pluralizing movements must revise their own identities to allow room for new ones.

At a time when the foundations of the ‘modernity’ of Hegel and Marx are collapsing under their own weight, Connolly’s ‘post-Nietzschean’ stance, prioritizing the richness of life over identity, is most compelling. At a time when we are told that democracy has won, Connolly urges us to consider what exactly democracy is and what it might mean to live democratically.

Chris Erickson