

# Choose life?

Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood, eds., *Against Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016). 277pp., £91.95 hb., £32.50 pb., 978 0 81013 213 9 hb., 978 0 81013 212 2 pb.

In José Saramago's 2005 novel, *Death at Intervals*, a land is stricken by a sudden uncooperative maiden of death who brings about the immortality of its inhabitants. Eternal life not only disrupts the biological life-cycle, but the basic premises of every political, social and religious institution. What is the worth of a state security powerless to kill or let live, of a 'holy institution, where the bold affirmation that god and death were two sides of the same coin'? Such are the sorts of questions that come to mind while reading the essays in Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood's collection *Against Life*. Just as Saramago rethinks life allegorically, *Against Life* does the same analytically. Transforming the old opposition of life and death exposes how dependent we are on life 'not simply [as] a fact we are asked to accept', as the editors of this volume argue, but even more as 'an exigency we must endorse and a task we must undertake.'

Based on a special ACLA seminar in 2011, the goal of *Against Life* is to criticise a fetishised 'culture of life' in order to reimagine the polity 'not [as] a community of human agents but something more like an ecosystem, a set of material bodies, human and non-human, affected by a common problem generated by the conjoined activities of a multitude.' In their introduction, Hunt and Youngblood thus take the 'turn to life' of recent decades – including Foucault's biopower, Agamben's bare life, Bauman's liquid life, Derrida's living on, Malabou's plastic life, Honig's more life, Anidjar's sacred life, and Thacker's after life – and try to indicate where it should lead us next. In doing so, the introduction provides both an incisive attack on the old humanist 'culture of life', and elaborates a longer, more subtle questioning of the recent 'turn to life'. Key examples of the latter are Jane Bennett's attempt to extend political ethics from humans to objects (her 'vital materialism') and Judith Butler's post-Derridean understanding of the work of mourn-

ing as a political equaliser (her 'precarious life'). In contrast to both old humanist tropes and these recent critical concepts, the editors argue, 'we pose ... questions out of a suspicion that the compulsory affirmation of life is actually killing us.' Their response, which they offer in a section titled 'Fuck life?', is to see life 'as yet another figure for identity, with "life" calling for its own critique ... with an attention to the added risks (biopolitical, thanatopolitical) that invocations of life always bring.' Such critique, they tell us, is conditional on an active disengagement from the old oppositions of human and animal, man and world, straight and queer, life and death, liberal and conservative, fertile and infertile. This is a collection that asks us to negate all forms of redemptive thought.

The first chapter, by Sarah Ensor, develops a 'non-salvific environmentalism' that refuses the temptation to oppose 'terminality' to life. Reading the history of AIDS through queer theory, Ensor understands *terminality* – the sense of 'borrowed time' – 'not as an exceptional condition, but rather as an exemplary one, and not as a realm defined by dwindling time but rather as itself a temporality in which alternate forms of relation and ethical investment can be developed.' Building especially on Eve Sedgwick's reading of terminal temporality – 'whatever else we know, we know there isn't time to bullshit' – Ensor extends the reading of a 'shared terminality' of the queer community to develop an 'ethics of temporality' that strives for a new 'environmental futurism (and, perhaps, environmental no-futurism)'. Here, a sense of urgency enables us to leave our anthropocentric and chauvinistic identity behind and consider a different reality, one already concerned with our *non*-presence.

In the following chapters, Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein choose affect theory as an alternative to the old goals of scientific observation, progress and growth. Colebrook criticises, following Hardt and Negri's work, the 'non-place' of the individual in the neo-liberal age. For her, one needs to continue the project of shaping alternatives to the Aristotelian-Kantian tradition of polity as the community of the *agora*, the good life, self-organisation and self-determination. 'The happy organism', Colebrook argues vis-à-vis Aristotelian *eudaimonia* [happiness], 'is not a riot of pleasures, consumption, and self-loss.

The happy organism, like the good earth with good climate, is a feeling, *autopoetic*, and self-maintaining whole.'

By contrast, Jami Weinstein moves beyond even the organism to argue for an 'object-oriented ontology (OOO)' or 'an absolute equality of objects' as the basis for a new 'ethics of in/difference'. This new ethics – very Nietzschean and Deleuzian in tone – is built on affect 'rooted in the portrait of the body as an assemblage of non-living forces'; a non-ethical reading of the body that relies on Cary Wolfe's understanding of animal life as a non-humanist form of life, and rejects Jane Bennett's account, which, Weinstein argues, 'unwittingly' defaults 'to subjectivity and distances the subject from other (nonhuman) subjects or objects in a representational mode.'

Taking a different route, Penelope Deutscher's chapter argues against the 'cluster of post-Foucauldian biopolitical theory' that she identifies with Judith Butler's ethics of mourning and Giorgio Agamben's biopolitics of 'precarious life'. In her mind, 'the problematisation and politicisation of women's reproductivity has not received much focus.' Deutscher's chapter joins other contributors to the volume in attending to specific conditions of living. Her call to extend the reading of 'bare life' to all forms of female reproductivity is an interesting and provocative idea, but, by applying the threat to every female body, it also wears it thin.

The second half of the volume draws its inspiration from the literary world. Robert McKay's article uses James Agee's short story 'A Mother's Tale' (1952) as a case study for the 'biopolitics of animal life and death in postwar America'; Isabel A. Moore's chapter takes animal life as a model of interpretation of lyrical poetry – specifically the concept of *biopoetics*. They are followed by Matthias Rudolf's theory of *mute responsiveness*. Rudolf follows Derrida and Agamben's theory of voice, bridged by Sara Guyer's suggestion that 'biopolitics is a politics of apostrophe', which resuscitates 'deconstruction's critique of figural language and literary animation in the face of the proliferation of political, ethical, and theoretical appeals to life.'

The final essay of the second section, by Donna V. Jones, returns to the themes of her excellent work

on life-philosophy and negritude, in a short analysis of an exchange between Leopold Sédar Senghor, founder of Negritude and the first president of Senegal, and Richard Wright. Senghor developed a version of Bergson's *élan vital* for Africans grounded in the racial thought of Arthur de Gobineau. Wright, in turn, criticised Senghor for his use of racial categories. Jones's attempt to solve the conflict by synthesising the two sides – as André Pichot synthesised them in his *The Pure Society* (2000) – is not always convincing. Still, she uses the early debate in order to re-read recent texts – Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men* and Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let me Down* – and so explore the relation between life-philosophy, negritude and biopolitical critique in a suggestive way.

Following a sharp interview by Alastair Hunt of Ranjana Khanna – a leading post-colonial theorist who has worked on the topos of melancholy as a way to undercut both 'the good life' and the therapeutic work of mourning – the book concludes with a short afterward by Lee Edelman, who brings together Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' with the recent 'turn to life' and contemporary biopolitical critique and queer theory. 'If living, like justice,' he writes, 'requires the annihilation effected by the divine, then it does no violence to Benjamin's thought to read the divine as queer and to see in the violence it directs against "life" the againstness of life itself as it enacts the justice through which what we are, like the law of what is, comes undone.' Edelman's negative use of critique, life, law, justice, undoing and 'againstness' takes some of the themes of this book to their logical end. This radical negation, wishing to 'undo' the norms and conventions of the system, produces a chilling effect, however, once it is translated to the realm of political decisions.

Reading this volume in the wake of the election in the United States of a populist authoritarian president lends a certain topical relevance to *Against Life's* high theoretical discussion. At a time when the old humanist ideas have shown themselves to be far less effective than political resentment, these essays open new ways of thinking about the moment in which we live. But does the volume, and this form of critique, say anything about the politics of the day after?

The critique of 'salvific' or redemptive solutions is

certainly relevant, but is it enough to state where we should direct our ‘againstness’, as Lee Edelman characterises it? Facing the threat of a very real state of emergency and the failure of democratic institutions, do we fight for the burning remnants of democracy in the name of humanism, or do we strive to create a new order? *Against Life* elects for the latter, choosing an unspecified revolutionary order. However, at a time when most of the left is thinking practically about what is to be done, the lack of attention given to the practicability of these ideas leaves us with a troubling gap. Turning against humanism surely has a cost in terms of democratic norms (eradicating them can lead as readily to tyranny as it can to post-humanist egalitarianism), as well as human rights, especially for those today who, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, lack the right to have rights.

Nitzan Lebovic

## Now the party’s over

Paul Clements, *The Creative Underground: Art, Politics and Everyday Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017). 232 pp., £110.00 hb., 978 1 13888 686 5

As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the creative process is an event or ‘festival’ which demands a break with linear time, a de-temporalisation of modernity; a suspension of means-ends relationships where others are subsumed, treated as things. Hence, it also entails a subversion of hierarchies of class and other forms of social division. In place of instrumental, reified relations and their external goals, such an event requires a moment of recuperation of the lateral ‘communication’ that sustains social hierarchies while transforming these into a synchrony of reciprocity and mutual recognition. This is time out, a carnival of the senses; a transitory, evental experience that is seen as stabilised or ritualised through artistic expression, and for which everyday life provides the setting. A similar conception of the everyday as interruptive ground of creativity both permeates Paul Clements’ arguments about art, politics and everyday life and may serve as a way of understanding what he calls ‘the creative

underground’. The process at stake in this has both the dimension of a break or rupture with the linear temporal structure of modernity and yet, at the same time, involves a (creative) synthesis, a necessary incorporation of the conditions of its production. This is a point adumbrated in his new book, in which Clements – drawing, in particular, on Michel de Certeau’s work on everyday life – investigates the rhizomatic nature of the ‘counter-culture’ as informal networks of aesthetic production which are both heterogeneous and yet articulated.

*The Creative Underground* addresses, amongst other things, the question of ‘outsider art’, the role of play and utopian visions, avant-gardism and autonomy and creative resistance, and draws these themes together in a final discussion of how they relate to conceptions of everyday life. In the counter-culture, as Clements describes it, ‘any grand narrative of linear history or culture is discombobulated in favour of disorganised connections and alliances between social practices and ideas, networks which lack order and chronology’. Such networks are ‘non-binary’ and ‘mutable’ and contain ‘strange connections and workings’, operating in ‘unlikely places’, and so on. These are familiar themes to anyone versed in accounts of the open horizontal structure of everyday life. At the same time, Clements’ description of this porosity of formal structures draws productively upon Jacques Rancière’s arguments with Pierre Bourdieu’s influential conceptions of the class-based character of ‘taste’, and with its assumptions concerning cultural hierarchy and its possible subversion.

As is well known, Rancière and Bourdieu share the sense that formal knowledge is divided on the basis of class and that the connections between areas of understanding remain hidden. For Bourdieu, however, the social scientist remains on the other side of an epistemological break from the discourse of the layperson and thus has privileged access to an invisible *modus operandi* which means that they can totalise social relations in a way that the person in the street cannot. Significantly, in Bourdieu’s case, this results in a class-based sequestering of taste and cultural capital, with a reflexive, totalising middle class, on the one side, and a marginalised working class, on the other, sunk in habit rather than stimulated by