

much of a chance to 'mature', and the radical core of May 68 soon came to be seen as but an ephemeral moment of emancipation. In the coming years and decades, many of the most radical Maoists, Victor included, would find the absoluteness included in the ideas of pure freedom and revolt attainable only in the form of religious thought, while others, such as Jacques Rancière, managed to remain within the earthly sphere only by rethinking revolutionary politics in more modest terms, by stressing intermittent disruptions. Reading these old discussions from the

early 1970s gives us an opportunity to revisit the moment which gave rise to currents of radical thought characterised largely by a rejection of any kind of determined and conscious organisational force of synthesis. In so doing, they might allow us to re-evaluate the directions taken by some currents of political thought which would develop during – and fail to challenge adequately – an era defined, in so many ways, by the profound and lasting defeat of radical politics.

Jussi Palmusaari

## Not German enough?

Tom Bunyard, *Debord, Time and Spectacle: Hegelian Marxism and Situationist Theory* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018). 430pp., £123.00 hb., 978 9 00435 602 3

Amid the copious notes taken by Guy Debord on the philosophy of Hegel, the following extract from the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* appears repeatedly: 'By the little which satisfies Spirit, we can measure the extent of its loss.' For Hegel, this was intended as a reproach to the parochial obsession with empirical detail. As to why the fragment held Debord's attention, it is not altogether misplaced to assume its significance lay in his competence as a diagnostician of modern society. An *enfant terrible* among other interventions of the New Left, Debord's 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle* attempted to give inner coherence to the way in which the capitalist economy develops its fetishised and reified character into an objective social form mediated by appearances. The society of the spectacle refers to the social and unitary organisation of appearances embedded with a meaning that contains both the image and the goal of social development under the commodity economy. As a totality, the spectacle both defines that which appears and gives to appearance essential actuality. For Debord, the spirit of the spectacular epoch is thus reduced to a satisfaction afforded by the objectivity of appearance-forms, which had become – under the 'enriched privation' of postwar prosperity – indistinguishable from a base colourless survival.

If the Hegelian and Marxian resonances of this

description are readily apparent, they have nonetheless been minimised within most scholarship on Debord and the Situationist International. Instead, one finds Debord as a critic of media distraction, of unrestrained consumerism or as a mere heir to Dada and Surrealism. Yet even a cursory encounter with *The Society of the Spectacle* clearly demonstrates that the spectacle is neither chiefly concerned with visual imagery nor reducible to the advertisements and entertainment that saturate modern society. There have, of course, been exceptions to such readings, although not many. Anselm Jappe's authoritative *Guy Debord* (1993) – which Debord himself considered to be 'the best-informed book about me' – remains unmatched in its situating of Debord within the Hegelian Marxist tradition of Lukács. Nevertheless, most accounts have largely ignored the profoundly Hegelian dimension of Debord's works, at best giving it only anecdotal attention and failing to heed what Debord himself exhorts in a 1971 letter: 'I will affirm to you straight away: I understand *perfectly* what I have written. Obviously one cannot fully comprehend it without Marx, and especially Hegel.'

By contrast, Tom Bunyard's wide-ranging monograph convincingly casts Debord as 'a twentieth-century Young Hegelian' and, through the influence of the young Marx and Lukács, as a thinker of histor-

ical praxis. Debord is presented as having incorporated and reformulated elements of Hegel's philosophy across his entire oeuvre, most notably in his concepts of time and history. As Bunyard makes clear, *The Society of the Spectacle* is, from this perspective, 'best understood as a book about history. Or, to put that more precisely: it is a book that describes a society that has become detached from its capacity to consciously shape and determine its own future.' However, interpreted as an estranged form of historical agency, the spectacle itself receives less attention in Bunyard's investigation than does its corrective. Bunyard's Debord is one who affirms a philosophical anthropology – largely informed by Hegelian, existential and early Marxian themes – in which free human subjectivity, dynamically self-constitutive in its dialectical interaction with the objective world, is 'understood in terms of activity and experience in time' and thus knowingly developing in history through the praxis of its own self-determination. Debord's Hegelianism becomes, in Bunyard's words, a 're-figuration of Hegel's claims, in which subject-object unity ceases to be a state of final resolution, and instead becomes the ground of a self-determinate future.'

In this sense, Hegel's philosophy becomes for Debord, above all, a resource – almost exclusively informed by its French reception, and an infatuation with the *Phenomenology's* Heideggerian and existentialist themes – for articulating the dialectical negativity of human temporality and historical praxis beyond the stultifying and passive conditions of spectacular domination. Bunyard's reading of the spectacle follows as the negative shadow of this philosophical anthropology of subjectivity, as a socially alienated historical agency not reducible to the reification of capitalist society but instead as a broader and transhistorical 'problematic' which capitalism has brought to its most extreme and full expression. Here, the spectacle refers to a condition of separation from self-determinate historical time and praxis, 'as a condition in which individuals become alienated from their ability to shape and direct their own time.' As such, the *society* of the spectacle becomes but one 'instantiation' of this more general problematic of alienated collective agency that can arise within any social formation.

The scope of Bunyard's book and its attention to Debord's archival notes, letters and writings, beyond *The Society of the Spectacle*, unearths a set of inquiries that traverse Debord's entire career, from his investigations in the Situationist International's (or SI's) early avant-garde years, the explicit engagement with Hegelian Marxism during the early 1960s and his work after the upheaval of 1968, through to the dissolution of the SI and his 1988 *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Aside from the aforementioned philosophical anthropology and concept of history, Bunyard identifies three additional themes that give continuity to these various periods in Debord's life: an ethical and normative dimension to the theory of the spectacle for which opposition is grounded against all forms of separated social power; an aesthetic aspect of Debord's interest in the temporal flow of lived experience which entails 'an aestheticisation of finitude, change and temporal process, and [an] identified beauty with conscious, self-determinate action in time'; and finally, the way in which Debord's Hegelianism helps him develop a dialectical conception of strategic praxis, thereby synthesising Hegel with the works of Clausewitz, Machiavelli and Sun Tzu. Along the way, the question is explored of how and to what extent the thought of the young Marx, Lukács, Lefebvre, Sartre and the most prominent French Hegelians (Jean Wahl, Alexandre Koyré, Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite and Kostas Papaïoannou) each came to inform, whether directly or indirectly, Debord's own thought.

Part 4 of the book offers a more critical engagement with Debord's work, including the latent tension between the SI's call for the abolition of labour – a renunciation of the dignity of labour as something to be redeemed from the fetters of capitalist parasitism – and their affirmation of workers' councils. This is an active tension that extends into the SI's '*theoretical neglect* of labour', which, Bunyard argues, ultimately results in a deficient conceptualisation of capitalism as a consequence of Debord's rejection of economism. Elsewhere in the book, Bunyard impressively examines how the SI's concept of decomposition – as the professed stagnation of modern culture following the failure of the classical workers' movement – amounts to a precursor to the concept of the spectacle; offers

an interpretation of Debord's 1978 film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* which 'evidences an aestheticisation of temporal flow and movement'; provides a reconstruction of the concepts of 'life' and 'non-life' within *The Society of the Spectacle*; and constructs an argument as to how Debord's interest in strategy and war was not a personal or private idiosyncrasy, but was 'in fact a form of Hegelian Marxism', in which dialectical thinking strategically requires 'recognising and understanding the changing relations between opposing forces.'

There is much to admire, then, in Bunyard's shifting of Debord scholarship towards the theoretical and philosophical foundations of his thought. Nevertheless, the book is characterised by an overemphasis on Debord's normative positions on human subjectivity and temporality that, I think, eclipses the specificity and conceptual determinations of his diagnosis of modern society. For Bunyard, Hegelian thought is important not for the way in which it illustrates the specific logic of the modern spectacle but for the way in which it allows Debord to conceive human practice as self-directed, transitory and free, as an historical unity of subject and substance. While this is illuminating as regards how Debord views the structure of free social activity in general, the spectacle ends up being defined as a derivative of the remedy suggested by Debord's wider philosophical anthropology; that is, it is 'best understood as a condition of historical arrest: as a state of alienation from historical time.' This is a reading overwhelmed by what Bunyard calls the 'ethical dimension' of Debord's thought, an orientation adhering with the passage of lived time from which the spectacle is derived as a contrary counterpart.

Bunyard is certainly right to emphasise the way in which Debord viewed the spectacle as independent of capitalism, or more specifically – as can be found within Debord's scattered comments, mostly within his letters – that there are pre-capitalist origins to the spectacle which has its 'basis in Greek thought', increasing during the Renaissance and in the eighteenth century when 'one opened museum collections to the public'. However, in the absence of Debord having written anything resembling a materialist history of the spectacle, Bunyard is left to generalise an abstraction, dubbed a 'problematic', not reducible to any

historical moment and which indeterminately refers to any situation 'wherein social actors become detached from their own collective abilities and agency, and thus from their ability to shape their own lived time.'



As a result, spectacular capitalism is only the 'complete actualisation of that problematic', an ahistorical and yet always existing potential for the alienation of collective social power. The movement from *potential* to *actuality* is left unexplained, so inadvertently affirming Bunyard's more general characterisation of Debord as a Young Hegelian. Here, all of the idealist propensities scrutinised by Marx in *The German Ideology* are smuggled into Bunyard's own interpretation of the spectacle without these ever being addressed. Debord ends up a Young Hegelian by inheriting all of that intellectual movement's defects. It is in part a noble approach, one which seeks to open a terrain of political possibility – 'for even if capitalism were to be overthrown, some new form of spectacular separation could emerge.' Yet it is not one which can elucidate the determinate and specific critical purchase that the concept of spectacle might have upon the present moment.

The spectacle emerges as an *idealisation* by which

human beings are subordinated to the results of their own objective activity through a condition of social separation. When Bunyard does describe Hegel's influence on Debord's concept of the spectacle specifically, the analysis is confined to Hegel's notion of representation [*Vorstellung*] along with the antinomies of the *Verstand*. However, Bunyard pays little attention to either the role of appearances [*Erscheinungen*] or the categories of social cohesion outlined by Debord explicitly in the opening thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*. While Bunyard does concede that 'Hegel's work greatly informs Debord's conception of spectacular representation', this observation is followed by a characterisation of the diremption between subject and object generally thematised within the *Phenomenology*. Bunyard makes reference to the mediations of *Vorstellung* that occupy the separation between a knowing subject and its world, but its determinate elucidation is only given by the example of 'Revealed Religion'. Bunyard does not distinguish between *Vorstellung* as a general immediacy apprehended by consciousness throughout the *Phenomenology* and its particular content within any number of sections in that book. Lost in this reading is the reason why Debord titled his opening chapter 'La séparation achevée', a beginning which traces the general self-moving form-determinations of the social reality of the spectacle as a *unifying force* of organised appearances.

What is important for Bunyard in his account of the Hegelian influence upon the concept of the spectacle is strictly a *generic* condition of the separation between subject and object. Presumably, however, Hegelian thought should have more to say about the deeper more integrative social reality of the spectacle, a point vindicated by Debord's extensive notes on Hyppolite's translation of the *Phenomenology*. While right to say that separation remains pivotal for the spectacle as its 'alpha and omega', single recourse to a Hegelian framework of antinomic division risks failing to grasp the spectacle as 'the social organisation of appearances'. Debord himself composed notes on the *Phenomenology* which exceeded in number those on the 'Revealed Religion' moment of Spirit, such as those on the 'Force and the Understanding: Appearance and the Supersensible World' section, which, it can be argued, does much to clarify the logic of the

spectacle in terms of the way in which a dialectic of *Erscheinungen* yields a 'sensuous supersensible' inverted world. Most remarkable in this regard is the complete absence of the concept of *Erscheinung* within Bunyard's analysis, a category that, for both Hegel and Marx, unfolds as the necessary manifestation of essence which cannot but appear at the phenomenal level and whose dynamic, arguably, remains fundamental to the structural determinacy and fluidity of the modern spectacle.

Bunyard is at pains to give determinacy to the unity of contingent forms of separated power, a problem that greater attention to the role of appearances might have resolved. Yet, without a more specific account of how it is that the spectacle, in its specific instantiation, deprives collective praxis of its possibilities, the contours of Bunyard's interpretation of the spectacle remain vague guidelines set at a distance from the actuality of spectacular domination. More attention to the determinations and forms of mediation said by Debord to define the modern spectacle – that is, with a focus on the prominent role of *appearances* – might have allowed Bunyard to give more internal coherence to Debord's disjointed comments on the pre-capitalist origins of the spectacle and thereby incorporated the essentially Hegelian insight adopted by Marx within the *Grundrisse*: 'The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape.'

Bunyard's interpretation traces in Debord a heavy debt to French Hegelianism with regards to the centrality of negativity within human history and the temporality of self-determinate social praxis. As a result, the spectacle often appears as a problem of subjectivity, frequently echoing the travails of Hegel's unhappy consciousness and, as such, bearing the strong but qualified impacts of existentialism. In elevating Debord's views on the contingencies of lived historical time, we find a version of Debord not altogether unreminiscent of Lukács' intellectual origins: a thinker whose subjectivism is inadvertently blemished with the stains of *Lebensphilosophie* and whose vitalism affirmed the lived time of subjective self-determination cohering with the flow of temporal and transformative flux. It is odd, in this respect, that Bunyard never once mentions Joseph Gabel's 1962 *False Consciousness*, a book which – synthesising the work of

Lukács and Bergson and existential themes – strongly informs Debord’s concluding chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* and whose theory of reification specifically identifies the ‘[s]patialisation of experienced duration’ and a ‘loss of temporalisation’ as its constitutive elements.

*Debord, Time and Spectacle* stands out for the unusual manner in which Debord is examined specifically as a part of the tradition of Hegelian Marxism. Yet this also remains an emphatically French Debord, in a fashion which minimises his work as a diagnostician of modern capitalist society by upholding an affirmative conception of historical praxis and deriding the spectacle for failing to live up to that possibility. Despite the limitations of centring a reading of the spec-

tacle on time and history, Bunyard certainly succeeds where this approach serves to develop ‘a holistic reading of Debord’s oeuvre.’ Nonetheless, at a moment when there is such an intense social need to excise ambiguity from a critical theory of society, the determinate mediations contained within the concept of modern spectacle ought to take some precedence over a generalised diagnosis of the deprivation of historical agency. The task therefore remains, one might say, to *Germanicise* Debord against the complaints he himself made about how the theoretical concepts of *The Society of the Spectacle*, ‘almost all of which have a German origin’, had been ‘quietly ignored’.

Eric-John Russell

## Symbolic glue

Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilising Against Equality* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). 302pp., £85.00 hb., £27.95 pb., 978 1 78348 999 2 hb., 978 1 78660 000 4 pb.

What fuels the success of authoritarian populism around the globe and how does the extreme right manage to hijack public debate? We know that ‘sex sells’, but we also need to learn how ‘gender’ turns the tables in this context, and *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe* is an excellent place to start. The editors, Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, have gathered reports from thirteen countries following two conferences that took place in 2015 in Budapest and Brussels. Each of the thoroughly researched and accessibly written chapters discusses the discourses, strategies and organisational efforts of the anti-gender movement in one European state, including Russia, often cross-referencing the phenomenon in other places. Most authors have a background in sociology and are prominent scholars of gender studies.

The chapters reveal some local disparities. For instance, the involvement of the Catholic Church varies from great prominence in Italy and Poland to a mere background function in Spain. In Slovenia and Croatia, specific anti-gender parties were established; in France the topic helped boost the existing party on the extreme right, the Front National; while in Germany a newly founded right-wing party, the AfD,

benefited from spreading anti-gender resentment. Most findings, however, corroborate the diagnosis that we are dealing with a coherent and concerted phenomenon across Europe (and possibly beyond) which deserves its own name: ‘anti-genderism’. This movement took off from the discursive framing of ‘gender ideology’ by writers in close association with the Vatican in the late nineties, and peaked in campaigns across many countries in 2012 and 2013.

One of the many things we can learn from the book is that our enemies know us better than we know them. Of course there are a host of projections, lies, exaggerations and false accusations fueling anti-gender campaigns, but, in a certain way, they are about what they claim to be. They are not merely conservative or Christian, not even primarily anti-feminist or anti-LGBTQ (though in consequence they are), but they are about gender. The anti-gender movement opposes the progressive conclusions drawn from the fact that gender identities are historically variable, power-laden social roles and that ‘normality’ can claim moral authority no more than ‘nature’ can. As I argued in a previous issue of *Radical Philosophy*, anti-genderism is a very specific