

# ‘on the roots of olive trees uprooted’

Joseph Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020). 312pp., £87.00 hb., £21.99 pb., 978 1 47800 767 8 hb., 978 1 47800 802 6 pb.

In 2001 the United Nations enacted an International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict (it's on 6 November, 12 days before World Philosophy Day). It is an honourable, if misguided gesture that at least points to the ways that armies and states deliberately or indiscriminately target people, their homes and infrastructures through acts of violence. Many of these forms of violence are done 'outside' of war, from nuclear testing areas of the western USA, and south Pacific islands, to the polluted soils, and waters around military bases in Alaska, Siberia, Diego Garcia, and beyond. Armies are exempted from even the barest, inadequate legislative restrictions on pollutions that nation states enact. And as many geographers have made clear, what the military has done to landscapes has been complemented by their work on what is known of landscapes – mapping, surveying, bordering the terrain.

Joseph Pugliese focuses on this military destruction of more-than-human life, the soils, waters, airs, animals and plants and the legal aspects of such destructions, arguing that non-humans are just as much targeted and affected by military and state violence. He then makes the increasingly vocalised point that 'the environment' is covered in only a patchwork way by international law and despite calls for a fifth Geneva convention or convention on ecocide (something Extinction Rebellion amongst other groups have begun to support), destruction can be, and is, undertaken with impunity.

In recent years forensic architecture – the production and presentation of architectural evidence, relating to failed or destroyed buildings, urban conflict, within legal and political processes – has been developed to try to counter human rights violations, environmental destructions and extra-judicial killings. In this book Pugliese focuses on what he terms forensic ecologies, that relate to the ways forensics has been taken up as a 'field of action' in social sciences to detect and confront state violations – as the collection *Forensis* (2014) puts it.

Forensic anthropology predates other disciplinary take ups, and has been closely linked to crimes and

war victims, whilst forensic media has pointed to the ways that audiovisual media technologies help reconstructions of events by accident investigators. The latter approaches are increasingly part of forensic architecture's practice too. Forensic auditing or accounting is increasingly used to detect crimes. Environmental forensics, as an approach, was invoked by Paulo Tavares' writings about the notorious Chevron pollution case in the Ecuadorian Amazon that resulted in a still unpaid \$18 billion fine in 2011. Here, 'interrogating the earth' for crimes committed made us realise that such forensics have been central to environmental legal struggles for a long time. Pugliese's forensic ecologies is most similar to the latter:

I deploy the concept to examine physical remains, in particular, of more-than-human entities left in the aftermath of the violence and destruction unleashed in zones of militarised occupation. I treat these remains as though they were evidence of culpable war crimes that must be brought to justice, even though currently they are necessarily proscribed by law.

In her recent essay 'Violence' Shela Sheikh has argued: 'To think violence today requires that we reposition ourselves, philosophically, legally, politically and ethically, in the space between certain extremes, themselves built upon violent historical categorisations and exclusions: human/nonhuman, subject/object, culture/nature, physis/tekhnē, active/passive.' It is in this between space that Pugliese seems to situate his work. His examples are drawn from the actions of the Israeli state, U.S. military and Palestinian peoples.

At the core of this book are discussions around witnessing; not just of the destructions of people's homes and bodies or the ways crossing points forced on Palestinians are comparable to the ways animals are treated as they are moved towards slaughter houses. These are witnessed here, but what are also witnessed are the ways bodies of animals, trees, soils are woven into every aspect of peopled life, and how these relationships of everyday landscapes are being destroyed. This wit-

nessing then is of a virtual kind, and it is of the degraded bodies of the violence of occupation of which forensic ecologies are made.

Pugliesi argues that his version of forensics differs from more legal forms. This is also where the relational materialism that is evident in much of the theorising in the introduction addresses criticisms made of the latter by indigenous scholars who accuse it of failing to acknowledge the ontologies and political practices that many new materialisms appear to echo. For Pugliesi, indigenous understandings of sciences entail being open to the roles of sensation, perceptions, affects, aspects usually shut out of western scientific discourses. He argues that in their practices forensic scientists are taught to listen to the way things speak in the trace evidences of a crime scene, a kind of animist vision of the world that is then, one gets the impression, stripped out when converted into formal evidence, with soils, plants, and other things reduced to mere background. If we are to follow this view of forensic science, making a strong distinction between 'indigenous' knowledges and 'western' sciences appears to make little sense, with indigenous groups using varied knowledges, ones which work for their situations, including sciences. Pugliese proposes a distinct definition of forensics that keeps in play ecological sites and actors:

*Forensic evidence*, as I deploy the term, is constituted by a narrator, spatiotemporal markers, affective and rhetorical elements, and the complex interplay between an ecological site and the material actors that enable an entity to assume its veridictional status.

Most discussions of violence in subsequent chapters take their lead from a narrator, an eyewitness or documented account published by other authors which are then reiterated through various theoretical concatenations. So, in the middle section of the book Pugliese introduces us to a raft of what he terms biopolitical modalities: pedonpolitics, aeropolitics, aquapolitics, phytopolitics, zoopolitics – in this case to describe the predatory actions of the Israeli military state 'that require the state to exercise different techniques of operation in order to realise its intended bio- or necropolitical goals ... These different modalities of statist operation are tributaries that flow from the governing category of biopolitics'. When discussing phytopolitics he invokes the work of Carol Bardenstein on how Israeli National Parks, picnic areas and camping grounds have been developed on

the lands of some of the many hundreds of destroyed Palestinian villages. She documents a visit with refugee ex-residents to one destroyed village in Galilee that reveals a 'layer of memory' under the trees planted by the Jewish National Fund, of rubble from homes, but also of plants – pomegranates, fig trees, palms and lemon that have 'survived the JNF's erasure of the Palestinian village'. Pugliese runs with this example into a 'phytosemiotics of biocultural history' – the attentiveness of the refugees to what the trees 'have to tell them'. In this section we hear also of the water expropriation by settlers and state that makes some land increasingly impossible to cultivate. Land defined by the state as 'dry, barren' can then be claimed by the state. Elsewhere, Irus Braverman has also looked at the making of National Parks as 'green grabbing' around East Jerusalem, which, in effect, annexes land without compensation.

As we are so often reminded, land is the ultimate goal of settler colonialism, and imposed, deviously devised property relations the primary means of realising it. Yet land comprises water, soil, trees, so Pugliesi also takes us through examples of the poisoning of Palestinian water sources through deliberate sewage pollution by settlers, the ways that Palestinian plants, trees and farm animals are deliberate targets of the military and settlers, and more, through his explications of biopolitical modalities. This leads to much twisting and turning around autoimmunity discourses on how self-destruction results from supposed self-protection in the ways that these biopolitical modalities of aquapolitics, zoopolitics, and more, increasingly come to detrimentally affect the settler colonialists themselves and not just Palestinians.

This layering or reiterating of others' documented events through theory is an approach that mostly works, though it can take a little getting used to. Pugliese can bring theories together to make deeper points well, but it can sometimes fall flat, as in a story originally documented by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian of a Palestinian family violently evicted from their house to make way for settlers and their child's recollections of the lemon tree of their garden. What it gains through being reiterated via theoretical tropes is debatable.

The value of this book is in bringing the relations of the human and nonhuman together to show that Israeli, U.S. or indeed any military colonial systems of control operate not just through the bodies of people, but also



the bodies of animals, soils, air, waters. Resistances can work through these bodies too, a point Zoe Todd has also made. Resistance to colonial dispossession is articulated and mobilised not only through human means, but also through the bones and bodies of animals, and we might add the roots, fruits and leaves of trees, soils, water bodies, and more. As such, these become aspects of a continually made and re-made more-than-human terrain. But it is sometimes hard to see this resistance as very effective rather than affective, especially when Pugliese points to the ways Israeli weapons and security firms can market new weapons and technologies as having been field tested on live populations – a very ugly sense in which bodies are targeted for knowledge, power, money, and because those bodies are seen as lesser. Many of those arms companies in Israel are partners now with EU border security agencies like Frontex, engaging in the highly profitable war on migrants as well.

Other witnessings and justifications recounted by Pugliese include a reading of official reports, letters and

accounts on the imprisonment of Guantanamo prisoners Adnan Latif, Ahmed Errachidi and Mansoor Adayfi, and the ways they seemed to draw sustenance from ants, birds, banana rats, iguanas, and other creatures that could move across, in and out of the boundaries of the cages, prison and even maximum isolation cells. For Pugliese, through intimate contact such as soliciting for food, such animals create ‘the Open’. In this space they give hope to men who have been swept up in operations by the U.S. military that finds it is all but impossible to countenance that such men are people. It is again a slowly powerful and distressing read. A final chapter deals with forensic ecologies of drone death, a recounting of witness statements of the after effects of the outrageous and unforgivable USA drone attacks on Yemeni villages. Airwars recently estimated that between 22-48,000 civilians have been killed by the USA since 2001 through more than 91,000 drone and airstrikes across mainly Islamic countries.

At the core of forensics in its different forms is some



notion of justice. Pugliese seeks to argue for justice for non-humans inevitably caught up or deliberately targeted in military and para-military violence. To do this he seeks to draw on various indigenous philosophies that offer an expanded non-anthropocentric sense of justice focused on 'all our relations' along with the concept of ecological justice. Here he invokes forms of earth jurisprudence that he argues are ascendent and that seemingly point a way to ecocentric law – that of Ecuador's constitutional rights of nature, Bolivia's Rights of Mother Earth / Pachamama framed in the constitution by Evo Morales' government, and the legal recognition of Te Urewera Park in New Zealand with its own 'legal personhood'. Such revisions to law are seen to extend legal systems and ethical obligations to the 'outlaws' of trees, soils, animals and mountains, with legal categories emanating from relationships rather than species. Pugliese

makes a lot of claims for these approaches, particularly around how they question property relations, but these discussions, though interesting, feel underdeveloped here. If mainstream environmental laws have been about regulating the use of the earth through property relations, and are therefore human activity-centred, then law is indeed an area where fundamental transformations in living need to be made, moving towards something more earth-centred. We need more discussions of how this can work when extended outside of indigenous groups that tend to initiate or inspire such earth-centred laws, but also a sense of realism that earth jurisprudence is only complimentary to political struggle.

*This review's title is taken from Iman Annab's poem 'An Ode to a Palestinian Olympian Living Under Occupation' (2016)*

Chris Wilbert

## Protests against reality

John Molyneux, *The Dialectics of Art* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020). 300pp., £17.99 pb., 978 1 64259 131 6

This book is a significant contribution to the Marxist reflection on art. This is not a 'Marxist history of art', but a Marxist book about art, composed of various essays, some of a general theoretical character, and others concrete studies of artists. It has the great advantage of avoiding the most frequent shortcomings of Marxist works in this area: the fetishisation of 'realism', leading to the rejection of 'non-realist' art; the mechanical economic reductionism; the explanation of art as a pure 'reflection' of existing social conditions; the exclusive interpretation of art works as the expression of 'class ideologies'.

How to define art? Ernst Gombrich tried to avoid the difficulty by simply explaining that 'art is what artists do'. Fine, but how do you define an artist? Gombrich's explanation is both circular and empty. Molyneux's proposal is: art is one of the forms of *non-alienated labour*, a 'free' labour whose works are characterised by the *unity of form and content*. This is a quite persuasive proposition, although it depends on the meaning of 'form' ...

Marx believed that 'capitalist production is hostile to art and poetry'. This provides, according to Molyneux,

an objective basis for the alliance between the Left and Art. Of course, some artists were reactionary – Italian futurists, Ezra Pound, to mention only a few – but most, in the last 200 years, have been left-leaning, from Gustave Courbet to Banksy.

How is one to judge art? The criteria most used in the Western tradition, by art historians, critics and artists themselves, have been: mimesis, skill, beauty, the sublime, morality, emotional power, realism, originality, critical force. Molyneux does not reject these criteria, but tries to show their limits. For instance, 'realism', which after Marx and Engels, was picked up by wide sections of the Left as *the* criterion cannot be seen as the only one, simply because this excludes too much great art, from Leonardo da Vinci to Pablo Picasso.

In a chapter discussing the dialectics of modernism, Molyneux quotes an argument by Trotsky: creative art always begins with a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic; with official academic recognition, the rebellion is neutralised. However, soon afterwards, a fresh