

All this means that Romé has written a highly complex book, and one can easily get lost in the richness and vastness of the terrain covered. It is therefore recommended to read the parts as essays in themselves and only afterwards discover the monograph, the thread that unites them as a whole. In this sense, the Althusserian gesture of thinking is repeated in the book itself: rather than writing a monograph on 'Althusser's politics of time', at the end of which we would find a definition of this concept, we find a complex network of approaches to a certain problem: the *problem* of a politics of time; politics of time as time of reproduction, of time as historical time and of time as means of categorical epistemology.

In this approach through problematisation, rather than through definition, we find Romé's true faithfulness to Althusser (a faithfulness that is radically different from an empty indebtedness). She invites us to reengage with Althusser's writings, because she reminds us that, far from being just another toothless dead white man that litters the European canon, reading him can be a dangerous endeavour that calls into question not just how we think the conjuncture of politics and theory, but our very position as political beings inside a complex structure of reproduction; reproduction of subjectivity, of knowledge, of power and – first and foremost – the reproduction of temporality itself.

Till Hahn

Estranging capitalist estrangement

Mattin, *Social Dissonance* (Falmouth: Urbanomic/Mono, 2022). 256pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 91302 981 4

Both a reconstruction of the notion of alienation and a partisan reflection on the relationship between experimental art and a social world, *Social Dissonance* could be considered the first work of 'Brassierian Marxism'. If the study of Wilfrid Sellars led Ray Brassier to a profound engagement with Marx's revolutionary contribution to thought, Mattin builds on his work, along with Thomas Metzinger's, to enrich traditional Marxian theories of alienation, complementing the 'alienation from above' instituted by the 'spectral objectivity' of value with a highly original rendering of the 'alienation from below' that constitutes the self as a sort of necessary appearance.

Much ink has been spilled discussing the proper role of the concept of alienation in Marx's work. Soldered, according to some, to a metaphysical notion of 'human essence' soon abandoned; crucial, according to others, as a reminder of Marx's deep humanist commitments. The entwinement of the debate with practical political problems has often served to occlude what was theoretically at stake in the first place.

What is perhaps most valuable about Mattin's contribution is his ability to vindicate both the cogency and enduring importance of the concept of alienation whilst circumventing most of the problems traditionally associ-

ated with Marxist humanism, be it its troubling nostalgia for a pre-alienated wholeness or its various appeals to an unhistorical 'essence' that contradicts Marx's own flattening of the latter into the 'ensemble of social relations'. Although he draws on Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, Mattin avoids some of that text's most flagrant flaws, such as the invocation of the 'soul of the proletariat' as an unmediated source of resistance against generalised reification. He instead resorts to Brassier's rendering of 'essence' as self-relating negativity. This interpretation salvages the notion whilst shattering any articulation of the latter as a substantial identity.

Mattin's appeal to the *externalisation* of alienation combines a farewell to any illusion of an estranged immediacy, either predating capitalism or coming after its demise, with a call for the supersession of its *specifically capitalist* forms. Communism, in short, is not a 'reappropriation' of any kind, but the *estrangement* of capitalist estrangement. Moreover, his rigorous – and equally Brassierian – deployment of the dialectic of immediacy and mediation circumvents a further contentious point of Lukács's work: his tendency to depict *praxis* as an essentially *free* activity lurking behind the reified immediacy of capitalist social forms. This interpretation fatally severs the link between social practice and social

forms as the necessary mode of existence of the former. Unlike Lukács, Mattin correctly asserts that alienation, properly understood, is not a mere mystification but the truth of our social being under capitalism.

However, a third complication haunts Lukács's critique of reification, one which Mattin's work does not avoid entirely. It concerns the proper role of labour in a theory of alienation. The latter point is crucial because for Marx, and even for the young Marx, alienation is first and foremost *the alienation of labour*. This is what makes his theory both socially critical and historically specific. Alienation does not stem from our 'thrownness', the pervasiveness of the 'they' or the role of the signifier: it is socially grounded in a dynamic of expropriation and accumulation, wherein our social powers (the productive powers of humanity) take a quasi-objective existence in the form of commodities, money and capital. Crucially, those collective powers are not something inherent in 'human sociality' or any other mystified abstraction: they are a product of capital, yet could point beyond its rule. Thus, the overcoming of alienation is not, for Marx, a re-encounter with a lost immediacy, but the collective appropriation, through the revolutionary action of the working class, of the social powers alienated in the forms of the commodity, capital and the state.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács operated under an inversion whereby the alienation of labour appeared as a by-product of a generalised and all-encompassing reifying trend arising out of the commodity-form, a Weberian body in Marxian clothes that necessarily leads to a mystified conception of politics. In truth, however, the products of labour only take the commodity-form as a consequence of the former's alienation, which creates a society built around the double split between (1) classes and (2) private and independent units of production. Mattin rightly asserts that alienation is 'a process founded on the fundamental asymmetry between workers who lack the means to convert their material energy into social wealth and a production process that converts this potential material wealth into the actuality of wealth: capital'. However, his quick move to the general ramifications of this original alienation obscures one important political point: how workers' struggle 'in-and-against' the wage-relation and the concomitant dictatorship of the capitalist in the working place is *already* a struggle against alienation. Capitalist alienation is the

mode of existence of a contradiction, a reality internally split by struggle. When the struggle *for* the wage develops into a struggle against the wage-*form*, class struggle – the mode of existence of capitalism – takes a revolutionary shape. And insofar as the former is grounded in the daily experiences and collective practices of the working class, the wage-form might well constitute the weakest link of fetishism. As Mattin repeatedly points out, seeing through its mystified appearance requires a theoretical effort, but this effort is fuelled by the impositions made by the valorisation process on the working class.

This latter point should not be mistaken for a call for a workerist politics (a demand of 'fair redistribution' confined to represent the interests of the working class as variable capital): it is just an attempt to highlight the identity of the self-abolition of the proletariat and the abolition of the wage-relation as the central determination of a *communist* politics. Only the fusion of theory and struggle in a revolutionary organisation could demystify capitalist mediations, pointing to their immanent overcoming.

After analysing the 'spectral objectivity' of value and its mediations, Mattin moves to the 'phantom subjectivity' (re)produced by capitalist relations, where the private individual confined within the self confronts the social world as something purely external. In the best Marxian fashion, he demonstrates how the critique of political economy is not an analysis of an inert objectivity somehow lying 'out there', but an immanent unfolding of the form-determinations of both objectivity and subjectivity. Social practice mediates between the two, producing a reified objectivity and the private 'abstractly free' consciousness of the commodity-producer as two sides of the same alienated coin. This rigorous materialist standpoint allows Mattin to denounce Reza Negarestani's one-sided identification of social praxis with *conceptual* practice for remaining idealist, trumping its emancipatory intentions.

Mattin's audacious innovation, however, lies in showing that there is a deeper layer of alienation that has not been thematised in the Marxist tradition, yet is by no means incompatible with it. It concerns the production of selfhood in a *neurobiological* sense, a topic he explores through the works of Thomas Metzinger. According to the latter, 'biological systems produce self-models in order to cope with the exorbitant costs of processing in-



formation in their environment'. Selfhood is a product, yet it appears as something *given*. As an immediate appearance that conceals the (neurobiological) mediations that give rise to it, the logic underlying the production of selfhood is closely linked to Marx's concept of *fetishism*.

Mattin pushes Metzinger's contribution towards Marxism because the actuality of selfhood cannot be detached from the social forms that mediate it. Selfhood as a neurological phenomenon intersects with the capitalist (re)production of the private individual (grounded in the indirectly social nature of commodity production and sanctioned by the state). The exaltation of experience as self-possession dovetails with the logic of ownership. It reifies experience as a form of immediacy, perpetuating the (liberal) myth of the sovereign subject.

The explicitly political dimension of Brassier and Mattin's attempt to disentangle selfhood – i.e., phenomenological immediacy – and subjectivity – i.e., rule-governed agency – derives from this entwinement. Experience is neither transparent to itself nor self-validating,

but socially (Marx) and conceptually (Sellars) mediated through and through. Although 'phantom subjectivity' has neurobiological foundations, it is ultimately instituted by the 'social actuality of abstraction'. Thus, the creation of a *communist* subjectivity would have to pass through the destitution of the self in a process whereby capitalist real abstractions are abolished and the relationship between the social recogniser and the recognised individual takes a radically different shape.

Mattin's analysis of the unity-in-difference of subjective and objective alienation from the perspective of its potential overcoming furnishes his vindication of an aesthetic of noise. Noise is a peculiar phenomenon that seems to elude both cognitive apprehension (conceptual mediation) and commodification (social validation). It is disturbing, baffling, *alienating*. However, positing noise as the *other* of mediation would turn it into another form of immediacy. Mattin's project goes in the opposite direction: a radical aesthetic of noise, he asserts, ought to inscribe the latter (which is precisely that which cannot

be smoothly inscribed, i.e., represented) *within* our social and conceptual practices, using its estranging powers to explore *social dissonance*, the estrangement of our social being. By estranging us from ourselves and our environment, noise sheds light on the estranged nature of our *selves* and our social world, both on the subjective and objective sides of alienation.

In Mattin's account, the practice of noise is neither a puerile exaltation of senselessness nor an abstract expression of discontent, but a radical and theoretically grounded exploration of negativity. Noise is negativity-in-act, and its practice aims to expose the negativity of our social world. By disrupting immediacy, it breaks its semblance of givenness, exposing the latter as the product of a complex net of mediations. It estranges us from the reality of our estrangement.

Despite the cogency and indubitable appeal of Mattin's argument, a few objections come to mind. First, the estranging powers of noise are arguably more ambiguous than Mattin suggests. It might well be that encountering noise when harmony was expected would simply end up fuelling feelings of anger and aggressivity. Second, and

most importantly, the senselessness of noise could reinforce the feeling of powerlessness among the oppressed rather than, as Adorno would put it, 'break the spell' of alienation. Thus, despite Mattin's insightful criticism of the entwinement of avant-garde art and certain romantic tropes, his aesthetic of noise is not entirely alien to one of the most troubling problems of the former in its relation to emancipatory politics: elitism.

More generally, in the absence of a link between the practice of noise and a broader, more explicitly political struggle against alienation, the disentanglement of the latter from the insidious *noise* that is part of the fabric of our everyday life (a profoundly disempowering exposure to an endless stream of information, stimuli, etc., streaming from opaque social mediations) might prove a Herculean task.

These problematic issues notwithstanding, *Social Dissonance* more than meets the most important requisite of any contribution to Marxian theory: reminding us that there is much to think, and much to be done, whilst providing some precious tools to face this challenge.

Mario Aguiriano

Allegorical mappings

Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 2019). 432pp., £19.99 pb., 978 1 78873 043 3

A concern with allegory as a mode of interpretation rather than as a literary historical description of a moribund genre has been a leitmotif in Fredric Jameson's thought from *Fables of Aggression* (1979) and *The Political Unconscious* (1981) to *Brecht and Method* (1998) and *A Singular Modernity* (2002). In *Allegory and Ideology* – announced as the second volume of the 'Poetics of Social Forms' series – Jameson returns to concepts and arguments that will be familiar to many of his readers. There are the Greimas-inspired diagrams; the discussions of totality, cognitive mapping, Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Paul De Man and science fiction; and the defence of Marxist criticism as an expansive approach that makes of the literary work an act in history rather than reducing texts to an expression of economic relations. This latter claim recalls Jameson's Althusserian suggestion in *The Polit-*

ical Unconscious that history is understood as an 'absent cause' in literary texts, and that it can only be apprehended through effects which set 'inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis'. Yet Jameson's latest account of allegory as a dynamic and multidimensional system of reference and signification also allows for rich and varied reflections on the ways in which the construction of the modern subject entails the transformation of 'named emotions into feelings that challenge language itself'.

Likening his dialectical materialist approach to that of a scientist in a laboratory, Jameson also reframes some of these ideas through new readings of Dante, Spencer, Shakespeare and Goethe, and a rethinking of his controversial 1986 essay on Third World Literature. To develop these readings, Jameson takes the three-level model of