

Reviews

Lost at sea

Enzo Traverso, *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (London: Verso, 2021). 480 pp., £25.00 hb., 978 1 83976 333 5

The second volume of Peter Weiss's epic historical novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* opens in Paris in 1938. Recently defeated international brigade fighters in the Spanish Civil War, the unnamed narrator and his dejected comrades have taken up temporary residence in a grand building made available by its owner to the members of the peace movement and Popular Front. Unable to sleep, the narrator stumbles upon a book by two survivors of the infamous shipwreck of the Medusa. The recent catastrophes he has just lived through recede and he finds himself absorbed by tragic events that unfolded over a century before.

In 1816, the Medusa set sail from France for Senegal to repossess the colony for the recently restored French crown. Led by an incompetent royalist captain, the ship diverged from its convoy, drifted off-course and ran aground on a sandbank. The Medusa's passengers began to escape in small boats but these couldn't accommodate everyone on board so 147 people were placed on a hastily constructed raft with few provisions, no mast and no oars. By the time the Argus, a ship from the Medusa's original convoy, discovered the raft by chance thirteen days later, only fifteen of the raft's original passengers remained alive. Stories of the horrors endured on the raft told by the survivors – of suicide, delirium, murder, starvation, cannibalism – soon circulated in France and caused a huge public scandal. The avoidable tragedy of the shipwreck became a symbol of the callousness of the recently restored monarchy, a kind of early nineteenth-century Grenfell Tower fire.

Weiss's narrator leaves the bookshelves at dawn to walk through the deserted city towards the Louvre, where he seeks out Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting *The Raft of the Medusa*. The book's long opening paragraphs interperse visceral descriptions of the shipwreck with discus-

sions of the 'agonizing restlessness' that characterised Géricault's attempts to convey the 'distress and desperation' of the events on canvas. This chance encounter with a historical disaster has a paradoxical effect on Weiss's protagonist: 'It was as if, reading of the bygone events described here, everything that lay torn open within me could be brought to a reconciliation.'

Enzo Traverso's *Revolution: An Intellectual History* also begins with an encounter with Géricault's painting in the Louvre, though he makes no mention of Weiss's novel. Traverso proposes reading the artwork as 'one of the most powerful allegories of the shipwreck of revolution.' He claims the painting, in whose corner the rescuing Argus can be glimpsed, not only represents a disaster but also anticipates future struggles. He views the black man on the raft as 'the premonition of anti-colonialism and black liberation' and interprets the red flag being waved, which in the early nineteenth century did not yet have an association with left-wing struggle, as a harbinger of communism. He sees in the conflict and tumult on Géricault's canvas a tension between resignation and hope, 'between capitulation and the obstinate search for an alternative, between abandonment and rebirth, between impotence and despair before a landscape of defeats and the desperate effort to resist.' By contrast, when Weiss's narrator first lays eyes on the painting he is unable to focus on the rescuing ship but instead experiences 'anxiety, a feeling of hopelessness. Only pain and desolation.' He encounters the painting in a moment of political defeat, in which the solidarity and common purpose that had united him with his comrades have suddenly evaporated. He understands that Géricault intended to show that the last survivors had clung to a desire to live in spite of everything they had endured, but in the faded colours of the painting's 'scabbing' sur-



Théodore Géricault, *Sailboat on a Raging Sea* (c. 1818-19), 86.GG.679, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

face he sees only the unresolved inner turmoil of the artist, in whom the 'revolution had been inscribed ... like a scar', a subjective rupture he also recognises in himself and his peers. Traverso emphasises the painting's hopeful aspect, but beginning his book with an image of catastrophe and suffering, of dead and dying people in a moment of restoration rather than revolution, sets a sombre tone and lacks the immediacy, intensity and emotional resonance conveyed in Weiss's engagement with the artwork. If this is what hope looks like then it's incredibly murky. The survivors are few; the possibility of rescue uncertain.

So, what is a revolution for Traverso? He begins with the image of a shipwreck, but elsewhere describes revolution as an earthquake and a volcano. Revolutions interrupt and erupt; they break the continuum of history (I'm paraphrasing Traverso who is fond of paraphrasing Walter Benjamin's theses 'On the Concept of History' (1940)). A revolution, he says, is 'a collective act through which human beings liberate themselves from centuries of oppression and domination'; it is 'a singular amalgam of innovation and chaos' that displays 'a spectacular

iconoclastic charge'. Revolutions 'are precisely the moments in which the excluded are no longer voiceless and clamour to be heard'. They are, less precisely, 'concepts converted into action', which 'follow an autonomous dynamic, as uncontrolled spirals that aim at obliterating the past and inventing the future from a *tabula rasa*.' Violence, he declares, using an unfortunate biological metaphor, 'is inscribed into their genes.' Yet for all that Traverso's prose proliferates declaratives, definitions and metaphors, there remains something curiously slippery about his object.

Is this book about ideal or actual revolutions? Is it about revolution as such or an assortment of particular revolutions Traverso happens to find interesting? Is it about revolutions, revolutionaries or the revolutionary? Is it just about political revolutions or also about other kinds of revolution (sexual, industrial, intellectual)? Is it, rather, about communism or perhaps capitalist modernity? Is it about theories of temporality and liberation or is it about insurrectionary practices? That the book is about all of these things at various points is not necessarily a weakness. As Leon Trotsky asks in the 1930 Preface

to his *History of the Russian Revolution*, one of Traverso's key sources: 'How can you take as a whole a thing whose essence consists in a split?' Traverso grapples engagingly with tensions between ideas and realities, theories and practices, dreams and nightmares. His subtitle 'an intellectual history' is perhaps a little too modest, given *Revolution* addresses a phenomenon both thought and lived. But what, ultimately, is to be gained from reading about past revolutions in the calamitous present, when the book itself refuses to make a strong case for doing so?

Revolution is structured thematically and conceptually, rather than as a chronological series of case studies focused on particular historical revolutions. Though confined mostly to a 1789-1989 timeframe, the book's examples are eclectic, jumping around historically and geographically to discuss revolutionary temporalities, subjects, bodies, symbols and concepts. Traverso is explicit that he has no interest in separating 'good' from 'bad' revolutions but instead contemplates both the utopian and the catastrophic: 'The happiness of insurgent Havana on the first January 1959 and the terror of the Cambodian killing fields'. Interested neither in valorisation nor condemnation, Traverso is not concerned with extracting strategic lessons from historic victories and defeats but offers instead a 'critical elaboration of the past', a past that he believes, the contemporary left is at risk of forgetting. His opening chapter is typical in its methodological approach, considering the locomotive as a symbol of revolution, while examining the significance of actual trains in past revolutionary struggles. Traverso begins the chapter with Marx's declaration that 'revolutions are the locomotives of history' and ends with Walter Benjamin's riposte: 'Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.' If the train had been an image of the inevitable forward-moving progressive trajectory of history for Marx, Benjamin, writing at the beginning of the Second World War, saw teleology leading only to catastrophe. Traverso's chapter closes abruptly with an image of the ramp at Auschwitz.

Though vividly written, full of sparkling details and sharp theoretical insights, the individual chapters – unwieldy, sprawling, bloated – often feel like they're sinking under their own length. A chapter on revolutionary intellectuals, for example, piles example upon example until

any overarching argument is buried beneath biographical subtleties and anecdotal niceties. The closing pages include a list-like typology of the revolutionary intellectual and charts of individual intellectuals of various generations, indicating key biographical experiences that united them. This offers a summary of the historical terrain just charted but struck me as a curious quantitative exercise that produced no obvious qualitative insights. Indeed, it seems methodologically closer to the 'universal history' Benjamin attacked than to the historical materialism he extolled: 'Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data'. If the experience of reading the book is anything like sitting on a train, it is nothing like speeding along tracks towards a glowing horizon, nor does it slam on the brakes. It's more like when you think you're getting an express train on the subway in New York only to find you're on a local train that stops at every single station on the line and then gets stuck at one for ages with no explanatory announcement from the driver. It's fine, you get somewhere in the end and maybe there's something interesting to look at through the window in the meantime, but it's hard not to feel impatient and fidgety. *Revolution* is bursting with ideas, images and examples, but for something so full, when I finished it I felt strangely empty.

At various moments, Traverso evokes the intensity of feeling unleashed by revolutions, celebrates the new forms of relationship that develop within them, and insists on the centrality of their corporeal dimension. Revolution, he proclaims, 'is a moment in which politics is suddenly flooded with feelings and emotions.' But if revolutions can be visceral, 'ecstatic, euphoric' experiences in which people 'display a quantity of energies, passions, affects and feelings much higher than the spiritual standard of ordinary life', this does not necessarily distinguish them from other forms of collective political action. Uprisings, rebellions, riots, occupations, picket lines or demonstrations could be characterised in a similar way, as his own description of insurrections makes clear:

Insurrections are moments of collective effervescence in which ordinary people feel an irrepressible desire to invade the streets, occupy the sites of power, exhibit their own strength, if necessary take up arms, and celebrate liberation through manifestations of fraternity and happiness.

Equally, none of these events necessarily feel uplifting. In the book's introduction he acknowledges that revolutions can be tragic and often sink into despair. Indeed, revolutions can even be boring, disappointing, deflating. *Revolution* constantly foregrounds such contradictions but because it is, however ambivalently, an attempt to transmit something positive from the revolutionary past to the present, it also gets tangled up in them.

Traverso's general pronouncements are haunted by spectres of their exceptions and often literally followed by non-ghostly clusters of caveats and counter-examples. In attempting to distil pure essences from the mess of history, Traverso keeps crashing into a contradiction between the universal and the particular, the ideal and the actual. His insistence on wanting to avoid romanticising the past and his refusal to sort 'good' events from 'bad' is paired awkwardly with constant general programmatic statements about revolutions, statements that do not say what revolutions should or could be, nor what they have sometimes been, but proclaim what they *are*. He doesn't want to celebrate any particular revolutions but he does want to celebrate revolution (except, unless, despite...). Thankfully Traverso does not spend time constructing pedantic taxonomies, policing terminological borders or dismissing political events for not being proper revolutions, even noting the '*structural symmetries* between revolution and counterrevolution' at one point. But although he may not explicitly label some historical moments revolutions, while disqualifying others – like Alain Badiou's designation of some things as 'events' according to his own idiosyncratic definition – he nonetheless constantly says what revolutions *should* ideally involve and therefore implicitly expresses criteria for judging them. Why else bother writing such a book in the first place?

Even though Traverso may not claim that collective emotional intensity is unique to revolution, an attachment to a distinction between the conscious and the spontaneous persists in his account, albeit in a fairly muffled taken-for-granted kind of way. Revolutions, he suggests, are distinguished from other kinds of event by the consciousness of the people who make them. Beneath his rejection of an orthodox Marxist faith in teleological historical progression lurks a continued attachment to an understanding of the conscious subject coupled with a mild disdain for the 'spontaneous' event

that belonged to that tradition: 'Revolutions are usually conscious accomplishments by collective subjects.' What becomes of the conscious baby, once the bath water of historical progression has been thrown out? Do the historical examples he discusses bear out this understanding of human subjectivity, agency and volition? Doesn't the consciously acting revolutionary subject also have an intellectual history? Can revolutions happen without such subjects at their helm? What would it take for such subjects to emerge again?

The aftermath of revolutions also sets them apart from other kinds of disruptive political event, which only temporarily ruffle the status quo without overturning it. Traverso is clear that revolution is both event and process, though he makes fewer pronouncements about the emotional qualities associated with the latter. He admonishes the radical left for celebrating liberation while neglecting 'the political and juridical norms required for establishing freedom as a durable order', but acknowledges that experiencing such transitions can be subjectively damaging. *Revolution* remains alert to the contradiction between rupture and consolidation, fleeting experience and lasting tradition, a theme central to the book's third chapter, 'Concepts, Symbols, Realms of Memory'. Traverso discusses how revolutionary iconoclasm precedes the creation of new symbols and rituals, wrestling with the contradictions inherent in attempting to memorialise something that is ephemeral by definition: 'The revolutionary spirit cannot be bottled and displayed in museums'. He contemplates distortions that occur when revolutions are institutionalised, domesticated or folded into national narratives and explores forms of 'counter-memory' that persist when revolutions end in defeat. For Traverso, the impulse to preserve and catalogue is anathema to the ruptural force of revolution; like pinning a butterfly to a board. He argues that revolutionary meaning 'lies in the void left by the destructive force of the revolution itself.' And how to build monuments to a void? These discussions of memory and memorialisation also raise meta questions about the project of the book itself and the counter pantheons, archives and chronologies it seeks to construct, questions which are geographical as well as historical.

In a chapter discussing conceptual distinctions between freedom and liberation, Traverso attacks Hannah Arendt for her dismissals of anti-colonial struggle

and lambasts her for acknowledging the French and American Revolutions, while ignoring the Haitian Revolution. Specifically, he takes aim at her essay *On Violence* (1970), in which she argued that the violence of the colonised outstripped that of their oppressors because it remained ‘pre-political’: ‘To write this in 1970 was neither simply inaccurate nor distastefully contemptuous; it was the expression of an astonishing intellectual blindness, not to say a clearly Eurocentric and Orientalist prejudice.’ Traverso is careful not to repeat the kinds of prejudices displayed by Arendt. His long chapter on revolutionary intellectuals, for instance, includes discussions of figures such as Ho Chi Minh, Manabendra Nath Roy and Che Guevara, alongside a parade of Europeans. *Revolution’s* conceptual structure enables geographically disparate events to be discussed side-by-side, while his final chapter ‘Historicizing Communism’ includes a section considering historical connections between communism and anti-colonialism.

Yet, just as Traverso quietly clings to the figure of the conscious revolutionary subject, with the notable exception of the Mexican Revolution, his chapters are structured such that anti-colonial struggles and non-European revolutions, though acknowledged and discussed, remain peripheral to his account and their in-

clusion does not seem to alter how he interprets events that took place in Europe. His approach is like adding a new wing to an existing museum in which the objects in the main building remain in their original places; he extends rather than rearranging, reconfiguring or rebuilding. Paris (1789, 1848, 1871) and Petrograd (1917) are the two revolutionary metropolises at the centre of *Revolution*. Traverso invokes the Haitian Revolution and CLR James’s *The Black Jacobins* plenty of times, for example, but never discusses either the event or the book at any length. In the introduction he lists a series of revolutionary moments that promise a book of global breadth: ‘France in 1789, Haiti in 1804, continental Europe in 1848, Paris in 1871, Russia in 1917, Germany and Hungary in 1919, Barcelona in 1936, China in 1949, Cuba in 1959, Vietnam in 1975, and Nicaragua in 1979.’ But the book’s index lists 66 page references under ‘French Revolution’, while the Nicaraguan Revolution isn’t listed at all and neither are the 1975 revolutions in Angola or Mozambique, which he mentions in passing in another synoptic paragraph in the concluding chapter. Towards the end of the book, Traverso declares that ‘Bolshevik literature was full of references to the French Revolution, 1848 and the Paris Commune, but it never mentioned the Haitian Revolution or the Mexican Revolution.’ Rather than chastising



Théodore Géricault, detail, *Raft of Medusa* (1818-19). Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

historical actors for failing to acknowledge the Haitian Revolution without discussing it in any detail himself, a more fruitful methodological approach could have taken a cue from Kristin Ross's *Communal Luxury* (2015), which draws out the internationalism and anti-colonial aspects of the history of the Paris Commune in order to unsettle its established historiography and so avoids the 'additive' approach Benjamin criticised. Sergei Eisenstein may not have been a Bolshevik leader but the fact that he planned to make films about both the Haitian Revolution and the Mexican Revolution indicates that these events were not completely absent from Soviet discourse.

In the aftermath of the collapse of state socialism, the meaning of events like the Paris Commune changed. Ross describes this shift as liberating, as an opportunity to return to history unbound by 'official communist historiography'. Traverso is not so sure. Though *Revolution* is not pervaded by the gloomy tone of his previous monograph *Left-wing Melancholia* (2017), it shares with that work the apparent conviction that history really did end in 1989. For someone so apparently enamoured with Walter Benjamin's understanding of 'messianic time' and so keen to expand established canons of revolutionary history, it seems strange that Traverso nonetheless demonstrates a melancholic attachment not to state socialist history itself but to the particular vision of historical progress propounded by state socialist textbooks. Of course, he knows that telos is dead and that it would be absurd to claim otherwise, but he nonetheless seems to see its death as fatal for the left (even if its existence was only ever imaginary) and equates it with the death of left-wing historical consciousness as such. Traverso invokes historian Eric Hobsbawm who by 1989 no longer believed in the teleological vision of history as a 'succession of emancipatory waves' moving towards freedom that had informed the structure of his five volume 'Age of...' account of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The moments of liberation punctuating his narrative had happened but he could no interpret them as arrows pointing inevitably in one direction. I thought instead of the revisions CLR James made to *The Black Jacobins* between its original publication in 1938 and reissue in 1963. The preface to the first edition explicitly situated it in relation to the 'booming of Franco's heavy artillery, the rattle of Stalin's firing squads' and was informed by the recent US occupation of Haiti and James's anti-colonial organ-

ising with the International African Friends of Abyssinia, while the revised book, in which he rejected vanguardism, was informed by political struggles and historical events that took place in the intervening years, particularly the Cuban Revolution. Both editions responded to the present and looked to the future.

In his theses 'On the Concept of History' (1940), Benjamin rejected historicism, 'universal history' and social democratic understandings of progress in favour of a historical materialism that 'grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one'. His phrase 'blasting open the continuum of history' is quoted so often – both generally and in Traverso's book specifically – that it has lost something of its force, but crucially for Benjamin the historical materialist is situated in a present they wish to transform: 'it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism'. Traverso borrows from Freud the notion of 'working through' the past but his implied patient, the contemporary left, is left out of his (case) history. Indeed, the present, including any discussion of twenty-first-century revolutions, is conspicuous by its almost complete absence. Traverso attaches great significance to the collapse of state socialism, understood primarily as the collapse of a meta-narrative, but has virtually nothing to say about revolutions that have occurred in actually existing post-Soviet states. In a recent interview in *New Left Review*, Voldomyr Ishchenko describes Euromaidan, various 'colour' revolutions in former Soviet republics and the Arab Spring as 'deficient revolutions'. Given Traverso's proclaimed intention to discuss revolutions irrespective of their deficiencies it is frustrating that he does not offer any analysis of such events. But the occasional passages in which he deigns to address contemporary struggles offer clues to understanding why *Revolution* seems so confused about its own existence.

Traverso claims his book is both 'a work of mourning but also a training for new battles', but like his claim that *The Raft of Medusa* represents both resignation and hope these scales are not balanced. In the introduction Traverso writes that:

The new anti-capitalist movements of recent years do not resonate with any of the left traditions of the past. They lack a genealogy. They reveal greater affinities – not so much doctrinal but rather cultural and symbolic – with



Théodore Géricault, detail, *Raft of Medusa* (1818-19). Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

anarchism: they are egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial and mostly indifferent to a teleological view of history... Being orphans they must reinvent themselves.

Though he concedes this is partially freeing, he argues that an absence of historical memory makes current movements vulnerable: 'for they do not possess the strength of the movements that, conscious of having a history and committed to inscribing their action in a powerful historical tendency, embodied a political tradition.' Similarly in his conclusion he lists various post-89 social and political movements – from Occupy to Syriza, 'alter-globalisation' to Black Lives Matter – claiming they are cut off from history and 'deprived of a useable legacy.' What about when students in Cape Town demanded 'Rhodes Must Fall', when a statue of Edward Colston was tossed into the river in Bristol, when student activists clashed with cops in 'book blocs' of insurrectionary classics in 2011, or when Chilean millennials sang songs from the early 1970s in 2019 demonstrations? I'm under no illusions about the parlous state of the contempor-

ary left and share Traverso's commitment to 'working through' experiences of twentieth-century communism, but if this book really was intended to provide people in on-going movements with historical resources to inform their struggles – 'training for new battles' – Traverso might have made an effort to engage with them less dismissively.

Weiss's engagement with the faded greens and greys of *The Raft of Medusa* is far more despairing than Traverso's but, like Géricault piling corpses from a morgue into his studio in an attempt to enter into the suffering of others, Weiss folds the past into the present. In describing the fate of the people on the raft, the pronouns shift from 'them' to 'we'. Historical devastation and hope merge with the experiences of the current moment:

Those gathered together on the raft still did not want to believe they had been abandoned. The coast was visible ... But night fell, and they still had not received help. Powerful swells swept over us. Hurling back and forth, struggling for every breath, hearing the cries of those washed overboard, we longed for the break of day.

Hannah Proctor