

sions about the limits of human political life on earth. Ratzel's work, and his now-infamous concept of *lebensraum*, would be used in the twentieth century to justify German genocide in South West Africa and Nazi imperialism in Europe.

This history makes Chakrabarty's lament that 'we don't yet know how' to understand ourselves 'as a species deeply embedded in the history of life' ring hollow. The relationship between human beings, the earth and political authority has been the subject of philosophical reflection for centuries. The likelihood is rather that it is specific answers to this question that have led to the current predicament, rather than their absence. More compelling are the images included in the book of a child playing with earth-moving vehicles in a sandbox that Chakrabarty argues demonstrate the naturalisation of humans' 'geomorphological agency'. This aligns with the way species thinking infuses contemporary politics, from biologically reductionist visions of race and nation to categories in international law like crimes against humanity. Moreover, humans' vulnerability to wider astrophysical forces drives scientific efforts to defend the planet from asteroid strikes and telecommunications networks from disruption by solar flares. This view is of course also present in the widespread alarm about the catastrophic environmental effects of political and economic globalisation.

This alarm tends to be channeled in two ways. The first is a narrow, technocratic response that asks how best to source the energy needed to continue the project of

global modernity. The second sees the Anthropocene as an 'ecological overshoot on the part of humanity', indicative of a 'shared predicament' among life on the planet. Here Chakrabarty departs from the earth systems scientists who inspire his reflection. While *Breaking Boundaries* concludes with Rockström calling for the planetary boundaries problem to be taken up by the United Nations (UN) Security Council, Chakrabarty suggests that the UN may be closer to the problem than any solution. While UN negotiations take place on an 'indefinite calendar', climate presents an urgent problem that calls for action on finite timelines. 'It is entirely possible', he writes, 'that planetary climate change is a problem that the UN was not set up to deal with.' The problem of temporal scale might also be posed in terms of the relatively short time horizon in relation to which UN decisions are made, which rarely points beyond the current century. Compared to the geological timescales that characterise the planetary, decision-making at the UN is all too human.

Despite Rockström's call for Security Council action on planetary boundaries, states so far remain uninterested in the location of the Anthropocene GSSP. Climate accords like the Paris Agreement, however, suggest that the limits earth systems impose on global political and economic order are now recognised by most states on earth. Perhaps soon they will convene to weigh in on the question of an Anthropocene time signal. Whether this should be feared or celebrated depends on one's answer to a question likely to animate the world politics of this century: who has authority over the earth?

Regan Burles

God's away

Willem Styfhals, *No Spiritual Investment in the World: Gnosticism and Postwar German Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 2019). 306pp., £112.00 hb., £32.00 pb., 978 1 50173 099 3 hb., 978 1 50173 100 6 pb.

Willem Styfhals' new book offers a conceptual history of Gnosticism within a deceptively narrow discursive field. Though Gnosticism re-emerged and became a relatively widespread term in German thought from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, gaining particular prominence in the interwar period, Styfhals takes as his principal focus the philosophical debates around Gnosticism that

took place after 1945.

At the core of this decision, and central to the concerns of the book, is the radical caesura in the theoretical usage of Gnosticism engendered by the events of the Second World War, and the atrocities of the Holocaust. What emerges through this combination of conceptual historiography and comparative analysis of the 'Gnostic

moments' in German thought is an account of the ways the term Gnosticism became bound up with the philosophy of modernity and its on-going self-definition and self-periodisation.

The most prevalent feature of the post-war shift was a turn away from any perceived radical political potential of Gnostic thought towards the notion of Gnosticism as a diagnostic catch-all for the problems of the present epoch. The radically divergent (and often deeply contradictory) positions that germinated from this re-excavated term lead Styfhals to suggest from the outset that rather than a concept in the more narrowly philosophical sense, Gnosticism might better be understood as a 'metaphorical motif of modernity'. The subsequent analysis is divided into six chapters, each highlighting one particular facet of this nebulous and shifting deployment of Gnosticism: Crisis, Eschaton, Subversion, Nothingness, Epoch and Theodicy. The recurrent thinkers throughout the book are ones whose work ranges over interdisciplinary ground, with admixtures of the theological, philosophical and historical to varying degrees: Hans Jonas, Jacob Taubes, Karl Löwith, Eric Voegelin, Hans Blumenberg, Gershom Scholem and Odo Marquard, as well as (more peripherally) Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger and Ernst Bloch.

Styfhals draws attention to the terminological diffusiveness of Gnosticism even in its everyday theological sense. Gnosticism 'is not and has never been a category that signifies a well-defined historical phenomenon'. Rather, it is an early modern or even nineteenth-century application to those early Jewish and early Christian heresies predicated on a radical separation [*Krisis*] between transcendence and immanence: a retrojected unity of distinct and disparate heresies. More specifically, it is a term used to denote sects that attested to God's absolute withdrawal from the world, a withdrawal which gives creation over to the devil and leaves the world fallen and evil. Re-coded in the domain of the political, this point of *Krisis*, enacted by the awareness of divine absence from the world, demands the birth of a new epoch, one whose historical urgency may be located in the *Kulturkrise* that swept German cultural life in the twentieth century. This relationship to crisis, that sprung from 'heretical undercurrents of Western monotheism' was vital for making Gnosticism an intellectual resource and object of fascination for Jewish and Christian thinkers in the interwar

period. It was also what would lead to its use as a diagnostic term for the crisis of late modernity.



Styfhals excels in his genealogical presentation of his object of study, despite the often murky conceptual terrain he has to navigate where definitions and usage not only of Gnosticism but of terms like: 'eschatology', 'secularisation' and, of course, 'modernity' are both stratified and precarious (even within the work of a single author). This is evidenced most clearly in the section on Eschaton, which primarily stages a confrontation between Taubes and Löwith and demonstrates the inextricability of Gnosticism from the discourse of secularisation.

Styfhals presents their shared conviction in the theology of salvation as initiating a break with 'classical' cyclical time, inaugurating the idea of time as a progressive evolution – and, further, that this structure of linearity still determines the contemporary experience of time. The key difference for Styfhals lies in the *legitimacy* of the secularisation of this eschatological line, with Löwith viewing it as an illegitimate de-formation, negating Christianity's transcendent God, and descending into groundlessness, and Taubes conversely identifying

in Gnostic eschatology a radical anti-totalitarian potential. Löwith's thought is therefore in line with Christian eschatology, whereas Taubes moves towards apocalypticism. For Taubes the eschatological resurgence in modernity is a legitimate transformation. In fact, his thought is characterised as one where 'the end of time structures the entire history of the West'. This idea of chthonic subversion puts Taubes at radical odds with Löwith, for whom it was the 'modern eschatological structure of hope itself' that had rendered these atrocities possible, but draws him into the orbit of Scholem whose influence on the philosophy of the Frankfurt School (and in particular Walter Benjamin) is well documented.

As Styfhals shows, Taubes and Scholem are alike in seeking to expound the radical potential of Gnostic heresy through a 'deconstruction' of orthodoxy, each developing a negative political theology (grounded respectively in an apocalyptic reading of Paul's theology and a messianic anarchism) oriented toward an absolute destruction of the political as such.

Scholem's notion of heresy, as a form of self-assertion whose radical messianism destabilises orthodoxy and any claims it has to authenticity, places its redemption outside of history. It has nothing to do with immanent development but rather is 'transcendence breaking in upon history'. This focus on the necessity of catastrophe for redemption sets paradox at the heart of Scholem's political project: it is the inner logic of the messianic. In Scholem's work this Gnostic force remained circumscribed by Jewish messianism, with Christian inwardness radically distinguished from the political, public messianism of the Jewish faith. It is here that Taubes aimed his radical critique: arguing for the messianic as a real historical force, one that was informed and transformed by historical contexts and events. Going beyond the merely historiographical, Styfhals here elucidates how Taubes utilises the deconstructive operations of Scholem's orthodoxy/heresy binary to problematise both the distinction the latter author makes between the Christian and Jewish salvation *and* between the religious and secular as such. The interiorisation of salvation in Christianity was, for Taubes, merely another historical transformation of the messianic.

The destruction of law and the political brings Styfhals to the question of nihilism. Through the motif of 'Nothingness', Styfhals elaborates a conception of *reli-*

gious nihilism, a constellation of Gnostic positions producing theologies after the 'death of God'. The classic reception of Nietzsche's phrase is as a wholesale rejection of any legitimating transcendent beyond that structures the immanent world. In Heidegger's words, we are left with a world where 'the supersensory world has no effective force'. Understood this way, nihilism and Gnosticism, in their denial of an ontological relation between the transcendent and immanent, share a rejection of the intrinsic value of the natural world and any form of moral law. The divine withdrawal of God (conceived as *das Nichts der Welt*) and the non-existence of God as anything but a figment of the imagination end on the same destitute plane.

Benjamin enters Styfhals' analysis explicitly here, through a discussion of the 'Theological-Political Fragment' and the paradoxical dynamics of the messianic and profane. Rightly noting Benjamin as anti-gnostic, Styfhals explicates Benjamin's dialectical recovery of the messianic-profane by grounding the former in the transience of the latter. Benjamin's readers have often tended either to over- or underemphasise Benjamin's nihilism (usually in line with their position on the materialism-theology spectrum which haunts all approaches to his work) but Styfhals' reading, whilst (given the book's context) remaining theologically inflected, makes a strong case for the dynamic, dialectical relation at work in the messianic. History's 'weak messianic power' finds its index of redemption in its unending passing away. Rather than Gnostic separation producing an all-encompassing nihilism, in what Styfhals terms *religious nihilism*, nihilism itself becomes the method of the messianic, the striving for the destruction of modes of being that gives rise to a history not of victory or progress but 'discontinuity, catastrophe and decay'.

With the final two chapters centred on Voegelin and Blumenberg, the metaphorical horizon of Gnosticism as a term reaches its widest arc and its most determinate application to the present epoch (*Neuzeit*). Both are critical of Gnosticism as such but whereas for Voegelin modernity is a Gnostic age, for Blumenberg, it is Gnosticism's very overcoming. Styfhals here draws out a dichotomy of uncertainty and absolutism that exemplifies the problem of modernity, even if this problem remains under-developed. Voegelin sets uncertainty at the very heart of Christianity as the absolute correlate of

faith, rendering the origin of the movement of secularisation interior to Christianity itself. Through Gnosticism then, Christ's de-divinisation of the world (in contrast to the preceding polytheistic and pagan religions) becomes spuriously re-divinised through its rendering immanent of the possibility for mystical knowledge. For Voegelin, the existential certainty of divine withdrawal which Gnosticism posits constitutes a failure of will. Further, this secularised pseudo-religious truth becomes the ground for totalitarianism over and against the relative temporal legitimation of Christian politics. Modernity illegitimately attempts to secularise Christian mystery into the realm of human action.

Blumenberg conversely sees the project of the 'atheological theodicy' of modernity as the legitimation of the world as it is. The modern age 'begins with an act of theodicy' in that it attempts to overcome the resurgent Gnosticism whose forces seek to divest the world of meaning and coherence. What Blumenberg finds in this atheological theodicy of modernity is an attempt to render life liveable and nature reliable, to legitimate 'the possibility of human existence and self-assertion'. Being faced with divine absolutism, human life becomes impossible. This, for Blumenberg, unites both myth and reason, in that they serve to discharge the absolute, a reduction of reality necessary for life.

Styfals suggests in the book's introduction that his investigative method parallels Blumenberg's 'metaphorology' in its exploration of the German *reception* of Gnosticism. However, this isn't quite carried through theoretically and feels like a missed opportunity to draw together the earlier thinker's metaphors of post-Kantian concept formation and the intellectual history of modernity.

The conclusion, certainly the book's weakest section, makes some reference to Blumenberg's 'background metaphors' in relation to secularisation, but not a reflection on the question of metaphor, the de-formation of the concept of Gnosticism into a 'pseudo-concept', as a constituting feature of the internal structure of the modern itself. For all his exceptional insights, metaphor is the term which Styfals receives and leaves underdeveloped.

If there is a weakness in the book then it lies in a certain withdrawal of philosophy from Styfals' own

method. Metaphor remains either too vague or risks becoming synonymous with vagueness. The closing remarks, which turn to Arendt, the question of the Holocaust and the failure of conceptual thought to comprehend, evidence this most clearly. What Styfals addresses is an undeniable *reticence* on the part of those discussing Gnosticism, even critically, to deal directly with the Holocaust (as opposed to thinkers like Arendt who did), despite the Nazis' destructive totalitarian regime largely confirming some of the Gnostic paradigms the various authors explore. The question from the book's opening gambit – why Gnosticism operated metaphorically and 'why this space was not able to be thought conceptually' – is examined on *historical* but not *philosophical* grounds. The question of metaphorical truth runs across Nietzsche's fundamental metaphors, whereby metaphor is a constituent component of perception, the hermeneutics of metaphor and, in the wider context of the critique of epistemology, the link between epistemic and historical violence. The question that Styfals provides a great deal of evidence for, and suggestive argumentation towards, but finally leaves unanswered is: what can the caesura in the theoretical discourse of Gnosticism engendered by the Second World War reveal about the status of metaphorical truth in modernity?

Despite this 'failure of will' (or perhaps of time), *No Spiritual Investment in the World* remains an invaluable contribution to understanding the complex conceptual history of Gnosticism, sitting alongside Benjamin Lazier's *God Interrupted* (whose primary focus is the preceding interwar period) and within the wider context of work examining the theological undercurrents of modernity. By writing a book which covers so much philosophical ground, Styfals illuminates the complex position of Gnosticism within the German tradition, and provides ample evidence for why the problems it sought to address – modernity's on-going problem of self-definition, the destruction of theology as a possible communicative mode of historical experience, and the struggle to find a legitimate ground for meaning – remain our problems today. *No Spiritual Investment in the World* makes Gnosticism a living metaphor, even if it stops short of investigating how this might transform our understanding of why 'metaphor is living'.

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