

Resources Association, building a sustainable and democratic system of production can only be achieved by ‘the force which is rooted in the majority interest and in the indispensable livelihood of all the people in the society, and that, ideally ... is the labour movement.’

Looking to the US, Huber suggests first organising electricity workers – a strategy he calls ‘socialism in one sector’. Ditching fossil fuels will require widespread electrification under any scenario; organisers should work with electric utilities workers, already heavily unionised in the US, to use strikes, slowdowns and work-to-rule campaigns to fight to nationalise electricity production, with an eye towards improving working conditions, providing electricity as a human right and transitioning the grid to non-fossil sources. Building this sort of programme will require sustained workplace organising focused on connecting workers’ interest in workplace safety (consistently a top priority) with their positional interest in control over the environments in which they live. If such organising succeeds, a nationalised electricity sector might form ‘the core of a public sector-led decarbonization program’. Longer term, the ‘disruptive capacity’ of electricity workers might supply the muscle for working-class voting majorities persuaded to support Green New Deal-type programs. FDR struck the New Deal under pressure from a broad working class backed

by industrial workers on strike. Who says it can’t happen again?

There are many reasons to doubt the odds. Despite excitement around the 2021 ‘strike wave’ and successful union drives at Starbucks and Amazon, union density and strike activity remain at historic lows in the US. Even if workers have a material interest in ‘decommodification and decarbonization’, the two core planks of capitalist ideology – the free market is good; there is no alternative – remain sturdy enough to block any quick conversion of the US workforce into a class *for itself*. More insidiously, the materials, machines and infrastructures that make capitalists powerful (and heat the planet) are also the materials, machines and infrastructures ordinary people rely on to survive. To live in a fossil capitalist society is to live under a threat: no fossil fuels, no work.

The hope is that labour militancy can answer this threat with its own: no workers, no profits. More than anything else, then, building a working-class movement for post-carbon democracy means supporting militant labour actions, however small, that demonstrate working people’s power to disrupt the economic and political order and remake it in some other image. As Huber suggests, there is no better way to get a feel for labour’s power than unionising your workplace.

Casey Williams

Frames of modernity

Susan Buck-Morss, *Year One: A Philosophical Recounting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021). 416pp., £28.00 hb., 978 0 26204 487 5

Philosophers of the enlightenment such as Rousseau, Kant and Hegel imagined their projects as universal in reach and scale. Whether these philosophers were writing about the social contract, the foundations of moral law or the progression of spirit, the idea that the whole world could be understood from a universal perspective was taken for granted. In the twentieth century, postcolonial theorists have argued that this ‘universal perspective’ was inspired by specific, local or provincial European imaginaries. Reading postcolonial theory, one has learned to be cautious of the way universal modes of thought

risk imposing one culture’s values and norms onto all other cultures. Yet in an increasingly divided yet ‘globalised’ world we might ask: Are there ways of recuperating universal forms of inquiry from this dubious history? If so, how would we navigate the risk of imposition and reduction? What kind of philosophical project could be both global in its reach and sensitive to particularity, contingency and difference? What kinds of projects could create *new* visions of universal thought and history? For the last two decades, the philosopher and historian Susan Buck-Morss has been tackling precisely these questions.

In Buck-Morss's hands, universal history does not name a desire for sameness, homogeneity or subsumption, but an attentiveness to moments of *commonality* that cut across national, cultural and racial divides. In *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2005), Buck-Morss argued that the 1791 Haitian revolution – the first successful campaign for freedom by enslaved peoples – was an event of *universal significance*. Hegel, for example, learns about the revolution in the journal *Minerva* and the vision of freedom developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is created in the shadow of the struggles of enslaved Haitians. The Haitian revolution, for Buck-Morss, challenges the idea of an isolated and uncontaminated Western modernity and is one of the key sources of a *global* modernity.

Universal history, on this account, is not only found in philosophical reflections, but embodied in the lives of ordinary people. Buck-Morss draws our attention to quotidian moments of cross-cultural recognition such as when French soldiers sent by Napoleon to quell the unrest of the Haitian revolution come across slaves singing 'La Marseillaise' and sense that they might be fighting on the wrong side. Or a Polish regiment who refused to drown 'six hundred' enslaved Haitians because they felt a sense of alliance with this struggle for human freedom. Such 'moments of clarity' do not belong to a national culture, but a universal one. In this way, Buck-Morss imagines universal history outside of its traditional parochialism.

'Common humanity', writes Buck-Morss, 'exists in spite of culture and its differences. A person's nonidentity with the collective allows for subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment, the source today of enthusiasm and hope. It is not through culture, but through the threat of culture's betrayal that consciousness of a common humanity comes to be.'

This sensitivity to subterranean solidarities, which cut across cultural difference, resonates throughout Buck-Morss's writing. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (2000), for example, underscored the commonality between communist and capitalist dreamworlds and *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (2003) illustrated the shared hopes and aspirations of Islamic and European critical theory. Buck-Morss's latest book *Year One: A*

Philosophical Recounting (2021) expands upon this compelling vision of universal history.

Year One opens by asking: How do modern readers engage with the first century? What kinds of origin stories do we tell about this century? Are these stories based in historical fact or fiction? In *Year One*, Buck-Morss takes readers to an epoch that is used to generate mythical origin stories of cultural, religious and national division. Our modern conceptions of time, Christianity and Judaism, law, war and apocalypse can trace their origins to the first century. Ambitiously, Buck-Morss returns to this century to tell another story – one that emphasises commonality over division, contingency over solidity, and multiplicity over linearity.



The first chapter focuses on ideas of time in the first century. Buck-Morss demonstrates how the standardisation of time – the use of *anno domini* signifying the years after Christ's birth – would not have been recognisable to people living in this period. People living in the first century navigated multiple temporal orientations. Some forms of marking the passing of time focused upon the seasons, while other forms focused upon the renewal of imperial titles. In times of civil unrest – such as in the first Jewish-Roman War – coins were minted which reset time and proclaimed a new year one. Thus, Buck-Morss

casts this period as one in which multiple visions of temporality were circulating. By emphasising how the form of time we inherit from the first century was unfamiliar to those living during this period, Buck-Morss introduces the central argument of her book: the first century is not the place we imagine it to be and modern readers have, systematically, imposed their cultural biases onto this early period. 'It is possible to colonize time', writes Buck-Morss, 'as well as territory. It happens when particular collectives claim a specific, vertical slice of history, set upon it a flag of national or religious belonging, and control the production and distribution of the meanings that are mined within it.'

The second chapter, focusing on Flavius Josephus' *Judean War*, provides an example of how national and religious origin stories distort interpretations of first-century texts. Josephus' *Judean War* has been important to Christian readers as it provides non-biblical evidence of Jesus' existence. And, it has been important to Jewish nationalist scholars who trace the loss of a Jewish 'national existence' to this war. Against such identity-based readings, Buck-Morss argues that modern understandings of religious identity, state structures, law and politics, do not easily align with Josephus' world. Reinterpreting the meaning of the Greek word *stasis*, Buck-Morss shows that Josephus' writing does not tell the story of a clash of identities or cultures, but rather focuses upon the dangers of 'factionalism' in political and social life.

In a similar manner, the third chapter focuses on the question of disciplinary knowledge through the writing of Philo of Alexandria. Buck-Morss emphasises the way Philo incorporated mathematics, musicology, theology, biology and humanistic exegesis into his thought, and uses this as an example of a philosophical method that does not abide by the strict demarcation of realms of knowledge. Unlike Kant, who sought to differentiate between 'scientific truth', 'ethical practice' and 'aesthetic judgment', Philo's method creates creative "analogies" among different forms of knowledge. Buck-Morss concludes the chapter by asking if such a transdisciplinary method might be useful to contemporary debates around climate disaster.

The fourth chapter turns to John of Patmos, author of the book of Revelation. Buck-Morss reconstructs the 'historical reality' that informed John's writing and thought. Rather than reading the book of Revelation as an eternal

meditation on the return of a messiah, Buck-Morss argues that John was concerned to critique forms of human power (such as the Roman imperial cults), which acted as if they were divinely empowered. Once again demonstrating how modern categories do not align with the historical experiences of first-century writers, Buck-Morss demonstrates how the book of Revelation does not create hard distinctions between 'Jew versus Christian, heretic versus true believer ... sinner versus saved.'

The concluding chapter, 'Constellations', turns to the question of translation as a method of reading history. In this chapter, Buck-Morss brings together first-century writers – particularly John and Philo – alongside theories of reading from Zora Neale Hurston to Reinhart Koselleck. History, for Buck-Morss, can be used to escape the myths, stereotypes, and binary divisions that haunt our contemporary moment. Throughout the chapter, Buck-Morss emphasises the importance of paying attention to how words in historical texts are translated. On the importance of translation as a method of writing history, Buck-Morss writes,

In the double vision of history suggested here – not only as critique of history-become-myth, but also as philosophical rescue of material traces it provides – the first task is to translate words in a way that lets the past escape the impositions that have been placed upon it, allowing historical details to slip out of the conceptual frames that have carried them forward. The evidence ... recedes from the horizon of modern understanding because the past and the present do not align. The part that vanishes from modern optics is its most valuable aspect because it challenges the inherited traditions of power. Rather than attempting a full recuperation, we enter into the text in order to decipher the transitory history encoded in the words. The experience de-reifies, de-ossifies, de-bakes the hardening of the past into concepts, making legible something that cannot otherwise be read. How to 'tilt the hermeneutic mirror' so that it does not reflect an immediate image of ourselves? How to extend the conditions of possibility that condense in our own moment in time, rather than using the past to naturalize the present along with the concepts and categories used to describe it?

In this sense, for Buck-Morss, reading historical texts can be compared to learning a foreign language. The task is to learn the new syntax, the new grammar, and new idioms of historical writers and philosophers. Translating past worlds into the present, in this account, is not about finding direct correlations, but meditating on the

gap between the language of the past and the language of the present. Within this gap, a new kind of opportunity emerges: to let go of or escape the modern myths that divide humanity and to free up space for us to ask new questions and tell different stories.

'Any search for origins', writes Buck-Morss, 'will discover at the source, not the purity of identity categories but the moment of these categories' disappearance.' Like her previous books, *Year One* is animated by the desire to think anew about universal history. This project is not guided by the desire to find one common origin story or myth. Rather, *Year One* invites us to think about the universal as a loss of origins, an inaugural ambiguity, and a multiplicity of differences at our supposed genesis: 'Here is the wager: if the first century can be reclaimed as *common ground* rather than the origin of deeply entrenched differences, then its very remoteness in time has the potential to lift modernity's self-understanding off existing foundational constraints ... A tiger's leap. The task is to liberate the past from the concepts that purport to contain it; to suspend the structuring schema of history as modernity's content. To fall out of modernity itself (emphasis mine).

Year One, then, leaves its reader asking where such a fall out of modernity might take us? What kinds of community emerge from the disappearance of origin stories?

What forms of historical writing can both accept the dispersion of entrenched differences and refuse reductive homogeneity?

One potential weakness of *Year One* is its emphasis on transcendence. Buck-Morss casts modernity in an almost entirely negative light and, therefore, argues that we must move beyond its terms absolutely. Yet we might ask: Has identity (a key term of modernity for Buck-Morss) not also produced forms of emancipatory politics? Are all adoptions of modernity's terms equivalent? How do we think about feminist, postcolonial or diasporic writers who have immanently reclaimed modernity's terms? Buck-Morss avoids these difficult questions by refusing to engage in key contemporary debates and, instead, turning to an 'outside' of modernity through the first century.

On the other hand, the strength of *Year One* is its commitment to a new vision of philosophy, history and politics. *Year One* seeks to remind us that we need not think of the past or the present as ossified. We can discover unexpected worlds in historical archives. And, inspired by these discoveries, we can think in a radically different manner about disciplinary structures, the future of the humanities, and the binds that connect us across space and time.

Nasrin Olla

Earth systems

Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). 296pp., £76.00 hb., £20.00 pb., 978 0 22610 050 0 hb., 978 0 22673 286 2 pb.

The bright red time ball atop Flamsteed House at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich rises halfway up its mast each day at 12:55 p.m., to the top of the mast at 12:58 p.m., and drops suddenly to the bottom at exactly 1:00 p.m. Like the BBC's famous pips, the ball is what is called a time signal – a visual or aural sign used to synchronise time across sometimes vast geographical distances. When first used in 1833, the time ball signalled the time to merchant vessels, fishing boats and warships on the Thames. Before the near-instantaneous communication offered by the telegraph, watchmakers would travel to

Greenwich to synchronise their goods, and one enterprising London family offered this service for a fee. Such temporal synchronisation is measured in relation to a single line that still serves as the reference point for global spatial and temporal coordinates: the Greenwich Meridian.

The global spatial and temporal ordering of the earth marked by the Meridian, whose location was decided on by delegates from twenty-six states at the 1884 Meridian Conference in Washington, D.C., is the culmination of centuries of European imperial voyages that aimed to map and conquer the so-called 'free space' of the globe