

own time, this indictment is perplexing. ‘Liberals have not yet figured out how to spread freedom without empire’, he writes. ‘The forlorn Cold War liberals counselled them not to try.’ But not only did the Cold War liberals see themselves as engaged in a great global struggle of freedom against totalitarianism, their inheritors took up this pose to defend what Moyn has elsewhere called the United States’ ‘forever wars’.

Those Moyn depicts as the contemporary heirs of Cold War liberalism – Anne Applebaum, Timothy Garton, Paul Berman, Michael Ignatieff, Tony Judt, Leon Wieseltier – were almost all fervent defenders of the Iraq War, which they depicted as a crusade for freedom. While Garton expressed some ‘tortured liberal ambivalence’ in the lead-up to the invasion, Judt was alone in criticising both the wars and ‘Bush’s useful idiots’ for defending them. After decades of endless US wars, many around the

world would be forgiven for thinking that if US liberals have still not ‘worked out how to spread freedom without empire’ it would be far better if they abandoned their self-appointed role of bringing freedom to the world. If there is anything to retrieve from Cold War liberalism it is the chastened recognition of the early Cold War liberals that US militarism abroad risked catastrophe. As a new Cold War looms, the inheritors of Cold War liberalism have combined the worst of liberalism’s past: the anti-democratic foreclosure of alternatives is accompanied by a war-mongering commitment to spread their values to the world.

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Cyberstructure

Bernard Geoghegan *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* (New Haven, CT: Duke University Press, 2023). 272pp., £25.00 hb., 978 1 47801 9 008

In 1969 George Boulanger, president of the International Association of Cybernetics, asked:

But after all what is cybernetics? Or rather what is it not, for paradoxically the more people talk about cybernetics the less they seem to agree on a definition.

For the general public he proposed that cybernetics ‘conjures up visions of some fantastic world of the future peopled by robots and electronic brains!’, but added various of his own interpretations: theories of mathematical control, automation and communication, a study of analogies between humans and machines, and a philosophy of life. Cybernetics may be all of those things. At its height it was something more like a movement than a method or a branch of science. It involved a collection of thinkers from various branches of the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities, who worked together on shared concepts and theories – primarily control, information and communication – which were discussed and disputed at a series of conferences. Much of the work was funded by private bodies, and generated both

serious and passing interest within certain areas of the academy (including amongst prominent philosophers in Germany and France), and a buzz in the press. It began to decline in the 1970s, however, and is of greatly reduced significance today. (James Baldwin’s identification of a ‘cybernetics craze’ may have been more accurate than Heidegger’s prophecy that ‘the sciences now establishing themselves will soon be determined and guided by the new fundamental science which is called cybernetics’.)

The diversity of projects under the umbrella of cybernetics, alongside a lack of a unifying theory or method, almost necessitates a historical approach, which has been taken by various books to date. Bernard Geoghegan’s *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* follows this tendency but makes its own contribution in attending to the politics of cybernetics, particularly as it related to humane disciplines or the socio-cultural stream of cybernetic research. Geoghegan focuses on work which was funded by ‘robber baron philanthropies’ – primarily the Rockefeller Foundation and the Josiah Macy Jr.

Foundation – and undertaken by North American anthropologists and by Russian and French structuralists. He emphasises the technocracy of both philanthropic institutions and socio-cultural cybernetic research, or the sense in which they likened ‘social conflict to mechanical failures, suitable for impartial redress by technical experts’. A major contention, in this regard, is that the jargon of technical problem-solving thus served to dissimulate the politics and ethics of these research projects whilst also diffusing ‘social struggle’. Throughout, the text follows a technocratic imperative as it travelled from philanthropic bodies into the research that they funded, highlighting both the concrete oppressive circumstances in which researchers and their subjects found themselves, and the ways in which this was concealed in the name of technical redress.

Three strands of argument run through the book, fruitfully woven into the particular stories told in each chapter. One details a drive for data collection and processing, or ‘datafication’, whereby humans are rendered objects from which data can be gathered. This is made possible by what Geoghegan calls ‘enclosures’, partially-closed spaces in which data can be gathered. A second emphasises the historical oppressions that went along with these cybernetic and information theoretical research programs: primarily, colonialism, mental illness and the holocaust; each with an associated enclosure: colony, asylum and death camp. Third is the technocratic imperative of research funders – primarily, the Josiah Macy Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation – as it permeated cybernetic research. These three strands are presented as mutually reinforcing, such that the abstraction of data and the language of code serves to obscure political circumstances, support apolitical machinic analogies, meeting the technocratic demands of institutions and securing their financial support.

These argumentative strands – data production, historical political circumstances, the technocracy of funders and research projects – are explored in five chapters, focusing on anthropological research conducted primarily by North American thinkers Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, followed by discussion of structuralist projects undertaken in the US under the banner of cybernetics and information theory, and funded by the philanthropic institutions in question – primarily those of Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jacques

Lacan.

In large part the argument is expressed through presentation of historical and theoretical material, such as the discussion of Mead’s ethnographic study of indigenous Balinese culture from 1936-39. Her claim was that whilst both indigenous Balinese and Americans were affected by schizophrenia, the former had a means to resist it which the latter lacked. One of the aims of the research was to produce data which could be used for comparative analysis of schizophrenia in Bali and the USA, which is what Mead did upon returning to America, where she turned her attention to mental health and suburban family life, claiming that Americans lacked both codes common amongst family members and harmonious and repetitive activity from which Balinese tribespeople benefitted.

Geoghegan argues that Mead’s approach in this regard was apolitical and technocratic. Bali was a Dutch colony at the time, but this was seemingly ignored and suppressed by Mead, who failed, extraordinarily, to acknowledge the Dutch policy of ‘Balization’, which aimed to preserve its own view of traditional Balinese culture, including effectively imposing poverty and malnourishment on the population. Mead was seemingly unaffected by this, and a lead research assistant attested that she never mentioned the Dutch colonial authorities or ‘broached a political discourse’. Geoghegan also contends that her project was technocratic, as it ignored the political situation in Bali and the US, approaching the latter as a series of problems requiring technical redress (through techniques inspired by cybernetic conceptions of communication) rather than broader socio-cultural change.

The concrete circumstances in Bali and suburban America suburbia were thus disappeared in Mead’s research, according to Geoghegan, through the very practice of datafication and encoding, where the translation of research findings into analogical concepts or self-identical data made an obscuration of the political possible:

Faced with the unimaginably destructive forces of disease, colonialism, nationalism, and pogroms, midcentury cultural theorists distilled cultural analysis into a kind of acid wash for recording culture as semiotic chains, remote from the crude chauvinisms of racial and totalitarian reasoning.

The 'acid wash' was provided by cybernetic and information theoretical concepts of information, communication and game theory, and the practice of translating the discursive into the numerical and the humane into the scientific. In this regard the three analytical threads are effective in illuminating the historical material selected, particularly with regard to the sense in which analogical anthropological reasoning served as a means to make abstractions which obscured certain aspects of political circumstances.



One of the successes of the text is a blending of political history, personal biography and particular theoretical interests and projects, in a way that is both technically precise and highly readable. Perhaps the finest example is the chapter on Roman Jakobson, which combines his early interest in Russian futurism and folklore, and fear of the latter's decline, with his discovery of Saussure's structural method, the political contexts of his various forced flights and migrations, and his work completed after moving to the US. Jakobson's particular structuralism is thus explained in part through a fear that Russian language and poetry was being destroyed by Bolshevism, from which he fled to Prague in his early twenties, along with his parents. When German troops

arrived in Prague, Jakobson was forced to flee again, this time through Scandinavia, eventually arriving in New York in 1941. There he managed to secure a professorship at the *École libre des hautes études*, hosted by the New School for Social Research and funded and partvetted by the Rockefeller Foundation. Here Jakobson reformulated Saussure's linguistics to accommodate media technologies such as the telephone, radio and amplified loudspeakers, which, as Geoghegan emphasises, was very much to the taste of the Rockefeller Foundation at the time. When many fellow refugees returned to their home countries in the late 1940s, Jakobson stayed in the US, where he was given a professorship in Slavic studies at Harvard in 1949 and received further funding from the Rockefeller Foundation for an exhaustive analysis of contemporary Russian on the promise that it would better that the Soviets.

Geoghegan carefully details both the significance of cybernetics and information theory and an anti-Soviet political agenda in the construction of Jakobson's work, and identifies them as key to US government and philanthropic agendas. But interestingly, whilst Jakobson's work was closely engaged in cybernetic themes and concepts, Geoghegan contends that his Rockefeller project culminated in an analytical subversion of communication theory through recourse to poetics. Whilst communication theory stabilises discourse, poetics does the opposite. Discourse may build equations from verbal terms such that the metalanguage of communication theory tends towards semantic stability, but poetics proceeds 'in an essentially indeterminate manner that countervails' the stability of communication theory, as a necessary aspect of language that is ungraspable by communication theory. For Geoghegan, then, a remnant of Jakobson's early interest in poetics and futurist poetry is put to use in subverting any dreams of total control or enclosure which communication theory may harbour.

Jakobson's resistant poetics is something of an anomaly, though, and much of the book emphasises the technocratic and apolitical aspects of cybernetics and structuralism – including a complaint that the latter takes over from existentialism as part of a depoliticising tendency in French thought. There are some obvious examples which run counter to this who are given scant attention, however, such as Althusser (and his *Reading Capital* companions) and Norbert Wiener. The latter, for example,

was deeply involved with cybernetics and information theory, but refused to allow his work to be used for military purposes after World War II, worried about handing over the successes of cybernetics to ‘the world of Belsen and Hiroshima’, and defended his MIT colleague Dirk Struik, accused of teaching Marxism, leading the president of MIT to assure the Rockefeller Foundation that Wiener had not ‘himself been involved in any Communist or Communist front activities’.

Sometimes, too, earnest interest in cybernetics is somewhat underestimated on the part of thinkers in favour of an emphasis on engagements for the purposes of achieving funding or developing careers. Jakobson’s work on information theory and cybernetics, for example, is presented as being motivated by his desire to remain in the US, made possible by institutions keen to support the former. Lévi-Strauss’ engagement with cybernetics is presented similarly (though less sympathetically) as an attempt to secure financial support for research; thus, his cybernetic reading of Mauss is described as a ‘maneuver’ to curry favour with funders. This is a welcome identification of the constitutive impact of material demands in understanding the engagements of various thinkers with cybernetics, and one which counterbalances overemphasis on concepts or a tendency for hagiolatry in histories of French thought. Little room is left, however, for the possibility that engagement with cybernetics and information theory may have been borne out of genuine interest in what appeared to many to be developing into a crucial scientific endeavour – similar to the recent successes of relativistic and quantum physics. Greater discussion of these and other factors would have offered a more complex picture of the overdetermination of research projects, with room for cybernetics and information theory as both funding strategy and intellectual conviction.

A more significant lacunae pertains to Geoghegan’s critical engagement with the actual work produced by the thinkers in question. Indeed, whilst the claim that funding bodies demanded technocratic research projects is well argued, there is little critical discussion of the political and scientific (or philosophical) status of the work produced. Geoghegan offers admirably clear glosses of major texts, thoughtfully highlighting the role of cybernetics and information theory therein, but the political critique of conditions, that is, funding institutions, is

not carried over to the result: the work produced. Whilst the ideology surrounding and supporting work is well identified, its claims to science or truth are not evaluated in as much depth. Instead, there is a tendency to criticise funding institutions and to endorse moments when thinkers subvert cybernetics and information theory – such as Jakobson’s poetics or Barthes’ reading of code – whilst shying away from thorough criticism of the work itself.

An interesting moment thus arises when Geoghegan notes a criticism of Lévi-Strauss by Maxime Rodinson, who proposes that the former’s work is ‘little more than US imperialism dressed up as French social theory’ (in Geoghegan’s gloss). Lévi-Strauss responds: ‘But should we not distinguish scientific findings, strictly speaking, from the political and ideological uses to which they are put, all too frequently, in the United States and elsewhere?’, before responding to Rodinson’s other criticisms in turn. For Geoghegan, Lévi-Strauss ‘demurs’ before Rodinson’s criticisms, ‘preferring to turn the inquiry to finer details’ of anthropological theory. It may be true that Lévi-Strauss evades the depth of his own question, but, ironically, Geoghegan follows a similar path. Indeed, throughout the text criticism is (rightly) made of both the political imperatives for funding research and their willing acceptance by researchers, and the political circumstances that went undisturbed or else obscured by research. But it does not necessarily follow that this work was unscientific or unphilosophical as a result (or indeed technocratically or politically effective). One wonders, for example, whether Jakobson’s engagement with information theory is less truthful than his work on poetics, or whether the latter is affirmed primarily because information theory is associated with reprehensible political institutions. In a more complex way, we might agree that Mead’s ignorance of colonial policy in Bali – intentional or otherwise – was an astonishing oversight, both ethically and scientifically, without concluding that this invalidates her claim that indigenous Balinese people were better able to cope with schizophrenia than suburban Americans, and hence provided a potential medical model. If Mead was in fact wrong in her understanding of Balinese resistance to schizophrenia, and if this were a result of her ignorance of colonial policy, then this would be an interesting argument, but the link is not made.

Lévi-Strauss's response to Rodin may be a rather empty self-defence, but it nonetheless points towards a distinction between truth and its conditions which is more delicate. With regard to Geoghegan's text we might reverse his question and ask about conditions for 'scientific findings' rather than 'uses' to which they are put: should scientific findings be distinguished from the political and ideological imperatives associated with funders in the US and elsewhere? Can this distinction be made

at all? Geoghegan's text is rich in its analysis of the political conditions for research and convincing in its presentation of the apolitical and technocratic hue of cybernetics and information theory of the period. One is left wondering, though, to what extent all of this research or its 'findings' lacked science, and without a connection rigorously identified between the two, what to make of Lévi Strauss' distinction between politics and science.

Gus Hewlett

Uncaged optimism

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, edited by Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London/Brooklyn: Verso, 2022), 506 pp. £12.99 pb., 978 1 83976 170 6.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore is a dialectician who embodies optimism without naivete, demonstrates dexterity in moving between universal, particular and individual dimensions, and describes contemporary conditions and past history with an eye to revolutionising the future, while contextualising everything with care and urgency. She is already justly famous for her massive contributions to the Prison Abolition movement, and these essays enrich our understanding of how her mind radiates outward to the whole world. Confining her brilliance to a single issue would obfuscate her dialectic prowess and far-ranging intellect. The essays and interviews collected in *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* reveal, both individually and in their totality, how Gilmore holds together a material analysis of contemporary capitalism, a geographer's sense of place, and her continued optimism for transformation rooted in resistance.

Abolition Geography occupies a particular space and time. The pieces date from between 1991-2018; this time span includes Gilmore's career as an activist and teacher prior to her PhD in Geography, through her writing of *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* in 2007, extending up to the opening years of the Trump presidency. It does mean that the book does not contain the seismic shifts of 2020 – COVID, the response to George Floyd's murder by the police, the disputed election. As frustrating as it can be to lack Gilmore's commentary on each of our current crises,

the essays as a collection enable the astute reader to see how her dialectical approach holds prognosticatory power.

'Abolition geography starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place'. In this book, the places in question are primarily in California, in particular Los Angeles and the Central Valley. She notes how communities that 'appear to lack the power to resist toxic incinerators or prisons' are the ones that get them (e.g. California's Central Valley). That specific geography then connects to how 'people from the hyperpoliced poorest urban areas are locked away in rural prisons' precisely because 'they appear to lack the power to resist mass incarceration that they are arrested and imprisoned'. Thus she forms a grounded, living connection between the environmental movements and prison abolition movements, asking what might happen if the differences created and exploited by late capitalism to divide people – like race/citizenship, innocence/guilt – could dissolve in our imaginations 'in favor of other things, like the right to water, the right to air, the right to the countryside, the right to the city'. Opposition to environmental destruction and the carceral state are both opposition to callous disregard for life, and the resistance embodied in the anti-prison and environmental movements call for 'and use and local democracy' as imperative.

The localisation and specificity in her dialectic does not mean that Gilmore's viewpoint is ever parochial. She