Reviews

Marketplace of dull ideas

Christoph Schuringa, *A Social History of Analytic Philosophy: How Politics Has Shaped an Apolitical Philosophy* (London: Verso, 2025). 336pp., £25.00 hb., 978 1 80429 209 9

The opening pages of the inaugural issue of this journal in 1972 begin with these words in the article 'Professional Philosophers' by Jonathan Ree: 'People who don't know anything about philosophy courses are likely to be astonished and dismayed by their effects.' In a trenchant critique of the dominant mode of Oxford philosophy of the day, Ree describes how students 'acquire a very mannered way of speaking and a knack of shrugging off serious ideas with half frivolous complaints about the words in which they are expressed' and he documents curious initiation rituals by which a student 'will acquire the superficial facility in argument.' Armed with this superficial facility, 'the philosopher has made a profession of amateurishness' and this philosopher 'has thought of himself as an intellectual lone ranger, who travels light, righting the wrongs in various intellectual areas.' After sketching this peculiar academic figure, Ree inquires with consternation: 'But what exactly is the intellectual tradition which has these sad results?' Christoph Schuringa's *A Social History of Analytic Philosophy: How Politics has Shaped an Apolitical Philosophy* provides a timely and detailed answer to that question. Written with wit, rigour and a deep concern about the future of an intellectual tradition harbouring colonial ambitions, Schuringa's book is essential reading for both contemporary practitioners of philosophy and anyone interested in engaging with contemporary academic philosophy. More than just a history of the analytic tradition, Schuringa depicts a bleak present of a discipline caught in 'methodological free fall'.

Balancing nuance, a sweeping overview of over a century of philosophical texts, and a knack for pithy summaries of works across 'a tradition that manages to think of itself as no tradition at all', Schuringa produces a persuasive case for analytic philosophy's fundamental role as a powerful intellectual tool of 'bourgeois liberal ideology'. The book is poised to serve two divergent purposes. First, for those of us trained outside of the analytic hegemon who are obligated to continually reassert our active professional distance from analytic assumptions and methodologies, Schuringa provides an invaluable diagnostic tool aimed at identifying the common ideological underpinnings of a broad and expanding tradition. Second, for those rooted in the analytic tradition, a tradition marked by a 'remarkable lack of methodological self-scrutiny', it will hopefully provoke professional self-analysis into the ideological entanglements of their own philosophical practice. The book ought to spark the very kinds of questions that analytic philosophy is – according to Schuringa's own analysis – professionally incapable of asking about itself. As Schuringa concludes: 'The tradition that is none cannot be touched.'

Schuringa is not content leaving this tradition untouched and the book aims to debunk analytic philosophy's 'retrospective fictionalized histories'. According to this dominant narrative, analytic philosophy traces its origins to the German logician Gottlob Frege in the 1880s. Through Frege, the analytic tradition developed its dedication to precision and logical rigour. This 'Myth of Frege', which Schuringa dates to Michael Dummett's work in the 1970s, 'has turned out to be little more than a means of validation of a conception of philosophy that seems highly technical and rigorous but serves no purpose at all.' Schuringa relegates this myth to a 'late stage' of the book in Chapter 7 and dedicates the preceding chapters to meticulously tracing the origins of analytic philosophy to a handful of distinct institutional spaces in the early twentieth century: the Cambridge of Betrand Russell, G.E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Chapter 2); the Red Vienna of the Vienna Circle (Chapter 3), the 'home of dullness' in pre-World War Two Oxford (Chapter 4), and campuses of elite universities in the early cold-war United States (Chapter 6). Specialists will no doubt quibble with details in this sweeping intellectual history,

however I want to focus on the overarching project of the book as an ideology critique written in the form of what Schuringa calls a social history. Schuringa's description of analytic philosophy as 'apolitical' is merely a restatement of the tradition's own self-understanding. The book is dedicated to translating a set of political commitments which analytic philosophy is professionally incapable of articulating about itself – even while forcefully solidifying and reproducing those commitments.

Schuringa describes his social history project as a history of 'what has sustained analytic philosophy in particular, rather than with the social reproduction of institutional academic formations in general.' In referring to 'what has sustained analytic philosophy in particular', he ultimately means the liberal political and economic order. Early in the book he describes how 'analytic philosophy, like its cousins behaviourism and neoclassical economics, serves to perpetuate a picture that is central to bourgeois liberal ideology.' With the waning of the British empire, analytic philosophy found a new home in academic halls of the US American empire. As John McCumber has shown in his books *The Philosophy Scare* and *Time in the Ditch*, analytic philosophy benefitted immensely from the anti-communist purges of the McCarthy era and played a pivotal role in, in Schuringa's words, 'shoring up the neoliberal project.' Schuringa excels at tracing that history. Given the tight links between analytic philosophy and the dominate economic logics of the day, I would suggest that the fundamental intervention of the book could be distilled down to a powerful basic claim: analytic philosophy is the court philosophy of neoliberalism. Schuringa never formulates his own project in that way, but he does hint at this possibility at various points. 'The ideology of analytic philosophy is that of liberalism', Schuringa writes, but he avoids explicitly drawing a more radical conclusion about analytic philosophy's role in shoring up the projects of neoliberalism. I would suggest that Schuringa gives us reason to conclude that analytic philosophy is in fact a tool of neoliberal governmentality. That is to say, neoliberalism both demands the sort of atomistic analysis which is central to analytic philosophy, while analytic philosophy has also served to solidify the cultural hegemony of neoliberal assumptions.

It is worthwhile to tease out more closely how Schuringa uses a social history of analytic philosophy to support this claim. The book is expressly not an institutional history, though it does provide rich fodder for institutional histories yet to be written. At times the book reads like a straightforward intellectual history and Schuringa demonstrates a subtle alacrity for getting to the core of his chosen subjects' thinking. He is intellectually at home in texts which might not be familiar ground for non-analytic philosophers. His choice of material skews by his own admission towards great thinkers (Russel, Moore, Wittgenstein, Frege as the canon of the classics; Sally Haslanger, Charles Mills, Robert Brandom, John McDowell as the stalwarts of the contemporary canon), but Schuringa attributes that to the way analytic philosophy 'promotes a cult of personality'. His intellectual-biographical sketches provide invaluable insights into the training in analytic philosophy as a form of *socialisation*.

The social aspect of this social history is brought out most persuasively in his evocation of the stuffy, homosocial atmosphere of pre-Second World War Oxford and Cambridge. A fair coterie of aristocratic types shuffle through these homogenous institutional spaces dominated by men trained at elite schools. Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch do receive their due and Schuringa describes the misogyny that hampered their careers at various stages. Empire looms in the background of these academic spaces in a diffuse way that remains unexplored. To what extent, for example, do the connections to empire in the Oxford and Cambridge of the early twentieth century extend or relate to the nineteenth-century story told by Uday Singh Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*? Yet by 1940 the links between analytic philosophy and the military-industrial complex are more explicit. The experience of WWII looms large in this period and Schuringa describes J.L. Austin's 'quasi-military operations' and documents the contributions to defence research at RAND by Hans Reichenbach, W.V. Quine, Donald Davidson and Nicholas Rescher.

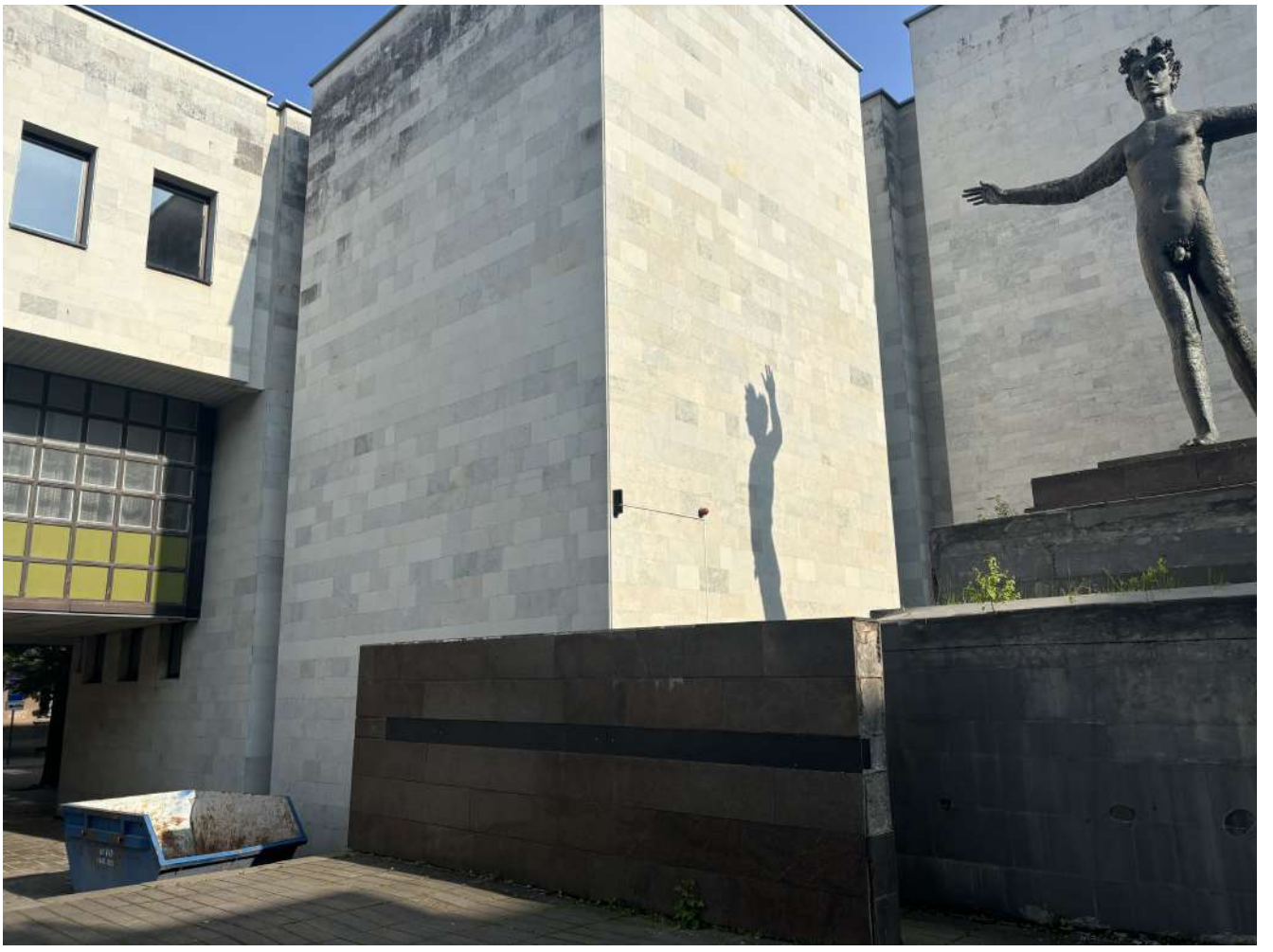
If social history involves describing the social practice of analytic philosophy as embodied in its professional mores, then the book excels in that regard. Schuringa displays a knack for a clever turn of phrase and the occasional sly – but never gratuitous – zinger. He depicts a discipline 'remarkably stuck in the past' and 'a continuation of a basically eighteenth-century mindset.' Feminists, philosophers of colour, and diverse practi-

tioners have long documented the marginalising power of analytic philosophy's 'highly combative' professional style in which 'all comers were welcome to participate', though ultimately 'a certain pushy, too-clever-by-half type predominates.' Schuringa persuasively shows how these combative elements are not merely professional tics which could be unlearned to make for a more inclusive analytic philosophy, but instead demonstrates how such combativeness constitutes the core of analytic practice. Schuringa's description of the Oxford tutorial of the 1940s is especially informative in this regard:

> Students were subjected to the iterated deployment against them of the question, 'What exactly does this mean?', to gloomy silences, and to other techniques of intellectual intimidation supposed to engender a self-critical attitude and cultivate the crafting of suitably precise statements of the expected kind.

This socialisation is shaped by 'a fantasy of consummate ease.' This fantasy is rooted in analytic philosophy's essential confirmation of hegemonic power structures and the self-assured comfort of indulging in thought experiments whose rigour is precisely guaranteed by their uselessness. This practice encourages and rewards those who feel at ease with the status quo and then 'pumps' their intuition for further philosophical justification of that very state of ease.

As Schuringa's description approaches the analytic philosophy of the present, he describes a '[r]eliance on intuitions' that 'is heavy, widespread and astonishingly casual', despite the 'discipline's own fetishization of "rigour".' Intuition pumping as a method is purportedly the guarantor for that rigour, which is not undercut, but is somehow reinforced by a number of professional practices which might raise the eyebrows of people accustomed to different standards of inquiry. First, there is 'the analytic philosopher's trope of not being fussed about historical details.' Second, Schuringa identifies an even more maddening defensive posture grounded tautologically in the purported rigour of the analytic philosopher's



uniquely trained and scrutinising eye: 'The profession [sic] "I do not understand this", if aimed by the right person at the right target, counts a powerful objection in analytic philosophy.' One very clear conclusion emerges: analytic philosophy is not in the first instance a practice of *reading*. This realisation alone has proven critical in articulating my own intellectual distance from the investments of analytic practice. What Schuringa shows – and this could be thought through more closely – is that reading is at most secondary and it is secondary not to thinking in the mode of, say, Hannah Arendt, but to *arguing*. Analytic philosophy's imagination of this arguing is predicated on an imagined neutral space – a featureless marketplace – bereft of power structures where, without any regard for hierarchy or the social production of power, the best argument wins in a clean and fair competition. A listener privy to such discussions might be treated to interventions such as: 'I've got the knock-down argument against that!'. Analytic philosophers might find it difficult to comprehend that not all philosophers, and certainly not all thinkers, find such modes of engagement intellectually productive.

In his 2008 defence-cum-history of analytic philosophy *What is Analytic Philosophy?*, Hans-Johann Glock describes what he calls the 'piecemeal approach' of analytic philosophy. This involves segmenting down a question to its smallest identifiable discrete unit – a practice applied fruitfully by Aristotle. Having segmented the question in that way, the analytic philosopher then pursues a hyper-local analysis of a highly specialised question. This results in the curious phenomenon of authors frequently citing their own earlier essays on a topic such as just deserts, while responding to another philosopher's recent critique of the author's own earlier argument about just deserts. This process continues *ad nauseum* with each incremental step filing down positions and counter-positions. Schuringa cites Ernest Gellner's description of this process as 'conspicuous triviality'. In this practice of triviality, the author is expressly discouraged from integrating their niche question into a larger whole or into a broader social or political reality, for the very refinement of the piecemeal stance away from an integrated whole is precisely the guarantee of scientific rigour. In this regard, there is a distinct break from Aristotelian practice, which both segments and synthesises. The logic of production built into this process is clear and it leads to essays of characteristic brevity within a field that eschews the production of books as the flipside to the aversion to reading. Here conspicuous triviality merges neatly with conspicuous consumption and gratuitous production.

The piecemeal treatment of discrete units neatly aligns with neoliberalism's reduction of all political analysis to the discrete unit of the individual. If, as Wendy Brown writes in her 2015 book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, '[n]eoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense', then perhaps analytic philosophy is another name for that sophisticated common sense. In its characteristic style and in its content (and in the neat equation of style with content), analytic philosophy thinks in a neoliberal manner. Stated in this way, Schuringa does not so much write an intellectual or social history of a cohesive intellectual tradition, but instead a sort of intellectual etiquette manual for being congenial to the neoliberal order. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe described the diffuse intellectual agents of this movement as the 'neoliberal thought collective'. Analogously, Schuringa writes a history not of a unified intellectual project, but of a diffuse thought collective's congeniality to the neoliberal order through a particular mode of intellectual practice.

If analytic philosophy is at the very least ineluctably neoliberal, then that accounts for the palpable shift in tone in the final chapter 'Colonizing Philosophy'. Here Schuringa continues with the sober analysis of texts combined with a more urgent polemical tone in his description of analytic philosophy's tendency to 'neutralize and defang' whatever it touches. The chapter documents how analytic philosophers 'have been effective in subjecting a series of successive radical, non-liberal currents of thought to liberal marketization.' In particular, he analyses analytic feminism, critical theory, Marxism and the philosophy of race. It would be wrong to say that these radical traditions undergo a depoliticisation in analytic hands, for that would endorse analytic philosophy's foundational myth of being apolitical. Instead, these traditions undergo a distinct political translation into the neoliberal assumptions of discretion, production and the valorisation of the individual in a practice of segmented analysis concerned with discrete units. Here, according to Schuringa, something more sinister than conspicuous triviality is at work.

This chapter is sure to spark the most controversy, not least because it directs an ideology critique toward contemporary philosophers who present their work as the vanguard of progressivism. For example, Schuringa identifies the work of Charles Mills as a threshold figure who at once, 'struck at the core of the liberal project', but was nonetheless ultimately 'amenable to a reconstruction of liberalism.' Unfortunately, Schuringa does not take Mills' 2005 essay "'Ideal Theory" as Ideology' into consideration, which not only strikes at the heart of Rawlsian liberalism, but ultimately shows that the entire application of such ideal practice and, by extension, the entire reliance on thought experiments are a tool for defending a white-supremacist status quo. An alternative account of Mills' philosophical evolution might show that he could only think philosophically about race once he had departed from analytic philosophy. Yet Mills' defence of Kantian universalism in his late essay 'Black Radical Kantianism' may ultimately confirm Schuringa's description of Mills' liberalism – is it an entirely moot question whether he perpetuates that liberal project as an analytic philosopher or as something else?

Schuringa's fundamental thesis already projects the potential reception of the book. 'There is', as Schuringa writes, 'from within analytic philosophy, no means to secure a critical vantage point on this sorry situation.' If his critique is, to use the language of analytic philosophy, *taken on board*, then the very process of onboarding will repoliticise and appropriate Schuringa's radical critique of the entire analytic edifice. Perhaps, too, Schuringa's analyses might be mined by thinkers within the tradition to provide fuel for petty grievance politics against rival thinkers within the tradition. One could imagine various bad-faith appropriations of Schuringa's critique of analytic feminism and philosophy of race mobilised to debunk feminism and philosophy of race as a whole. Yet Schuringa's book is decidedly not a work of naïve flag-waiving. A critique of analytic philosophy does not necessarily amount to a defence of continental philosophy. Schuringa does not attempt the latter, though Chapter 6 does defend the existence of continental philosophy as a distinct tradition. Continental philosophy has certainly been apt to lapse into its own unproductive personality cults and there were doubtless members of its canon who were proper card-carrying fascists. Moreover, works such as Mariana Ortega's *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self* show how certain portions of the continental canon labour under their own assumptions of 'consummate ease'.

Although written as a social history, I would suggest that non-analytic readers will benefit from Schuringa's book as a diagnostic manual documenting a dazzling symptomology. Schuringa diagnoses a curious situation in the professional philosophy of the present. He speaks at once of analytic philosophy's 'methodological decrepitude', yet the entire book testifies to analytic philosophy's fecundity. Analytic philosophy thrives in the marketplace of ideas and not the least because it does not question the fundamental mechanisms of the market. Schuringa's depiction of a tradition marked by 'high levels of studied historical ignorance' and his detailed analyses of the tradition are an invaluable resource for those puzzled by that professional ignorance.

Lastly, it is worth noting how the book is also written in the mode of mourning. As J.M. Cohen writes in 1972 in the second issue of *Radical Philosophy*: 'These academics deserve the students they breed; but the students do not always deserve such academics: caveat emptor.' Schuringa's work will perhaps serve a valuable third function as a tool for orienting students perplexed and ultimately disappointed by the analytic style they encounter in their university classrooms. Readers of this journal have likely repeatedly had some version of a conversation with puzzled students or colleagues seeking to account for the social practices of analytic colleagues. We now all have a valuable resource to supplement those explanations.

For those who fight to keep institutional spaces for non-analytic philosophy alive, Schuringa writes to a bleak present. He speaks to an institutional setting in which critical philosophers are forced to market themselves as experts in a limpid from of critical thinking that is supposedly equally at home in the corporate board room, court of law, and in the fight for some corporatised form of social justice. Increasingly, we find ourselves as professional philosophers reduced to peddling a form of critical thinking purportedly bereft of content – as if critical thinking were not always critical thinking about something. Analytic philosophy effaces that very possibility and thrives in an imagined power-free space of neutrality. Our institutional survival means selling our wares as a neutral vessel of thought and thus involves a

silent capitulation to analytic creep. Analytic philosophy thrives in that space because it labours under the assumption 'that a training in logic makes people better able to think in other domains', which Schuringa describes as 'a plausible sounding idea for which there nevertheless appears to be no evidence.' The realisation is a powerful one which we should wield in the university planning meeting instead of dusting off platitudes about the power of critical thinking.

Perhaps many of us carve out our institutional niche while touting this form of dogmatism and placating ourselves into thinking that we create spaces for different forms of thinking within the classroom. Schuringa provides a clear diagnosis of that tendency: 'It is not difficult to see that reliance on intuitions is a symptom of philosophical degeneracy. It is a form of dogmatism, and thus the antithesis of philosophy.' Schuringa's conclusion is a bleak one: if philosophy survives in institutions at all it is as the antithesis of philosophy. Should we be dedicated to promoting the survival of this moribund assemblage? Is Schuringa's book ultimately a critique of analytic philosophy, or of the institutions that sustain it?

Adam Knowles

Full-spectrum philosophy

Victoria Browne, *Pregnancy Without Birth: A Feminist Philosophy of Miscarriage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022). 232pp., £21.99 pb., 978 1 35027 969 8

For some people, to disclose a pregnancy is to be assigned a place in the future almost immediately. It might start innocuously enough. If you are pregnant in Britain, a health professional might call you 'mum' when you least expect it. If you're in London, you might order one of Transport for London's 'Baby on Board' badges to let other passengers know you need a seat. One of the many issues with this badge is its rhetorical erasure: if the baby is already on board, the pregnant person might as well not be. For those with a lower tolerance for cutesy alliteration, or anyone unsure about disclosing their pregnancy to a carriage of strangers, TfL offers another option: the 'Please offer me a seat' badge. This is pitched at commuters with 'invisible' disabilities or health conditions, but it also caters to anyone not ready or willing to reveal their pregnancy. They might be considering termination. They might be worried about work. They might want to protect a pregnancy someone else wants them to terminate. They might not know how they feel about it. For wanted pregnancies, the standard account of the 'first trimester silence' hinges on the statistical likelihood of miscarriage in the first trimester. Nobody wants to have to 'un-announce' a pregnancy, the thinking goes. Personally, I'm not sure the process is always as rational as all that. I ordered the 'Please offer me a seat' badge in my first trimester because I was sick and clinging instinctually to the care I needed *now*, in the present tense.

Since reading Victoria Browne's *Pregnancy Without Birth: A Feminist Philosophy of Miscarriage*, I have a new term for what I was dodging with my niche taste in TfL badges: 'proleptic pregnancy', the normative pregnancy culture where, as Browne puts it, 'two imagined figures of the future – the mother and baby – are superimposed on to the present, such that they come to stand in for pregnant embodiment as such'. The culture of proleptic pregnancy 'leaves us ill-equipped to deal with the conceptual complexities and messy materialities of miscarriage', says Browne. Of course, the problems with proleptic pregnancy don't start and end with miscarriage. As the book notes, the superimposition of the mother-baby dyad onto the pregnant subject is one of the favoured rhetorical contortions of anti-abortion discourse. Even beyond abortion and miscarriage, Browne makes a powerful argument that the subsumption of pregnancy into the maternal future does a disservice to all pregnant people, however their pregnancies end. She writes:

> [R]eflection on the nonchosen nature of miscarriage brings into view the fundamental contingency of *all* pregnancies, whatever choices have been possible, even when