

and, in any case, this book is largely unconcerned with aesthetics or form – for example, Disney’s embrace of CGI is attributed to labour disciplining, globalisation, financialisation and IP management, rather than it being understood as an expressive, visual form of contemporaneity. Everything devolves down to ownership and property and the money logic that the culture has itself

become. But the most depressing reason Osterweil offers as to why Disney does not glower out as a dull beacon of reactionary cultural form nowadays is that the entire entertainment apparatus has remade itself in Disney’s image. As a result, Disney outputs no longer attract distinct ire – they are no longer exceptional, but exemplary. What a world!

Esther Leslie

The philosophy of revolt

Idris Robinson, *The Revolt Eclipses Whatever the World Has to Offer* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2025). 256pp., \$16.95 pb., 978 1 63590 243 3

In a 1972 interview from her cell at California State Prison, the interviewer presses Angela Davis, then awaiting trial, on the question of revolutionary violence. Rejecting the implicit premise that revolution is necessarily more violent than the system it seeks to overthrow, Davis reminds the white interviewer of some basic facts about life in the United States of America: that Black people are constantly exposed to violence; that racial profiling and police harassment are daily occurrences; and that her own life, too, has been shaped by atrocity – including the devastating story of four Black girls from her childhood block in Birmingham, Alabama, killed in a racist church bombing. ‘You ask *me* whether I approve of violence?’, Davis retorts. ‘When someone asks me about violence, I just find it incredible because what it means is that the person who’s asking that question has absolutely no idea what Black people have gone through, what Black people have experienced in this country since the time the first Black person was kidnapped from the shores of Africa.’

Watching Davis’s interview is a sobering experience for someone like me, whose mind, like that of so many white minions once trapped in Anglo-inspired philosophy departments, has been primed to think about violence from a position of structural innocence. Violence, we are taught, is something ‘out there’, something that happens to someone else for reasons beyond our control. Our job is simply to act as moral magistrates. The main example of this kind of thinking, of course, is the magically self-moving trolley that any undergraduate analytic philosophy student inevitably encounters: Do

you choose to pull the lever to act as a white utilitarian saviour or do you prefer to remain in the only slightly awkward position of white innocence?

From the position of the morally innocent bystander, it is but a short step to embrace the liberal non-violence doctrine. Undergirded by turn-the-other-cheek-Protestantism, the political correlate to non-violence is the belief that there are legitimate and non-legitimate ways of protesting incipient fascism and responding to state violence. In this peculiar liberal phantasy, the state only makes use of its armed monopoly on violence in exceptional cases, to uphold law and order. Should the state abuse its powers it is ultimately kept in check by constitutional law. Downstream from this is where you’ll find the most horrid people you’ll ever meet in a situation of political protest: the self-anointed guardians of peace, hell-bent on keeping everyone within the limits of respectability politics.

In his book, *The Revolt Eclipses Whatever the World has to Offer*, the philosopher Idris Robinson powerfully refuses any such nonsense. He also refuses white moral extortion when it comes to the question of violence, arguing, similarly to Davis, that ‘there is simply no way to avoid the spiral of violence that began at the very moment when the first wooden ships reached the shore of the Atlantic.’ For those whose very existence has been shaped and moulded by the slowly widening orbit of violence that is US American capitalism – the cosplaying fascist ICE goons are simply the latest and most shameless reinforcing of the existing racial hierarchies of power

– the question of violence is not an abstract thought experiment in ethics but a matter of survival: ‘There’s only one way to deal with this fascist wing of the state: they operate with violence, and we return with violence that’s more powerful.’

The Revolt is a philosophical inquiry into the question of violence and the nature of revolt. Robinson rejects the non-situated point of view of liberal philosophy – where violence is imagined as something that *might* happen, some phantastical possible event taking place in a historical vacuum – and begins his inquiry instead from lived experience of revolt. The author’s experiences form a political cartography of the present moment: an attempt to map out a loose set of coordinates for revolutionary theory in the new era of riots. ‘Theory’, for Robinson, is not about inventing catchy new concepts. At the core of *The Revolt* stands its author’s belief that ‘theory can only fulfill its own internal demand for weight and determinacy by encompassing revolutionary violence.’ ‘Encompassing’, in this case, does not mean to endorse or celebrate. It means reckoning critically with the use of force as a recurring problem in proletarian class war, from the US wasteland to occupied Palestine. It is a book of strategy which ponders how to make revolutionary energies flow around peaks and throw itself violently down slopes, how to avoid the enemy’s strengths and strike at its weak points. Robinson clearly grasps what any true revolutionary thinker knows: that the role of theory is first and foremost to assist in the self-clarification of proletarian struggles. To this end, Robinson draws in equal measure from the US Black radical tradition and French ultra-left thought – with the book’s title echoing Gilles Dauvé’s influential collection of essays written in the aftermath of May ’68 and published in English as the *Eclipse and Reemergence of the Communist Movement* in 1974.

Much like Dauvé’s essays were occasioned by distinct moments in the extended political tumult of May ’68, each of the chapters in *The Revolt* are likewise originally ‘written to deliberately intervene in some specific political conjuncture, especially in the context of the hot pandemic summer of 2020.’ The book’s interventionist character and the sense of urgency in its prose is partly what makes it such a powerful read. ‘Initially spoken rather than written’, Robinson’s book is composed on the fly, forged in the flames of the revolt it theorises.

‘Several of the chapters’, Robinson notes, ‘are transcripts of conversations I had on the ground. Instead of polished compositions, these were originally nothing more than knotted strings of ideas, extemporaneously deciphered from illegible scribbles in my wide-ruled notebook.’

Robinson is a thinker of revolution for our times. *The Revolt* revolves around the perennial question epitomised by Lenin’s pamphlet, which borrowed its title from Chernyshevsky’s novel, *What is to be done?* (1902). In Robinson’s attempt to ‘Blackify the title a little bit’, the title, by way of southern dialect, becomes: ‘How it Might Should Be Done’. Like Lenin, Robinson wants to address ‘the burning questions of our movement’. But rather than offering a set of directives for the proletariat to follow, Robinson rethinks ‘the means and the techniques of struggle’.

Written in response to what Robinson describes as ‘the spectacular misrepresentation of the George Floyd uprising as a kind of peaceful non-event’, *The Revolt* offers a counter-narrative from someone who personally felt the very foundations of bourgeois society shake under his feet during that long hot summer of riots:

We all saw it. We all saw what happened after the murder of George Floyd. What occurred was an extremely violent and destructive rebellion. It was a phenomenon the likes of which we have not seen in America in forty or fifty years. Very few of us have experienced anything of this magnitude: a precinct was immediately torched in Minneapolis, after which entire cities went up in flames – New York, Atlanta, Oakland, Seattle.

Robinson argues ‘that 2020 went harder than 1968’ and risks charges of naïveté by claiming that the George Floyd uprisings ‘opened the window to insurrection and even a full-blown revolution.’ The US lays bare the veiled civil war that defines capitalist society at large: ‘Despite certain grandiose delusions of white mastery and control, it is becoming increasingly evident that civil war is inescapable. It is not up to anyone.’ Here too Robinson usefully moves beyond the idea of individual moral choice – ‘it is not up to anyone’ – and recentres the question of violence as one of partisanship. Given a state of civil war, the question forced by countervailing material forces becomes: which side are you on?

In his trenchant analysis of civil war, Robinson draws from disparate sources including the French classicist Nicole Loraux’s *The Divided City*, the US American com-

unist Harry Haywood's *Black Bolshevik* and, perhaps most importantly, Giorgio Agamben's *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*. The grand claim in *The Revolt* is that the raging civil war signifies a point of no return, a potential break with the entire paradigm of Western political thought and life centred on the dialectic of constitutive and constituted power. In other words: the model of power based on the sovereign nation state and constitutional democracy is in deep crisis, shit is about to hit the fan.

Inspired by the militant research collective Colectivo Situaciones – who coined the term 'destituent power' to capture the Argentinian masses' insatiable drive to repeatedly topple and overthrow without seeking to replace the unseated authorities – Robinson argues that there is essentially nothing left to salvage from liberal democracy and its state-form. The modern state is founded on exclusion. Violence and racism are constitutionally enshrined in state authority. There is, as Marx and Engels learned from the Paris Commune, no point in trying to lay hold

of the ready-made state machinery in order to wield it for emancipatory purposes. The bourgeois state *must* be abolished, its system of laws and rights overthrown. Ultimately the new revolutionary horizon is, Robinson agrees with Agamben here, defined by the concept of destitution. There are, however, crucial differences between their respective understandings of what 'destitution' means.

Robinson's notion of destituent power differs from Agamben's mainly in the way it posits the confrontation with power itself. Firstly, whereas Agamben seemingly postpones this confrontation indefinitely – relaying the final reckoning with power to what he enigmatically describes as 'the coming politics', a sort of messianic conception of time and rupture – Robinson argues that this revolutionary break is already well underway in the streets, marked by the sustained if necessarily fragmented popular revolt in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Secondly, Robinson argues that Agamben's theory of destitution – according to which any power 'overthrown by violence will rise again in another form, in the



incessant, inevitable dialectic between constituent and constituted power' – amounts to a form of philosophical defeatism. Agamben places little hope in violent insurrections and revolt, which he regards as half measures that risk affirming and reinstating constituted power. Rather than seeking a violent confrontation with power, Agamben emphasises strategies of flight and desertion. But Agamben's politics of desertion, Robinson argues, 'cannot satisfy his own self-imposed requirement' for a purely destituent potential and must therefore be 'complemented with a strategy of destitution as destruction.' Robinson's view of destitution, in other words, is one which reclaims the revolutionary initiative.

It is not hard to imagine dismissals of *The Revolt* as a form of romantic anti-capitalism or left communist infantile disorder. Those more inclined towards Leninism would no doubt object that the author is high on spontaneity and chaos, and that 'dstitution as destruction' is no viable revolutionary strategy. Actual revolutions have historically succeeded because of centralised mass organisations, strict Party discipline and inspirational political leadership. Journalist Vincent Bevins' book *If We Burn: The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution* (2023), for instance, argues that the lesson from the 2010s is that the riot tends to wear itself out before it amounts to anything like a revolution.

From this perspective, the contemporary left's incapacity to organise and mobilise in any effective way today, beyond the momentary chaos of the mass uprising, is essentially due to a crisis of leadership. For someone like Robinson, however, this idea of leadership as applied to the major waves of Black-led revolts in the US is but 'a figment of the white-liberal imagination'. There is no revolutionary leadership above and distinct from those fighting it out in the streets, not least because almost every Black revolutionary leader ever was either disappeared or brutally murdered. Besides:

After half a century without a figurehead in the front, the Black youth has shown the whole country that they are more than capable of setting their own path and directing their own initiatives. They have demonstrated to us a dynamism that can never be reduced to a homogeneous mass following any one authoritative voice. Paradoxically, it is the entire spectrum of the Black revolt in the streets that can be identified as leaderless 'leaders,' since they have shown everyone else what it means to free yourself.

In that sense, *The Revolt* is a non-didactic book, deeply sceptical of any avant-gardist claims to revolutionary authority and leadership, its authorial voice echoing instead Marx and Engels when they claimed in the *Communist Manifesto* to have 'no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.'

Looking back at the first weeks of the George Floyd uprisings, Robinson recalls how 'a Black avant-garde' acted as a catalyst for what quickly became a 'wildly multi-ethnic uprising'. On this view, to take part in an avant-garde movement means stoking the flames of revolt, and, in so doing, 'forsaking the lineage of whiteness' that is implicit in the idea of revolutionary leadership. In Robinson's account, the figure of the avant-garde reemerges from the fog of art history to reclaim its original significance as those troops positioned at the front line. Shifting abruptly from questions of cultural production to revolt, Robinson notes: 'I use the term *avant-garde* in a more specific sense. There were no leaders. We were not leaders of the revolt. We were the avant-garde who spearheaded it: we set it off, we initiated it.'

Though Guy Debord is one of Robinson's key interlocutors, and the book would certainly qualify as 'situationist' in the best possible (or least horrible) meaning of that term, *The Revolt* has no particular truck with art history and its misplaced libidinal investments in the figure of the avant-garde. And yet there is a sense in which the book stands as a tombstone for Peter Bürger's influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), which famously projected its disappointed revolutionary hopes post-68 back onto the historical avant-garde – Dada and Surrealism in particular – and its imagined unique capacity to attack the foundations of bourgeois society and revolutionise life itself.

The problem with Bürger's theory, of course, was that its supposed revolutionary subject remained tied to the bourgeoisie by a golden umbilical cord, strangling any true revolutionary initiative. By contrast, the Black avant-garde – consisting, in Robinson's telling, of 'former African slaves and their ancestors [who] have been the avant-garde of *everything* in this country ... there's no culture in America, in this American wasteland, without us' – has nothing to lose but its chains. Robinson's is a theory of the avant-garde, then, only insofar as it is none.

Anyone who wants to think seriously about over-

throwing capitalism must reckon with the institution of private property and its potential destruction. Alongside recent titles like *The Concept of Property in Kant, Fichte and Hegel* (2023) by Jacob Blumenfeld and Daniel Loick's *The Abuse of Property* (2023), *The Revolt* forms part of a critical philosophical re-examination of property and its sacrosanct status within bourgeois society. 'Whitey loves property', Robinson remarks, and ponders why property seemingly 'has a special kind of sanctity or prestige in America.' 'If you've ever rioted in another country, it's much easier because people just don't care about windows as much.'



One way to account for whitey's obsession with his property might be, as Robinson argues, due to 'the fact that it was once alive. We had living, walking, breathing property.' In the US American mind, private property retains this deep-seated affective and psycho-social dimension inextricably tied to the phantasy of racist mastery and ownership of other people. An affront to property, then, is essentially an assault on the owner's personal dignity and subjecthood, an attack on what constitutes 'whitey' in the core of his petty bourgeois being.

Robinson notes, however, how the cultural sanctity

of property holds less of a spell on parts of the younger disenfranchised generation Z, as evidenced by the sheer destructive powers unleashed in the course of US riots and uprisings since George Floyd. Beyond a healthy disrespect for private property, many have even developed an almost instinctive hatred of cops premised on the understanding that cops, as the defenders of a racialised property regime, are their class enemy: 'There's a small step from recognizing that the cops protect the property to "Let's go after the property itself".'

I fundamentally share Robinson's view that any left strategy today must take aim at destroying the institution of property, which includes accepting and defending sabotage, vandalism, and other forms of material damage in the service of the revolution. It is admittedly hard not to get swept up in the revolutionary fervour of Robinson's prose: I revel in phantasies of property destruction, burning Waymos and unmarked ICE vehicles pulsing black smoke against a deep red horizon. But *The Revolt* also alerts me to the limits of my acquired political intellect, which prompts me to think 'realistically' in terms of the seizure of state power, the party-form, non-reformist reforms, and so on. I call up my Marxist superego, but all I hear is a long beep, as if someone tried to call up Kautsky in another century and left the phone off the hook.

And yet if I listen closely I can make out a cacophony of competing voices saying things like: don't be seduced by these savage thoughts. Property is a *social relation*, not a collection of things that can be destroyed at will. Radical slogans like 'abolish property' might sound sexy, but they are not meant to be taken literally as in *actually* destroying things – smashing windows, burning cars, looting or fighting it out with cops on the streets. The question of violence and the right to revolt requires philosophical balance and an admission of ethical complexity and nuance, not blind partisanship. But what if the demand for 'complexity and nuance' in moral judgment is simply a way of preserving the status quo, shifting the burden of explanation onto those who are already weighed down? What if condemning violence in freedom struggles from California to Khan Yunis, on abstract moral grounds, ultimately puts us on the side of the oppressor?

All this, of course, brings us squarely back to the cursed trolley example, which presupposes a reasonable philosophical subject imagined as universal and non-situated: a moral arbiter draped in a veil of white ignor-

ance. Rejecting this fiction, Robinson's philosophy of revolt ultimately sets the trolley itself ablaze and lets it run its course. The least we can do, as philosophers, is to

stop acting like moral magistrates and get the fuck out of the way.

Dominique Routhier

Erotic worldmaking

Alexander Stoffel, *Eros and Empire: The Transnational Struggle for Sexual Freedom in the United States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025). 276pp., £50.69 hb., 978 1 50364 166 2

In his rich and generative book *Eros and Empire: The Transnational Struggle for Sexual Freedom in the United States*, Alexander Stoffel offers a new transnational reading of twentieth-century queer activist movements in the United States and develops the concept of *queer worldmaking* based on these analyses. The book is several things at once, which is one of its big strengths: a historical materialist study of queer movements, a queer Marxist engagement with the US state and US empire, an intervention in debates about methods and perspectives in queer studies and a contribution to the study of counterhegemonic global relations. Stoffel studies the gay liberation movement of the sixties, black lesbian feminist movements of the seventies and AIDS activism of the eighties and nineties in the core of empire. He suggests that transnational connections to other movements and organisers, as well as transnational analyses of US interventions abroad and the structures of sexual relations and hierarchies within the US were decisive for these movements. Stoffel convincingly shows that each one of them cannot be fully understood in their radicalness and reach through the domestic frame, which has been the usual frame of analysis thus far.

Stoffel locates the three movements within US empire and understands them as having arisen under 'successive waves of capitalist expansion', as suggested by David Harvey, characterised by post-war Fordism and post-seventies neoliberal capitalism. Specifically, he is concerned with the contradictions of the bourgeois state and the connected nation-state system, the boundaries of which are constantly transgressed by capital. The three movements need to be studied with a transnational perspective not only because the conditions of their emergence were transnational, but also because they 'share

the conviction that the pursuit of sexual pleasure, erotic enjoyment, and bodily self-determination are central to the cause of revolutionary transformation on a *world scale*'. For Stoffel the radical sexual politics of the parts of the gay liberationists, black lesbian feminists and AIDS activists he studies are an intervention against the state's central institutions such as the family, monogamy and the privatisation of social relations. This is what Stoffel understands as erotic worldmaking, the concept at the heart of the project: 'the transnational project of overcoming the bourgeois sexual relations that were central to the reproduction of United States empire through an erotic intervention into its social forms'.

Applying a transnational lens to the gay liberationist movements, as Stoffel does in his first chapter, tells a radically different story about the split within the movement. This counters the common narrative of a split between a more assimilationist fraction, as represented for example by the Gay Activist Alliance, and a more radical fraction, with such groups as the Gay Liberation Front and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. The latter, according to Stoffel, are too often seen as mere outbursts, which then gradually integrated into the rights-oriented assimilationist projects sidelining transnational connections. Stoffel argues that the more fundamental split was between a gay nationalism and a gay internationalism in the context of and connected to Third World radicalism, the Black Power movement and anti-war protests. Stoffel shows that for the internationalists, struggles at home and abroad that targeted the nuclear household and the position of the homosexual as an outlaw through the nation-state form were connected. Departing from the thought and action of figures such as the Italian activist and theorist Mario Mieli and the Aus-