



Verso: Radical Thinkers II

Pulling up the roots

Verso: Radical Thinkers II

Pulling up the roots

Introduction

Verso's neat Radical Thinkers series brings together some of the best of the last century's thinkers in a handy, heady package, aiming to popularise radical thought for a wider contemporary audience. The reviews below are of books in the current, second series, which is soon to be followed by a third.

Featuring the work of leading lights such as Adorno, Eagleton and Zizek, this second cycle is an excellent resource for anyone who wants a thorough overview of the thinking that has shaped our times, or sought to: the focus is very much on on left-leaning theorists. In fact, the series raises the question of what makes a radical thinker, of what makes for interesting and innovative theory.

Culture Wars' coverage of these books was born of a desire to engage with – and criticise – the often difficult and technical work of important and influential leftist writers. Rather than a hot-headed approach, we've been concerned with reflecting on the issues raised, putting these thinkers and theories in context and drawing out how they better illuminate the current cultural and political climate, in a bid to 'pull up the roots' of the big issues.

Features

Essay – What is a Radical Thinker? p.4

How should thinkers balance intellectual integrity with the need to be understood; how should radicalism express itself in order to be received positively; and if the ultimate aim is doing something, how can theories become manifestos?

Sarah Boyes

Essay – What makes a Radical Reader? p.6

Rather than addressing a movement, radical thinkers since the 1990s have addressed other thinkers who are disoriented by the demise of the left. If 'being radical' had once been shorthand for being on the left, this meaning was now all but redundant, and the term was up for grabs. It still is.

Dolan Cummings

Reviews

Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists by Raymond Williams p.8

Williams' critique of cultural pessimism remains relevant given the still current trend to disavow the future and its alternative potential, and to categorise new technologies alternately as both determinants of social change and threats to established artistic, now 'classicalised', forms.

Hugh Ortega Breton

Fragments by Jean Baudrillard **p.10**

It is always tempting to imagine Jean Baudrillard preparing to write a book by sharpening an axe, swinging it into his computer monitor, then gluing the shattered pieces to a celluloid film reel, projecting it to a crowded room full of admirers and absolutely forbidding them to take it seriously.

Sam Haddow

Emancipation(s) by Ernesto Laclau **p.12**

The real disappointment for this reader is not the rarefied language, but the fact that Laclau rejects the possibility of formulating the Enlightenment notion of a totalising universal identity, and with it washes down the drain any project of uniting the world under a single banner of rationality.

Sarah Boyes

On the Shores of Politics by Jacques Rancière **p.14**

Rancière's aim is to criticise the post-political consensus that has replaced yesterday's battles. Some genuinely winning and original insights come through, but beneath the arch-theorising, Rancière's vision of politics amounts to little more than a tired fantasy of liberal pluralism.

Philip Cunliffe

Strategy of Deception by Paul Virilio **p.16**

There is no consistent argument in any article, let alone any broader theme developed across the collection as a whole. Instead, it is a jumble of categories and neologisms ('globalitarian') with no analytical heft, mixed in with portentous quasi-mystical rambling about technology.

Philip Cunliffe

Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx Louis Althusser **p.17**

Whether one subscribes to the now-deceased Althusser's now-deceased project or not, his attempt to identify what makes a thinker radical deserves serious consideration; and the book is indeed ultimately worthy of inclusion in this Verso series.

Alex Hochuli

Late Marxism: Adorno or the persistence of the dialectic Fredric Jameson **p.19**

The problem with using Adorno to reveal the alienating praxes at work within capitalist social relations, is that it's not really capitalism that's the problem for Adorno. The 'reification' discerned under capitalism is ultimately absorbed back into what Adorno perceives as a far longer history of reification per se.

Tim Black

What is a radical thinker?

Pulling up the roots

Sarah Boyes

The recent case of five British Muslims jailed for downloading extremist material is a disturbing example of how we imagine and deal with, 'radical thinkers' today. Whilst many things are casually described as radical: ideas, sports, razors, flowery flares from the sixties; in a political sense it seems only jihadists (or even potential jihadists) aiming to establish a Sharia state warrant the name; but surely not all radicals are Muslims and not all radicals want to blow themselves up.

So what is a radical thinker? The word comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning 'root': it means to cut to the fundamentals, to advocate an overhaul of rudimentary principles to 'protract thorough political or social reform' (OED, 1998). A radical thinker, then, is anybody engaged with the very core of her material, who challenges and changes the key beliefs we all have about the way the world is – and should be. And as for the often forgotten flipside of thinking – action – radical thinkers develop and propagate practical methods of challenging and changing the status quo. By questioning deeply ingrained platitudes about ourselves and society, radical thinkers force us to rehash who we think we are and how we want society to be.

And yet there lies the problem. Many of the theorists selected for this second series of *Radical Thinkers* published by Verso have been charged with everything from obscurantism, irrelevance, and banality to sheer bloody-mindedness. In many ways they have heralded and developed the very ideas that seem to make any positive project for grand social change inconceivable – postmodernism, relativism, and particularity. Bereft of a common subject, theirs has often been a radicalism of method – Laclau anchors his theories in impenetrable Saussurian semantics; Baudrillard seeks to explain the world by reducing it to signs – rather than substance. An obsession with technicalities, to some extent necessary, means the possibility of reaching a wider audience to stimulate action is woefully diminished. But how should thinkers balance intellectual integrity with the need to be understood; how should radicalism express itself in order to be received positively; and if the ultimate aim is doing something, how can theories become manifestos?

One of the main ideas running through these texts is the doctrine of multiculturalism (developed most strongly by Will Kymlicka), an endorsement of cultural diversity that sees each person as ultimately 'culturally embedded', ultimately alone and ultimately unable to identify with and understand others. Different cultural groups have distinct moral values, religious ideas and political persuasions which make up complete 'world views', so there are few – either political or social – collective principles to challenge or rework. While a multicultural society is rich with ideas, beliefs, texts and artworks, if we privilege group identities – or particularisms – over universal rights and citizenship more generally, this leaves little space for the traditional notion of a radical thinker and radical action. It's not about changing the world anymore, because we all live in different worlds (not one world; more sensibly, six billion of them). And existing only as part of mutually exclusive groups with mutually exclusive ways of engaging with the world, it's hard to see how any one issue can affect everybody, and how radical thinkers can attract enough support ever to challenge society as a whole.

Nevertheless, some issues do interest and affect large sections of the British population – climate change to name a high-profile obsession; terrorism another; then the recent furore over rubbish bin collection; the ongoing thrash-out over primary and secondary school syllabuses and university fees; immigration laws and of course, taxes. But apart from the first two (mainly media-spun, celebrity-guzzling projects), how do the others appeal? Rubbish

bins, we're told, are the problem of local councils; school syllabuses matter only to teachers and parents; immigration laws are lethal ammunition for the far right and the mainstream is afraid to talk about them; whereas tax, a friend tells me, 'is going to be big' but in the absence of the ideological conflict that used to shape the issue, it is confined to policy documents and economics departments. And none of these bitty issues provide enough meat for radical thinkers concerned with change on a massive scale to get their sharpened theoretical teeth into.

Perhaps climate change and terrorism will have to be ripe for radical thinkers after all, but that will mean changing the way we think about these issues rather than simply climbing on a bandwagon. It will also mean reaching a wider audience. While radical thinkers expound on theory at carefully selected events like the Institute of Contemporary Arts talk series run in tandem with the release of *Radicals II*, more open public spaces often become monopolised by nitwits who simply recycle conventional wisdom. And whilst academics are attacked for their impenetrable prose, celebrities on the climate change circuit similarly co-opt terminology that marks them out as part of the in crowd. Hence 'carbon footprint' and 'carbon thumbprint'. With the terms of debate fixed, any dissenting view is difficult to formulate, let alone understand. Without an actor's charm and the right lingo, it is hard to make it to the A-listers' podium. And challenging the official line on either of these matters doesn't help either, as recent censorious activity reminds us. Genuinely radical thinking does not attract immediate approval, but can be deeply unsettling, especially to a conservative society.

As the case of British Muslims jailed for storing 'extremist material' on their computers illustrates, what sends shivers down the proverbial spine is the notion of 'extremism' itself, which is apparently a force in its own right rather than having to do with any particular ideas. BBC Online's headline reads, 'Students who descended into extremism' [my italics]. This implies extremism of any sort is the last desperate refuge of an emotionally weak and intellectually crippled mind. The part of the article subtitled, 'online radicalisation' implies any radical must have been brainwashed and is a passive victim rather than having made a sane and rational choice. Looking for a more satisfying explanation of radical Islamic thought and of why some young Muslims find it attractive becomes unnecessary, especially when the youngest defendant claimed his attraction to radical Islam, downloading videos of suicide bombers and reading 'terror-related material', was because he had been lonely and depressed. To echo the more sympathetic tone of the news reports: poor boy.

A deluge of articles and reports has descended recently, considering how we should stamp out extremism (read: jihadism); media mechanisms have mobilised to shout down radicals (read: violent Muslim radicals); everybody has knocking knees and nobody asks: how can we both lament the loss of genuinely radical thought and make out radicalism is a dirty word?

Whatever happened in the above case the message is clear: extremism means killing people and radicalism must not be tolerated. Perhaps it's worth pausing to consider the illustrious history of coveted British radicals – Thomas Paine with his revolutionary Rights of Man in 1791; the academics in Verso's *Radical Thinkers II* series, including the innocuous Terry Eagleton and Zizek the cult-classic; Adam Smith the free marketeer recently installed on the back of a twenty pound note; Charles Bradlaugh who successfully campaigned for atheists to become MPs; and broadening out, Martin Luther, Ghandi... Whilst radical thinkers historically have not always had their praises sung by the grateful emancipated, and many enjoyed violent tactics, our understanding of radicalism and its many methods should not be constrained by its current high-profile expression in certain strains of Islam.

So where does this leave the notion of a contemporary radical thinker? – needing to be radically refreshed. Whilst it's no good to try and fit an outmoded idea of what radical thinking means into contemporary society, or to advocate a straightforward regression to past modes of activism, neither does it do to have a simplistic understanding of both radicalism and extremism. If anything, the history of radical thought shows radical thinkers are always radical in a particular context, and it's possible to be a political radical in many ways, about many things. It's not just platitudes that need to be pulled up and replaced, but the very notion of being a radical concerned with action in contemporary society.

What is a radical reader?

Theory in a pre-political age

Dolan Cummings

Karl Marx wrote that ‘theory becomes a material force when it grips the masses’. Today, theory grips only graduate students, and is not a material force. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that ‘theory’ is in the grip of the academy, detached from political life and the possibility of transforming the world. People still have ideas, of course, and to some extent these determine how they behave and how society functions. And scholars still try to understand and critique society in various ways. But the idea that a set of ideas might ‘grip the masses’ and inspire them to change the world is arguably more alien to Western culture today than at any time in the past 150 years.

In this context, Verso’s Radical Thinkers series is an enigmatic initiative. The question of what radical thinking is, and what it is for, is in fact discussed in the books as well as being something to ask about them. Indeed, many of the texts were originally published around the time of the end of the Cold War, a time of crisis for the political left, and, less obviously, the right. Rather than addressing a movement, they addressed other radical thinkers who were perplexed and disoriented by the demise of movements of the left in particular – the organised working class, and anti-imperialist movements. If ‘being radical’ had once been shorthand for supporting these things, this meaning was now all but redundant, and the term was up for grabs. It still is.

As Sarah Boyes argues, there is a certain ambiguity about the idea of radicalism today: the term ‘radical’ retains a glamour that appeals to advertisers as well as political progressives, but at the same time there is anxiety about ‘radicalisation’, which is becoming synonymous with Islamist extremism. The enthusiasm is nostalgic, the wariness paranoid. The Verso series errs on the side of nostalgia, which is surely preferable. The audience is likely to be mostly graduate students, but one would have to be even more nostalgic – for the days of workers’ education and Welsh miners learning German to read Marx in the original – to object to that. The important question is what readers – whoever they happen to be, and whatever their reasons for picking up these books – will get from the series.

All of the thinkers included are left-wing in the sense that they are not right-wing – if you were so inclined you could plausibly publish neoliberal, neoconservative, or even quasi-fascist texts, not to mention Islamist ones (Verso has in fact published the writings of Osama bin Laden), under the rubric of ‘radical thinkers’ – but there is little more ideological cohesion to the series than that. The omission of ‘other voices’ is not in itself a bad thing: keeping an open mind to new ideas doesn’t mean affecting a know-nothing neutrality. But the implication, intended or otherwise, that the thinkers who are included are all on the same side, ‘our side’, is more problematic. Thinkers as diverse as Theodor Adorno and Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek, could only be considered part of a single movement in times of peculiar political drift, without the benefit of the intellectual clarity that comes with political engagement. It would be a mistake, then, to look for a common sensibility among these thinkers, and to call it ‘radicalism’. This would amount to a phony partisanship, floating free of real social divisions, actual or potential.

In his book *Public Intellectuals*, the American judge and conservative thinker Richard Posner describes how certain books preach to the choir rather than setting out to persuade readers of an argument. He calls these books ‘solidarity goods’: they affirm what readers already believe, and sometimes even foster the sense of being part of a movement. This is true even when there is no meaningful political movement to speak of. It is telling that such books are especially common in the US today, catering to both ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ tastes, despite

the fact that by 20th century European standards there is a remarkable degree of consensus in American politics and society. Partisanship, while often bitter, is less ideological than temperamental, even aesthetic. The Democrat thinker George Lakoff describes it in terms of conflicting attitudes to child-rearing: stern father versus nurturing parent. This kind of politics is about 'values' rather than ideas.

Most of the Radical Thinkers books are frankly too hard-going to function on this level. No doubt their silver covers will look snazzy on the radical bookshelf, but there are few nods and chuckles to be had in the reading. It's serious intellectual engagement or nothing. Indeed, if there is vanity in the books' appeal, it is precisely in their difficulty. But the ambition to grapple with difficult theory is no bad thing. Things are rarely as simple as they appear, and it often takes a good deal of abstraction to get to grips with social and political developments. While many 'radical thinkers' are criticised for their obscurity and pretension, sometimes quite rightly, it would be philistine to insist that all theory should be easily-grasped. It is up to readers to work at books like this and to discuss and argue about them, considering how they relate to the world beyond their silver covers.

Culture Wars' reviews of the books in this second series of Radical Thinkers offer mixed assessments: unsurprisingly some of the thinkers have more to tell us than others. Considered as a whole, these books neither speak to a political movement nor offer comfort to readers, but individually they are variously stimulating, enlightening and infuriating. Rather than supplying all the answers to the perplexing questions thrown up by politics today, it is to be hoped that the series will help inspire a new generation of radical thinkers, and political actors, to think anew. That could make the difference between the post-political world we seem to inhabit, and the pre-political one we might live in.

Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists

Raymond Williams

Hugh Ortega Breton

This collection of essays and lectures from the 1980s foregrounds Williams' concern with elucidating the material, historical and social relationships that shape cultural and other forms of social life, and are given expression in variously specific forms through culture. He takes as his subject of critique the fluidity of the notions of 'modernism' (and 'postmodernism') and the equally soap-like term 'avant-garde', providing a detailed history of twentieth century art and media. These vague subjects are perfect as Williams' concern is for specificity, dynamism and social context. In equal turns, Williams deals with literature, cinema and attitudes towards technology and social change.

Williams narrows down modernism to its differentiating or fracturing character - a proliferation of groups developing out of one another, each claiming uniqueness - and noting how this anti-bourgeois 'movement', if it can be sensibly called that, was perfectly suited to assimilation within the market, because of its structure and its affirmation of subjectivism and formalism. 'Cinema & Socialism' explores this character in relation to the radical potential of film and the shifting meaning of naturalism throughout film and theatrical history.

One recurring theme is that of transgressing or crossing boundaries, a 'mobility across frontiers', whether across the often unhelpful boundaries of the traditional disciplines that study culture, or the movement of people to developing metropolitan centres in the Western world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the artistic innovators of this period were immigrants, and their subjective experience of strangeness as mysterious and, more importantly, their experience of community as first and foremost based upon their shared choice of medium or practice, shaped the innovations in art that they produced, and its development according to distinct cultural forms.

One is impressed by Williams' historical empathy: his ability to place himself within a previous set of social relations and circumstances that he is analysing and view them as if he is contemporaneous with them. This is no doubt due to his scholarly command of Western twentieth century history, and firm grasp of the historical imagination. His style ranges from dry-academic to polemical and rousing, but the historicity of his writing gives it a flow throughout. The book's fluency, however, is at times hampered by its form: many of the sentences are long and clumsy, and this makes an already demanding and challenging piece of cultural-historical theory very hard to stay with at times. For these reasons, this is not a read for the faint-hearted, but it is worth the effort. The book ends with a much more fluent transcription of a conversation between Raymond Williams and Edward Said, which shows linkages in their work and clarifies some of the points made in the earlier part of the book.

Some parts of Williams' critique are perhaps now outdated, in particular a lament about the growing dependence of cultural organisations and mass media on sponsorship. While in some cases his concerns appear to have been proven, he implies an overly deterministic, Chomskian model of the influence of capital, and does not consider the possibility that private companies may be able to form progressive constellations with cultural producers without restricting the political potential of their work, and even facilitating dynamism and creativity.

Williams' historical knowledge of literature, cultural studies and the avant-garde is presented with a deftness and expertise which is still unfortunately unusual in the academe. Consistently and methodically, he is able to elucidate the connections between deep 'structures of feeling',

economic and political processes and the specific formation of artistic trends within literature, the avant-garde art scene, the development of cultural studies and individual consciousness. In his arguments on modernism and the avant-garde Williams regularly refers to the basic outline of the Formalist approach that became fashionable in cultural studies and the study of cultural forms generally in the 1950s and again to some extent in the 1970s. He uses basic Formalism to elucidate an extensive social analysis moving from formal analysis of cultural works, first explicated by the Vitebsk group (Medvedev, Voloshinov and Bakhtin) in the late 1920s. This involves not theory, (which he considers easy in comparison) but analytical work, 'to see how, in the very detail of composition, a certain social structure, a certain history, discloses itself' (Williams 2007:185).

Williams' critique of cultural pessimism (from *Culture & Technology*, written in 1983) remains relevant given the still current trend to disavow the future and its alternative potential, and to categorise new technologies alternately as both determinants of social change and threats to established artistic, now 'classicalised', forms. This essay, alongside others, provides a useful history of the development of mass communications, and how this has influenced forms of popular culture and produced defensive attitudes from established artists and institutions in the twentieth century. Williams makes note of our apparent predilection for drama dealing with fragmentation and loss of identity, and the naturalisation of competitive violence in popular crime, espionage and intrigue novels, movies and TV programmes. This is connected to the modern experience of dislocation and alienation of the late nineteenth century in the burgeoning imperial centres of Berlin, Vienna, Paris, London and New York.

Not only is *Politics of Modernism* an invaluable resource for students of genealogy, social and historical analysis, 20th century cultural history, and for scholars of all cultural forms, it also serves as a corrective or reminder to smug, self-defined fissiparous radicals (and there are many in academia as well as outside of it), who embody and reinforce the restrictive practices of the old guard they claim to be surpassing, because they unconsciously remain trapped within the same frames of thinking, and equally importantly feeling.

Sam Haddow

The bulk of this review was written shortly before Baudrillard's death on 6 March, 2007. I contemplated a subsequent re-draft, but reasoned that in any critique of Baudrillard, the hyper-real will inevitably secede chronology, therefore any attempt to destabilise 'flux' with 'actuality' would completely defeat the object of the exercise. If one were inclined to be slightly cruel (and I have so far encountered several people who were) then Baudrillard's death itself is 'hyper-real', unable to be proved as an event beyond the flux. Converting this observation away from its vindictive genesis, the majority of us will remember Baudrillard's work, rather than the man - his death is therefore negotiable because his work shows no signs of being forgotten.

It is always tempting to imagine Jean Baudrillard preparing to write a book by sharpening an axe, swinging it into his computer monitor, then gluing the shattered pieces to a celluloid film reel, projecting it to a crowded room full of admirers and absolutely forbidding them to take it seriously. With *Fragments*, this may not be terribly far from the truth. A seemingly random collection of rants, observations and theories whose structure affords no over arching argument or narrative, *Fragments* covers subjects ranging from automatic cash dispensers to the degeneration of an erotic statue in the gardens of Luxembourg, which celebrates a man whom Baudrillard muses may have invented the dildo. *Fragments* is not, in short, an easy book to get through. Stylistically, it is a book to dip in and out of, perhaps one with which to open a page at random and digest a Baudrillardian maxim for the day. Quite how one would turn a sardonic 'fragment' such as 'In the empty space of desire, the seats are expensive' into a motto with which to face the daily grind, however, is slightly beyond me.

Whilst this isn't going to imbue the book with a particularly strong commercial bent, I don't imagine that will bother either the writer or publisher. Baudrillard has firmly established himself as 'postmodernity's quintessential theorist', and staying true to form, seems to have busied himself ever since with attacking his own importance. For example, in one of the early fragments of the book, he spits 'credulity is so widespread... Even an entirely made-up quotation from Ecclesiastes receives official corroboration by the fact of its being published.' His referral back to the erroneous 'Bible' quotation at the opening of his seminal essay 'The Precession of Simulacra' indicates, rather maddeningly, that there is no way a reader can adopt a stance on Baudrillard that Baudrillard will approve of. If we dismiss him, we vindicate his assertions of human ignorance. If we agree with him, we just piss him off even more. Which is heartening, in a way - whatever this review says, he would never agree with it, so I'm pretty much free to write whatever I want.

And, whilst my objectivity is somewhat compromised by being an *a priori* admirer, I choose to see this as Baudrillard's intention. Endlessly pursuing his thoughts through intractable observations with no fixed parameters beyond the need for flux, this book seems more by-product than product, an incidental vapour trail left behind on another furious voyage into a world that has long since destroyed its foundations. Every object or artefact available to human perception is, to Baudrillard at least, a mask to cover artifice. Unveiling this artifice will lead no closer to any objective 'truth' - 'truth' itself is in all probability a blasphemous concept in the world we are presented with here. The placement of the reader is therefore entirely at the reader's own discretion - by eliminating the mechanics of conventional 'argument', Baudrillard has created a wholly autonomous text that refutes all didacticism. The reader is offered no safety net upon which to construct their reactions, and subsequently any reaction they have will be the product of nothing more than individual choice.

I realise this probably all sounds a little too positive for a text written by an 'apocalyptic' theorist (thank you, blurb), but then I for one have never found Baudrillard particularly depressing. His identification of flux as the only constant within contemporary perspective has always appeared to me as an enabler of epistemological freedom - the 'desert of the real,' being divorced from its role as the progenitor of any universal 'truths' is as much a playground as it is a dungeon. Which leads me on to my final point - *Fragments* is, in places, hysterically funny. This is true whether we are being treated to a rare moment of Baudrillardian whimsy - 'Can we imagine a video dispenser which would identify everyone by their smile, and not by their code or their fingerprints?' - or observing a caustic attack on the atavistic qualities of insurance companies:

Rival advertisements for insurance companies. We assure you:

From the cradle to the grave
From the womb to the tomb
From the sperm to the worm
From erection to resurrection

We are witnessing, above all, a man rambling at us with his thoughts on a world that he is still not comfortable with, but familiar enough now that he can see the funny side.

Fragments is not a book that will please everyone. Its style is experimental, which some people will see as pretentious; it makes no promises beyond 'doing what it says on the tin', and is likely to enrage some admirers of Baudrillard's earlier work, coming to look for the next vitriolic dissection of postmodern society. I for one, however, thoroughly enjoyed it, and it would seem to me that the phrase 'I for one' is the most appropriate, if not the only way, of responding to this book.

In memory of Jean Baudrillard, 1929-2007 (?)

Emancipation(s)

Ernesto Laclau

Sarah Boyes

It is fashionable to dismiss thinkers who claim to understand the world in terms of Theory (of the capital cross-bone 'T' variety) as being wilfully oblique, inaccessible and uninspired: such was the response of Ziauddin Sardar to the first batch of books in Verso's 'Radical Thinkers' series.

You can imagine him responding in much the same way to the sequel run, 'Radical Thinkers II (Return of the Radicals)' - and to Laclau in particular. Obsessing about ontological differences, the antagonisms and exclusions of identity and the logic of incarnation looks like the embarrassing attention-seeking of an intellectual relic. And some would go further: Theory, it is said, is most probably dead, along with God, the subject, and history, all fraternising in some defunct Platonic heaven. So how are we to make sense of Radicals II?

It's telling that the first two reviews of *Emancipation(s)* spat up by Google are in pay-per-view journals, academic hangouts rather than the public sphere. Any other information (well into the third pages of search returns) reads suspiciously like a publisher's blurb. And the blurbs are unenlightening: we learn Laclau is an 'influential theorist' who makes a 'startling argument' about how the changes of the late twentieth century have transformed Enlightenment notions of 'emancipation'. Apparently, *Emancipation(s)* is 'highly recommended' by *Fortnight Philosophy*. I've never heard of *Fortnight Philosophy*; nor has Google and nor has the British Library catalogue. It sounds suspiciously like philosophy that doesn't happen.

Emancipation(s) itself is a svelte book of seven essays bound like the other 'Radical Thinkers' books in a kitsch silver sleeve. The essays, written between 1989 and 1995,

should be seen as provisional explorations rather than as fully-fledged theoretical constructs, as answers to the ethical and political imperative of the intervening in debates about transformations which were taking place before our eyes.

However difficult the prose, then, Laclau is writing from a sense of political obligation to respond to unfolding events. And the events of that time were indeed transformations: the restructuring of the world order after the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the civil war in former Yugoslavia, the rise of racist political parties in Western Europe, the end of apartheid in South Africa... all, says Laclau, characterised by being the 'rebellions of various particularisms'. Unfortunately, he swiftly undermines his former heroic statement by acknowledging even further the essays' 'ad hoc character, their inevitable repetitions, and their lacunae... I hope, anyway, that they can be useful in throwing a certain light on some of the more pressing political problems of our time'. He sounds like an old scholar performing the parlour trick of false modesty, of pre-emptive defence against possible criticism, and this sort of shenanigans, I suspect, has kept many an academic publishing for years. But Laclau at least partially redeems himself, conceding that it is 'for the reader to judge what is achieved through this kind of approach'.

The real disappointment for this reader is not the language, but the fact that Laclau rejects the possibility of formulating the Enlightenment notion of a totalising universal identity, and with it washes down the drain any project of uniting the world under a single banner of rationality. Thankfully, he also rejects postmodernism's view of the world as a place populated by particular identity groups with no hope of commonality. Instead, he proposes a radically alternative analysis of the relationship between universal and particular, namely, marriage: they can't live with each other, can't live without each other, 'universality is incommensurable with any particularity but cannot, however, exist apart from the particular' (p34). And this is

pronounced the paradox whose 'non-solution is the very precondition of democracy' (in analytic philosophy they simply call them 'immanent universals').

The political bite of the analysis is severe. The concept of human rights developed during the French Revolution was based on implicit assumptions about the homogeneity of the society at that time. But today, we have no homogenous society in this sense, since this would need the universal notion Laclau has just rejected. 'Liberal democratic theory and institutions' must now be deconstructed before human rights can be had by all groups of society, but about how this deconstruction is to take place, Laclau remains eerily vague.

[I]f democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation....[this is the] final failure of society to constitute itself as a society.

Hence, I suppose, the existence of hideously legislative social policies to keep these competing groups in check. And it seems that *Emancipation(s)* is itself an expression of this idea: each essay asserts its own viewpoint, jostling with the others to be taken seriously, but no clear dominating theory emerges. What results is both dissatisfying and exciting: you know there's not a 'fully-fledged' theory anywhere in *Emancipation(s)* but feel like there almost is. It's this constant teetering on the universal that drives you to distraction, and the fact that I still have the idea of a universal to teeter on probably means I haven't understood a thing Laclau has said, or else that I disagree with him entirely.

Which carries us swiftly on to Sardar's gripe against radical writing's 'rarefied' terminology: it is comforting to suppose that if you don't understand something it's nonsense. Unluckily for Sardar, the charge of rarefied terminology has no charge at all. For instance, most medical-speak is impenetrable to most people, but nobody accuses doctors of semantic fascism. Words and ideas are partners in crime: a rich and nuanced lexis can pick out subtleties of thought and elucidate complex ideas in a way a restricted vocabulary never can. Rather than inaccessibility being 'a direct cause' of the decline of leftist thinking as Sardar claims, it's often the imposition of accessibility that simplifies it to the point of vacuity. If anything, we need a truckload of technical terms in order to make sense of the world. And it's not always easy, and neither should it be, to understand the 'rarefied' terms.

I don't mean to say that being inaccessible makes a theory automatically amazing. A high frequency of technical terminology alone doesn't vindicate Laclau, Adorno or Baudrillard's inclusion in the series; the right question to be asking is, does the terminology do the job? Like Laclau says, it's up to the reader to judge. But if the reader doesn't understand, and perhaps this is what Sardar is getting at, how can he judge the effectiveness of the approach, and if he can't, who can? Just so, it's ultimately up to readers to make the world more accessible to themselves, and not up to the world to make itself more accessible to readers.

No, the real problem with *Emancipation(s)* is not its semantics - it's not that the book is oblique, inaccessible or uninspired - but with the sentiment. It's not enough to have just a 'response' to world-changing events: you need a well-worked out position. If Laclau has a theory, an interpretation of events, a coherent worldview, he should say so, and be prepared to defend it. If he doesn't, I don't want to know about his speculation. It just doesn't do to be so non-committal about the application, and potential, of political theory. Seven half-theories don't amount to one good book.

On the Shores of Politics

Jacques Rancière

Philip Cunliffe

Jacques Rancière, one of the post-Althusserian generation of French philosophers, wrote the four essays that make up this collection at the end of the Cold War (1988-1990). They are: 'The End of Politics or The Realist Utopia', 'The Uses of Democracy', 'The Community of Equals' and 'Democracy Corrected'. Although each of the essays stands alone, many of the themes and arguments overlap. Each essay is an attempt, to a greater or lesser degree, to bring the insights of classical philosophy to bear on that phenomenon variously characterised as the 'end of politics', 'the end of ideology', 'the end of utopia' and so on - by which is meant the end of the sharp ideological battles that dominated Cold War politics. Rancière's aim is to criticise the post-political consensus that has replaced yesterday's battles.

So how successful is the attempt to use classical philosophy to shed light on our post-political era? Rancière has difficulties discussing concrete political events and individuals of the day in the lofty categories of classical philosophy and mythical allusions. Thus in discussing the Chirac-Mitterand rivalry at the end of the Cold War in the first essay, Rancière can only bring himself to allude to the key players: Mitterand is 'the one in whom the "spirit" of the Constitution of our Fifth Republic recognizes the supreme and cardinal virtue, auctoritas' (p9); Le Pen is 'the candidate of "France for the French"' (p23); and (more amusingly from the viewpoint of 2007), Chirac 'the personification of youth, dynamism and production' (p11). The overall effect is unfortunate, as it makes it seem as if Rancière couldn't possibly descend to the vulgar level of actually naming any living politicians, when in fact his discussion of Mitterand's routing of Chirac is insightful and engaging.

Despite the portentous classical allusions and categories, there are some winning and original insights that come through. In 'The Uses of Democracy' for example, Rancière discusses how the dogmatism of the old left has metamorphosed into a debilitating scepticism that serves to buttress the post-political consensus. Rancière sees this scepticism incarnated in the suspicious, lazy mode of critical inquiry whereby high-minded promises or claims (justice, liberty, equality and so on) are compared with the workings of a particular institution, and inevitably found wanting. The thrust of this type of inquiry, Rancière suggests, is less to transform any institutions for the better than to sully the ideal itself. Rancière illustrates the discussion with reference to the reform efforts of educational sociologists who denounced the failure of the Fifth Republic's schooling system to live up to Republican values: 'The work of Bourdieu and Passeron exemplifies this logic, in which the sociologist and the social critic win every round by showing that democracy loses every round.' (p.52). Although Rancière's own discussion of equality is suspect, he is nonetheless right to point out that these supposedly penetrating sceptical inquiries ultimately mirror the archetypal reactionary move, that simply contrasts empirical reality with an ideal or aspiration, in order to throw out the goal itself: 'the counterrevolutionary critique of democracy ... the idea that disharmony between the constitutive forms of a sociopolitical regime signifies ... a fundamental lie.' (p54)

Another particularly striking insight comes from a fascinating discussion of our changing perspectives on time. In the first essay Rancière explores the effects of no longer thinking about the future in terms of utopian possibility. It is not quite that the end of utopia embodies the end of progress, rather it is the end of the 'idea of a yardstick, a telos which served simultaneously to take the measure of the state of politics and give a finality to its forward motion.' Once belief in a substantive vision of political transformation and social transcendence withers, 'faith in the pure form of time [serves] as the last utopia [...] What is heralded ... is a time in which every political commandment will embrace the natural form of "Forward! March!"' (p25) New Labour's slogan in the last British general election - 'Britain: forward, not back' - exemplifies this attitude. The result of this new attitude, Rancière

suggests, is something that is actually more superstitious than any utopian mirages and philosophical schemas, whereby time itself is endowed with almost mystical properties of transformation. 'All we need is time, give us time, clamour all our governments. Of course every government wants to increase its life span. But there is more in this plea: the transfer to time of all utopian powers.' (p25)

As there is no longer any place for human effort in effecting radical social change, the only source of change (and the hope of change) can come from is the spontaneous inertia of accumulated time itself: 'the natural productivity of time ... becomes synonymous with faith in miracles'. (p26). Again, Rancière illustrates this with reference to the marketisation of education, where ideas of qualitative self-transformation are abandoned in favour of qualifications that match the demands of the market: 'giving the young at school qualifications which match the jobs on the market ... posits a utopian equivalence between the biological time of the child's maturing into adulthood and the temporality of the expanding market.' (p26)

These essays were originally published as part of Verso's 'Phronesis' series edited by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who wanted to provide a post-Marxist theoretical base for a post-socialist politics of radical and plural democracy (it is difficult to avoid repeated use of the word 'post' when discussing anything to do with Laclau and Mouffe). The aims of this series are fully on display in Rancière's renunciation of any project of building a radically different society (pp60-61), his suspicion towards the exercise of collective agency and reason (pp82-83), and an inspired characterisation of the power of democracy - but a power whose only value for Rancière is its negativity, its potential to tear up pre-existing arrangements, rather than its power to lay the foundations of a positive new order (pp32-33). Beneath the burnished radical sheen and arch-theorising, Rancière's substantive vision of politics amounts to little more than a tired fantasy of liberal pluralism: a fantasy because it envisages a world where politics is at once lively enough to be absorbing, but also sufficiently diffuse and finely balanced that no one group has any chance of decisively changing the world.

Strategy of Deception

Paul Virilio

Philip Cunliffe

Reading *Strategy of Deception*, one gets the feeling that Paul Virilio is the kind of person who would have been paid gross sums of money to give seminars and talks to management consultants and techies at the height of the dotcom boom. Virilio excels in spattering out ideas and language redolent of the New Age techno-mysticism that prevailed before the crash, when society was supposedly being digitised and reconstituted in the ether of cyberspace.

But if Virilio could be a Silicon Valley guru, this is not to say that *Strategy of Deception* provides us with a snapshot of cyber-theory in the heady days before the crash. Instead, it is mostly a series of newspaper articles that Virilio wrote during and after NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 - a war that was notorious for the grandiloquent claims made for a new era of frictionless information warfare that would minimise 'collateral damage'. Shiny new technologies would result in bloodless warfare to match a pristine new war effort based on values, not national interests. There is much to be said about these claims, and the way in which new military technologies and strategies have been developed to meet new political imperatives.

But instead of telling us anything profound about information technology or warfare, this short book itself reads like the gibberish spat out by frazzled printers, with little more coherence or intelligence than a meaningless morass of ones and zeros. There is no consistent argument in any article, let alone any broader theme developed across the collection as a whole. Instead, it is a jumble of categories and neologisms ('globalitarian') with no analytical heft, mixed in with portentous quasi-mystical rambling about technology, and embarrassingly absurd predictions about the outcome of the war and its impact on international politics. Words and sentences are arbitrarily italicised and bolded, presumably to compensate for the absence of any argument by giving the impression that something important and meaningful is being conveyed. As there is nothing in this extended blog-post that makes sense beyond the occasional sentence, it would be pointless bothering to criticise - whatever I wrote would simply be my own argument, as there is no argument of Virilio's to engage with.

This new edition of *Strategy of Deception* is the 22nd publication in Verso's series of books by leading radical thinkers. Judging by the contents of *Strategy of Deception*, it is impossible to see what claim Virilio has to be included in a such a series alongside the likes of Raymond Williams and Slavoj Žižek.

Politics and History

Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx

Louis Althusser

Alex Hochuli

Louis Althusser strangled his wife. He was judged to have been mentally unstable at the time and so was only committed to a psychiatric hospital. Following his release he secluded himself, emerging only to produce an autobiography. Then he died.

Subtitled 'Montesquieu; Rousseau; Marx', Politics and History is composed of three distinct (and separately conceived) essays on each of the three thinkers, the first two forming the bulk of the work. Sections on Montesquieu and Rousseau concern themselves primarily with each thinker's major work of political theory, *The Spirit of Laws* and *The Social Contract*, respectively. Surveying Althusser's work, this reviewer is tempted, out of courtesy to the reader, to relay what the French Marxist philosopher himself says; to seize Althusser's understanding of Montesquieu and Rousseau and simply pass it on. Like any game of Chinese whispers, though, something would be lost on the way. To convey my understanding of a theorist's understanding of other theorists' understanding of the world is, to me, just too many degrees of separation. Suffice, perhaps, to recommend you just click on the link above and buy the book, appending a note of the type you find on many university level textbooks: 'Suitable for students of politics and the general public'.

But then, that's not quite enough. Indeed, it's a cop-out. 'Write a review? For you? Why don't you just read the book yourself and tell me what you think?' That doesn't work. And then there is a further issue: this is not a new publication. Politics and History was initially published, as a collection of three essays translated into English, in 1972 (the French originals predating it by at least a decade). The problem then is not only how to engage with a writer's critique of other writers – a challenge, sure, but surmountable – but to interpret it in an original way. To find the key to unlock Althusser's critique of Montesquieu, Rousseau and Marx in 2007, we must look beyond the book itself.

Why has this work been re-published? The series title indicates that somebody here should be a 'radical thinker'. But it's not Althusser – that's seeing only the wood, and no trees. We need to look at the smaller picture. The reason Althusser, the real Althusser, ducks and dives throughout the work, presenting his unvarnished thoughts at only a few key instances, is that he is not 'the radical thinker'. He is deliberately inconspicuous through much of the book. His work is an attempt to examine what makes a truly radical thinker. In a time when relevance is paramount, here's why this matters to you, Mr and Ms General-Public-and-not-student-of-political-theory.

Montesquieu presents himself as radical by seeking to examine not essences, but laws. 'The objects of this work are the Laws, the various customs, and manners, of all the nations on earth,' says Montesquieu (via Althusser) contra thinkers who preceded him and reflected 'not on the totality of concrete facts but either on some of them or on society in general'. Montesquieu presents us with a genuine revolution in method, then. But, when it comes to an engagement with the structure of French society in the mid-18th century, we learn from Althusser (and only at the very end of his section on Montesquieu) that Montesquieu's was not an objective analysis of French politics and society, but rather, his detailing of the power struggles between crown, court and the emerging bourgeoisie amounted to little more than a defence of his own class interests. His counsel, that the absolute power of the monarch be tempered by the aristocracy so as to ward against despotism, would in reality serve only as a buffer between the seat of ultimate power, Versailles, and the toiling masses.

So, in spite of his contribution to scholarship as a father of modern political science, and the censure that *l'Esprit des Lois* attracted upon publication, Montesquieu was not very radical at all. Next we have Rousseau – ‘taking men as they are and laws as they might be’ – who, if only at a rhetorical level, sounds far more radical than the aristocratic *Président de Parlement* of Bordeaux who precedes him. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau reveals himself to be a truly original thinker, making radical conceptual leaps so as to overcome inherent contradictions (‘Discrepancies’, of which Althusser identifies four) in his contractual theory. These include the question of how individuals can make a pact with the community, in order to protect the liberties of each with the force of all, if there is no pre-existing entity (‘the community’) with which to make that compact. In itself, Rousseau’s is a radical, inspired theory of how man, civilised man, can become truly free. Althusser’s reading of it, as with Montesquieu, allows the original genius to shine through, while at the same time getting to the heart of the theory, unpicking tensions and contradictions. Again, Althusser appears after 40-odd pages of leading the reader by the hand through Rousseau’s thought, to assert why the latter can not be the truly radical thinker he aspires to be. All other apparent contradictions aside, where Rousseau’s *Social Contract* really falls down is in its attempt to prohibit ‘intermediary associations’.

Rousseau’s theory relies on equal and autonomous individuals acting and voting beyond their immediate, particular interests. This, Althusser alleges, necessitates either a recourse to religion which impels individuals to act morally (a too fragile edifice) or a regression to a feudal economy of autonomous economic actors (eg the independent artisan). Neither is possible or desirable, and so Rousseau’s theory crashes to the ground, as there is nothing to prevent the individual from pursuing, not the general will, but the interests of ‘intermediary groups’ – associations greater than the individual but smaller than the community with which each individual has made a contract. Class-based politics are thus prohibited. And yet, for Althusser, they are crucial to the equality to which Rousseau aspires.

Thus, Montesquieu’s and Rousseau’s supposed claims to bear the standard of radicalism are invalidated – Montesquieu for ignoring the masses altogether in his attempt to protect against despotism; Rousseau for being impracticable. So where does that leave ‘radical thinking’? Well, a bit predictably, with Marx. Which is exactly what we get in the concluding section of *Politics and History*, in which Althusser, taking Marx’s understanding of Hegel as his starting point, concludes that, rather than Montesquieu, it was Marx who founded a true science of history. This, against intuition, is actually the least convincing section of the three. Gone is the detached stance of the scholar. The real Althusser has stood up. He uses a much-too-short space (less than half the length given to Rousseau, a quarter of the length given to Montesquieu) to explicate what is, theoretically, the most complex of the three. Much of the space is used to beat the more humanistic strands in Marxism, dismissing ‘human potential’ as ignoring the great laws of history.

So, again, in the spirit of the times, why is this relevant? In a world-historical context in which, despite hyperbolic claims about the world speeding up, it seems that the wheels of history have slowed down, this sort of historical thinking should be welcomed. A re-examination of thinkers who strove to change history through an examination of society would be no bad thing today. Whether one subscribes to the now-deceased Althusser’s now-deceased project or not, his attempt to identify what makes a thinker radical deserves serious consideration; and the book is indeed ultimately worthy of inclusion in this Verso series. The challenge seems to be, in the face of all manner of structural limitations to human action on the one hand, and platitudes that ‘your choices matter’ on the other, to resist having ‘radical thinkers *redux*’ as all the the future has to offer.

Late Marxism

Adorno or the persistence of the dialectic

Fredric Jameson

Tim Black

Late Marxism: Adorno or the persistence of the dialectic – it's a title that simmers with the radical gesture. In 1990, the year of its publication, Marxism, outside academe at least, couldn't have been more out of season. The 'late capitalism' to which the title alludes had seen off all comers - there really was no alternative now.

Despite its refraction through the lexicon of Critical Theory, its author, Fredric Jameson, captures well the particular sense of defeat: 'late capitalism has all but succeeded in eliminating the final loopholes of nature and the Unconscious, of subversion and the aesthetic, of individual and collective praxis alike, and, with a final fillip, in eliminating any memory trace of what thereby no longer existed in the henceforth postmodern landscape.' (p5 LM) All in all, pretty grim for those reared on Anti-Oedipus and the Situationist International.

His riposte to what, in effect, is posed as the absolute triumph of capitalism, an implacable totality in which there is nothing that is not mediated by its dead hand, is to revive the thinker who began postulating just such an 'iron cage of rationality' some forty years earlier. In his late work, *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno asserted: 'The subjective consciousness of men is socially too enfeebled to burst the invariants it is imprisoned in. Instead, it adapts itself to them while mourning their absence. The reified consciousness is a moment in the totality of the reified world.' (p95 ND) Not that Jameson is unaware of the unrelenting melancholy of the author of *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a damaged life*, the thinker with whom he has now chosen to battle capitalism when seemingly at its strongest. Indeed, he admits Adorno was unsuitable in the 1960s when 'tout est possible.' And the 1970s weren't much more suitable, with Adorno's Hegelian ballast preventing his ascent to the high peaks of French theory where it was all 'jouissance' and 'ideological state apparatuses'. But as the 1980s drew to a close, taking, finally, any actually existing alternative with it, Adorno's prophecies of a total system finally seemed vindicated, and conversely, his critique, such as it was, gained in apparent utility:

Adorno was a doubtful ally when there were still powerful and oppositional political currents from which his temperamental and cantankerous quietism could distract the uncommitted reader. Now that for the moment those currents are themselves quiescent, his bile is a joyous counter-poison and a corrosive solvent to apply to the surface of "what is." (p249 LM) But using Adorno in this way, for all its ascerbic balm is, as we shall see, fatal for any grander social critique.

That Jameson wishes to do so, however, is understandable. Adorno's frequent nods to the 'economic standardisation of the world' (p21 LM), its reduction of the qualitative – be it humans or nature – to the abstract quantities of exchange-value, seems to promise a critique of capitalism when at its most universal, its most ideologically entrenched. Adorno's negative dialectics offer not reconciliation with what is, but the perpetual unfurling of what is not. Indeed, Jameson reckons on it as a tool, a lever to prise apart the identity of capitalist rationale and existence. What appears as natural, as 'just the way things are,' can then be re-cast precisely in terms of its non-identity with nature, human or otherwise. Adorno promises, in short, to rediscover the future that capitalism had reduced to an interminable present.

This is achieved, argues Jameson, through the reinstatement of the category of totality (p27 LM). What this means is that rather than grasping the significance or meaning of particulars as isolated facts, they are to be apprehended instead in terms of the social totality in which they have that meaning. To the positivism of the particular, Adorno opposes the mediation of the universal. There is no thing, no thought, be it marriage, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, or

even love, that is not thoroughly mediated by the social, historical process. All this, it goes with out saying, goes on behind the backs of its subjects:

A candid look at the predominance of the universal does all but unbearable psychological harm to the narcissism of all individuals in a democratically organised society. To see through selfhood as non-existent, as an illusion, would easily turn men's objective despair into a subjective one. (ND 391)

The problem with using Adorno to reveal the alienating praxes at work within capitalist social relations, is that it's not really capitalism that's the problem for Adorno. Yes, he does reference the 'exchange relation' or, indeed, the 'economic standardisation' of life. And no doubt Part 1 of Marx's Capital proved illustrative for Adorno. But it does so within the force field of Adorno's own thought. The conceptual abstraction, indeed, the 'reification' discerned under capitalism – the commodification of social life – is ultimately absorbed back into what Adorno perceives as a far longer history of reification per se.

As it turns out, this history of reification, of identifying things with their conceptual abstraction, is, for Adorno, nothing less than human history as a whole: even in its most primitive forms, human society has always inscribed things with particular meaning, always mediated itself and nature in its own particular terms. It is this narrative that is formulated in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). There, Adorno and his co-author, Max Horkheimer, take Mana, the ancient moving spirit, as a starting point. This primitive animism, they argue, emerged as a response to the brutal caprice of nature, the fear of the unknown. Its shared linguistic form – indissociable from the founding social moment – indicates the first and, as it turns out, fatal identification of men's thoughts with externality.

Each passing stage of civilisation, then, regardless of differing social forms, proceeds to identify its view of the world with what is, and to live among its concepts as though they were living in truth. And just as each social form (of life) believes itself to be in truth, so it consigns all preceding worldviews to myth. This is the dialectic of enlightenment as riff: 'Just as the myths already realise enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology.' (pp11-12 DofE) With each historical stage, then, the incommensurable multiplicity of what is, is subject both to greater mediation by the universal, that is, the social totality, and to greater levels of abstraction. The result is desperate. All individuality and particularity is made commensurable and categorisable, ripe for calculation and manipulation. 'Abstraction, the tool of enlightenment, treats its objects as did fate, the notion of which it rejects: it liquidates them.' (p13 DofE) As that last clause connotes, Weber's notion of rationalisation, of the progressive disenchantment of the world, finds its coda in the Holocaust.

Despite the frequent recourse to Capital, this is closer to Heidegger than it is to Marx. And there's a fair bit of Nietzsche in there too. Hence, as Adorno presents it, the history of conceptual abstraction contains an index of actual domination: knowledge as a product of the will to power. Admittedly, there's no valorisation of wild Ayran beasts, but it's no less bestial: 'The (philosophical) system is the belly turned mind...' (p23 ND)

Adorno's critique of capitalism as the commodification of social life is, then, a mere moment in his critique of reification, a process that seems to have almost anthropological underpinnings. The central flaw in all this can be grasped via the thinker who deployed the term 'reification' most explosively – Georg Lukács. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), Lukács used it to refer to the process whereby men's consciousness itself, that is, the terms in which they think of themselves and the world, is reified. Reflecting the process of alienation at work under conditions of private property, they come to think of themselves as things under the sway of an alien power. This is mirrored theoretically, in that philosophy – e.g. Kant's noumena/phenomena distinction – tends to conceive of the world contemplatively, as an object with laws independent of, and impervious to subject's action. As monumental as Lukács' effort was, at points, particularly in the implied notion of the proletariat as the subject-object of history, he seemed to be advocating an idealist solution to the problem of alienation. All alienated objectivity was simply to be reappropriated by Geist as proletarian subject.

As Lukács was to realise, especially after the publication of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts in 1932, his use of reification contained a strain of Hegelian idealism. In effect, this involved the conflation of objectification with alienation. Where the former designates the process whereby man produces some object in the world, the latter refers to the production not just of the object, but capital also, as part of the process of capitalist exploitation. Alienation is simultaneously objectification and its loss. Approaching the problem from the perspective of idealism, which assumes everything to be the creation of Geist, Hegel's attempt to overcome alienation, to apprehend the laws at work in the world as those of subjectivity itself, involved the overcoming of objectification too – cue absolute spirit.

In Adorno there seems to be a similar conflation at work. His history of the rationalisation of existence, so to speak, grasps all objectification as alienation: each and every social form creates modes of thought that reproduce the domination of the particular by the social whole. But whereas Hegel was on the side of the social whole as the universal, Adorno is the obverse; he steadfastly refuses to reconcile the alienated particular with the universal, or as Marx put it, to 'make man at home in his other being as such'. What Hegel saw as alienated subjectivity which must be reappropriated by the subject, Adorno sees as subjectivity that must be expropriated from its alienating objectification. From Adorno's perspective, any social form in which alienation might be absent is inconceivable.

The ultimate problem with Jameson's adoption of Adorno as the theorist of the present is that his contemporary resonance is a mirage. What seems like a formulation of a globalised system of capitalism before the fact, was really a criticism of social mediation after the fact. Or as Adorno puts it, 'society precedes the subject' (p120 ND). To expect more from Adorno than a revelation of the baleful effects of the universal mediation of individual lives is to look to the patient for the cure.

Radical Thinkers II

http://www.versobooks.com/lists/radical_thinkers.shtml

Theodor Adorno et al. : *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukacs*

Louis Althusser: *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*

Jean Baudrillard: *Fragments*

Peter Dews: *Logics of Disintegration: Poststructuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*

Fredric Jameson: *Late Marxism: Adorno: Or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*

Ernesto Laclau: *Emancipation(s)*

Antonio Negri: *Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project*

Jacques Rancière: *On the Shores of Politics*

Paul Virilio: *Strategy of Deception*

Raymond Williams: *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*

Slavoj Zizek: *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*



Culture Wars is the reviews website of the [Institute of Ideas](#) (IoI) in London. In keeping with the IoI's aim of shaping the future through debate, we review books, films, theatre, art and talk events, with a view to understanding how political and other ideas filter through the culture, and how the arts in turn influence politics and culture more generally. We also publish essays, interviews and other articles on the arts, culture and society.

'Culture' is often presented as a vast accumulation of commodities to be browsed and consumed by passive audiences. In this view, the role of the critic is banal. Critics trawl through the marketplace and advise us, as the

annoying phrase has it, 'what's hot and what's not'. **Culture Wars** is different. We want to engage with cultural life, to discuss it, and argue over it. And we want to encourage others to join in.

Thematic reviews

We believe that cultural output tells us a great deal about the society we live in. As well as assessing books, plays, films and so on for themselves, we are keen to draw out the way they express contemporary ideas. Ideas like multiculturalism, environmentalism, evolutionary psychology, and social exclusion, to name just a few, appear in the most unlikely places. By engaging with contemporary culture we can come to a better understanding of society more generally.

Critical engagement with arts practitioners

Culture Wars continues the spirit of **Round Table Rumbles**, a series of live review events organised by the Institute of Ideas with the Edinburgh Festival Fringe between 2001 and 2004, and at the National Theatre in London in 2005. Panels of critics discussed a selection of shows relating to a different theme each night, with writers, directors and performers, as well as ordinary fringe-goers, invited to join in the discussion. Without compromising critical judgement, our aim is to encourage engagement between critics and performers, avoiding self-important showboating on the part of critics, and self-serving cynicism on the part of practitioners. Our reviewers are committed to the art forms they write about, and we encourage submissions from practitioners themselves.

Culture Wars reviewers

We do not currently pay contributors, but we offer a space for all and any writers who share our aims. Some of our writers are professionals who make a living writing for other publications. Others are amateurs in the best sense of the word, writing for the love of the arts. Our reviewers include arts practitioners - writers, directors or performers in their own right - as well as more expert critics. We welcome unsolicited reviews, in the hope of establishing **Culture Wars** as nursery for new writing talent, as well as a home for established writers who share our commitment to the arts and ideas.

Culture Wars people

[Dolan Cummings](#) editor

[Shirley Dent](#) development editor

[Andrew Haydon](#) commissioning editor, theatre

[Jon Martea](#) commissioning editor, film

[Sarah Boyes](#) commissioning editor, books



All articles © Culture Wars www.culturewars.org.uk