

LIFE, WRITING

Niall Gildea

David Wills, *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 318pp; \$30.00 paperback.

There is no doubt that 'life' has undergone something of a redefinition in the last few years, as there has dawned the belated realization that anthropocentrism is having irreversible ecological and geological effects. In the Humanities, a popular response has been to affix 'and the anthropocene' to familiar objects of study: *Shakespeare and the Anthropocene!* *Modernism and the Anthropocene!* I thought I'd made these up for laughs, but Google (*Google and the Anthropocene*, of course) says otherwise.

Before that practice became fashionable, however, there has long been in the history of philosophy a deep-rooted or even unconscious anxiety concerning the conviction with which our species ought to apply its paradigms of life across the board. The superficial confidence with which such paradigms have been instituted - by a Descartes or a Lacan, for instance - does not survive attentive reading. David Wills's latest book, *Inanimation*, traces some important instances of this trepidatious philosophical legislation, taking its cue from the work of Jacques Derrida - particularly his 'La vie la mort' ('Life death') seminar of the mid-70s, his 1997 'lecture suite' at Cerisy-la-Salle on philosophy's construal of animals (which became, sort of, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*), and his final seminar, *La bête et le souverain*. The book's other chief interest is in art, literature and philosophy which gesture towards more elaborated understandings of the human, the organic, and the living.

Inanimation is Wills's third book (after *Prosthesis* and *Dorsality*) to consider historical and philosophical parameters for the thinking of life. It is structured around three modalities of language - 'autobiography', 'translation', and 'resonance' - which name its three sections. Each term undergoes a series of intelligent convolutions which shows it to figure a non-singularity operating right at the heart, so to speak, of philosophical myths of the 'purely' or 'organically' human - a phenomenon Wills defines succinctly as 'prosthetic articulationality' (p213). In essays on Descartes, Freud and Derrida, 'autobiography' is shown to encompass many modes of self-inscription across many forms of life in a way which unavoidably precedes and determines the more familiar anthropocentric sense of the term. 'Translation' names, in essays on Cixous and Celan, Benjamin, and Schmitt, Jünger and Joyce, ways in which language neither marks a 'fall' from an organic unity, nor is such a unity, but is better understood as already a process or 'technologisation of life' permitting anything beyond spontaneity. 'Resonance', an even more flexible figure, describes how disjunction and interruption constitute life

rather than impede its development. The terms sketch out different routes to Wills's consistent point, that 'language, as both mechanical instrument and conceptualizing function, fundamentally inheres in the technologisation of the human' (p195). But it is a point which needs to be relayed back, as Wills would have it, to show how it lays bare the human's anterior or *dorsal* intimacy with forms of life (animal, mechanical, 'non-') from which it is in the business of distinguishing itself.

Wills's essays are sinuous and should be read slowly, but the political import of his text is straightforward: it follows from the 'principal ethical exhortation' of *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, which is to acknowledge, as well as one can, 'the singularity and irreplaceability of *whatever* lives, *however* it lives' (p88). Accordingly, 'life' in *Inanimation* can refer to human, animal, and amoebic life, and also to the life of a phrase in a text, of things or ideas, and finally of a birdsong archived within a squeezable plush beanbag bird. In all cases, everything comes down to the question of 'inanimation'. In Wills's understanding of the term, 'inanimation' refers to the machinelike or mechanical starting-point of many organic lifeforms and their proliferation (Derrida's 'Life death' concept, broadly speaking), but also to the process of 'inanimation' from the verb 'to inanimate' - to imbue with life.

If *Prosthesis*, *Dorsality* and *Inanimation* comprise a series, it is because they are linked by an insistence that ostensible 'simplicity' is always already technologically primed: 'What we call life begins as a rupture vis-à-vis itself, an interruption of inanimate by an animate that has somehow lain inert, or inanimate, within the inanimate' (p69). Such a formulation - initially mindboggling, then persuasive, and finally indisputable - structurally is of Derridean stock, but what must be said about Wills is how frequently, when reading him, one is reminded that it is substantially a much simpler thing: a marker of philosophy done well.

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HOSTS IN THE MACHINE

Joe Darlington

Trebor Scholz, *Uberworked and Underpaid: How Workers are Disrupting the Digital Economy*, New York, Polity Press, 2016, 242 pp.

When capitalism imagines itself it dreams of machinery. It sees the spinning jenny and not the highland clearances. It sees the laptop and not the plant in China. And now, in the era of cloud computing and the internet of things, we are invited to believe that all that is, is air, and to talk of solids melting is an anachronism. But the internet isn't air, it is made of metal and plastic, and the work that it does is most often done by people. This basic comprehension of how things really work is the starting point of Trebor Scholz's latest book. *Uberworked and Underpaid* is a survey of the twenty-first century economy with the labour left in, and, from this foundation, it provides some of the most important insights that the field of media scholarship has produced for a long while.

Throughout the work Scholz emphasises how far technological mysticism distorts labour, law and life. The Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) is a key example here; a virtual labour exchange which recruits thousands of workers from the US, India and Brazil to perform minor tasks which users on the receiving end of the transaction would consider automatic. For instance, the 'Amazon Remembers' service invites a user to upload a photo which is then identified and located for them online. The work is done by a worker, or 'Turker', who is then 'paid ten cents' (p22), while the user believes the search to be the work of a machine. The software Soylent works the same way only for spelling and grammar checks. As someone who has worked for an online copywriting company, this is the machine that I, as a reviewer, recognise. Everything on the internet is done by someone, but usually not the person you expect. Exploitative labour practices become slightly more visible when human interaction is part of the service; see Uber, TaskRabbit or - in the UK - Deliveroo. The sleight of hand, however, is the same: hide the worker from the customer through an automated app, and hide them from the government by calling them 'independent contractors' rather than employees. As Scholz astutely comments, this is not happening now because of new technology but because of new social conditions: these business models are 'reliant [both] on the availability of an abundance of cheap labour and a permissive regulatory environment' (p44). Amazon Mechanical Turk, notably, was not only deemed too exploitative to operate in Europe but also in China where workers are required at the very least to be paid in money, rather than Amazon gift vouchers.

Rather than present an anti-exploitation polemic, however, Scholz is

also careful to present the voices of the workers themselves. In the case of AMT Turkers these voices reveal as many positive responses as negative ones. Working from home and flexible hours are cited as benefits, plus the inclusion of gamification principles into interface design makes it possible to transform some mundane tasks into compulsive, *Candy Crush*-esque puzzles. Scholz mentions a number of these game-like softwares beyond the AMT which incorporate user feedback to hone their system's overall accuracy. Some of these gamified systems are well-designed enough that users contribute to them for free. One example given is the Google Image Labeller, which pits two players against each other listing keywords when presented with images, the aim being to get a match. If both players input the same keyword they both win; the players get points and Google gets a verified keyword to feed back into Google Image Search. Another was the reCAPCHA human verification system which, as you may have noticed, has recently developed from text identification to image identification and utilises the same user feedback principles. Although it was released too late for inclusion in Scholz's work, his analysis of how play is turned into labour is typified by 2016's *Pokemon Go* phenomenon. A re-skinned version of the game *Ingress*, *Pokemon Go* is a way for Google to track and map pedestrian data in the same way it already tracks and maps data from satnavs in vehicles. There is joy in this new work and elegance in its covert design. In the techno-utopia, it is argued, all work will be play and all expended energy will be productive. Yet there remains the capitalist catch: ownership. What Turkers and *Pokemon Go* Trainers have in common is their contribution to a platform, and platforms are power.

What Scholz brilliantly pinpoints about work and play in the twenty-first century can be summarised by the old adage 'money in a gold rush is made by selling spades'. Where media scholars have been too quick to dismiss labour altogether from their analyses, contemporary labour theorists have arguably done the opposite and seen unpaid labour everywhere. For Scholz, unpaid labour is not necessarily wrong, it is a question of who benefits. Charitable work and creative labour can be sources of personal gratification and social betterment without needing to be paid. Pay can also ruin a system; the voluntary UK blood donor service is more 'ethical and efficient' than the American system where 'the rich exploit the desperately poor by buying their blood' (p89). Wikipedians similarly, Scholz argues, would consider payment to be a cheapening of their principled public service. No, it is not whether labour is accurately compensated or not, but who is deriving the surplus value. Tech companies manipulate governments, bypass labour laws, and absorb all competition. They can do this because there appears to be no alternative. In the 1990s every techie had their own webpage, but now the internet is defined by monopolies: Amazon, Facebook, YouTube, Google. This, as Scholz defines it, is 'platform capitalism' and it is pervasive in a way that the spectacle was for the situationists. Unlike the spectacle, however, platform capitalism can be combated.

The conclusion of Scholz's findings leads him to propose a new system of 'platform cooperativism' wherein the function of the monopolies can be replaced with a system prioritising redistribution rather than profit-generation. Such a proposal, similar to Guy Standing's championing of Universal Basic Income, is convincing in its rationality and seeming viability. It is an idea whose time appears to have come. On a theoretical level, it also breaks from the Keynes/Hayek dichotomy that has defined left and right mainstream economics since the end of the Second World War. It owes much more to Karl Polanyi's vision of a society that protects itself from the market, rather than reducing society to just another market mechanism. Whether or not platform cooperativism convinces, however, the analysis does not stand or fall by its proposals. The analytical work of *Überworked and Underpaid* is absolutely essential reading for contemporary scholars across the social sciences, if not just for its conclusions, then for its approach. The internet isn't a neutral medium, it is an infrastructure with a vast number of uses, each of which take place on private property. The web has a spider, and the spider is capital. Scholz's new work is providing us with its outline.

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ALL THAT'S LIQUID

Simone Natale

Esther Leslie, *Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Liquid Form*, London: Reaktion, 2016, 296pp, £25 hardback.

Writing histories of media always entails engaging with a theoretical and methodological question: how should we approach the relationship between the technological and the social? A long-standing debate on the issue has animated the field. Yet this debate has been enriched in recent years by the inclusion of a third pole: the natural, intended also and especially in its material and geological dimension. Ignited by studies in Science and Technology Studies that refuse rigid distinctions between the human and non-human, recent works have signalled a potentially paradigmatic shift in media studies, with Jussi Parikka proposing the study of a 'geology of media' and others, including John Durham Peters, calling for the examination of the ecological and elemental dimensions in historical and theoretical approaches to media and communications.¹

Esther Leslie's book contributes to this emerging niche of research, providing a timely examination of an element, liquid crystals, that relates at the same time to the technological, the scientific, the natural and, Leslie argues, the discursive and the imaginary level as well. The author aims to interrogate to what extent 'forms of physical matter play into the technologies of a particular time - which would include the modes of thinking' (p21). Liquid crystals have become ubiquitous in our societies, from digital watches to computer screens, laptops, and LCD televisions; but have they also become, Leslie asks, an inherent part of the ways in which technologies are thought, represented, and narrated in contemporary societies?

The key contribution of the book, in this regard, lies in how it enters in dialogue with the rich literature in media history that looks at the relationship between technology and the imaginary.² One of the strands of such literature is based on the concept of the 'technological sublime', proposed by Leo Marx in his *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) and further developed by authors such as David Nye and Vincent Mosco. Yet, while recent explorations of this idea tend to focus on the technological element, Leslie's work reminds us that the concept of the sublime in Kant is inseparable from the question of how human culture sees and imagines the natural realm. This element was present in Leo Marx's work, as he reflected on the awe and wonder inspired by the observation of technological infrastructures that dominate the natural (or we might say, following Leslie, the liquid), such as bridges and dams. Yet, it has become less crucial in recent examinations of the 'digital sublime', as Mosco called it, where the dimension of the natural is secondary if not

1. Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2015; John Durham Peters, *The marvelous cloud: Towards a philosophy of elemental media*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2015.

2. See, for an overview, Simone Natale and Gabriele Balbi, 'Media and the imaginary in history: The role of the fantastic in different stages of media change', *Media History*, 20(2), 2014, 203-218.

completely absent. Leslie's observation that many advertising videos of LCD screens take up images of water and snow, whose rendering is facilitated by the technology, is in this sense quite compelling. Such a visual repertoire, she suggests, helps us realise that 'the digital mechanism has an affinity to the liquid and the crystalline' (p208).

Leslie employs a *longue durée* perspective, which moves from scientific research on liquid crystal in the nineteenth century to lead us on a journey that ends with the ubiquity of screens in our contemporary world. She posits the emergence of 'liquid thought' or 'crystal imagination', promising that this will allow us 'to think about a complex of matter, thought, society, in relation to the late Victorian social world, which is not so distinct from us' (p21). It is in the character of the journey, however, that the book reveals its more problematic and potentially contentious aspect. The story of how liquid crystals were discovered in the late nineteenth century and then applied to technical media in the last decades of the twentieth century mingles, in Leslie's narrative, with an examination of how the boundaries between liquid and solid, ice and water are thematised in art, philosophical thought, literature, and science. Leslie's inventiveness, the curiosity that leads her in transversal connections and detours, becomes however the book's weakness, as we find out that the journey we have embarked upon has become a rather erratic one. One is left wondering, as representations of water and ice are integrated within the cultural history of liquid crystals, if the at times predominant use of metaphorical connections is the most effective way to bring together the dimensions of the technological, the social, the cultural and the natural. Perhaps it is the relative scarcity of materials specifically *about* liquid crystals (such as, for instance, a 1968 *Life* magazine article that suggested that liquid crystals could in the future be used to read the body for disease and explain how we see, touch and think[p201]) that forces Leslie's move towards metaphorical links to advance her analysis. Yet, this makes Leslie's claim that 'we live now, and those who found liquid crystal lived, in what might be called a liquid crystal epoch, in which all that happens can be conceptualized in relation to a pull this way and that between the liquid and the crystalline, the fluid and the frozen' (p21) sound even more overstated.

The fact that a painting, Friedrich's *Das Eismeer* ('*The Sea of Ice*', 1824), is presented as the *fil rouge* across the book is revealing of an underlying problem: how does the particular imaginary embedded within a painting (or within literary and philosophical sources) relate to things such as natural elements, scientific practices, and technologies? The difficulty to find an answer to this question at times anchors Leslie's explorations within what Karen Barad would label a representationalist perspective,³ whereas the chain of connections between the material and the discursive follows a purely metaphorical approach. If we want to challenge the idea that words and ideas are strictly separated from the world of matter, Barad and others contend, we need to look at the engagement between such dimensions in a way that

3. Karen Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Durham, Duke University Press 2007.

is not limited to the metaphorical level.

The strongest and most convincing parts of Leslie's book, in this regard, are those that revolve around the history of scientific work and technological applications of liquid crystals. The author tells us, in this context, the fascinating and little-known story of how the faculty of liquid crystal to convert heat into visible patterns of various colours opened up the opportunity of using them in media devices. In the last two chapters of the book, Leslie makes compelling media history as she successfully follows the trajectory of the technological, the physical, and the imaginary dimension through a more substantial analysis of the different threads of connections between those levels. She convincingly argues that liquid crystals' influence lies in their oscillation between stasis and movement, and relatedly, between life and death. What makes this argument compelling is the fact that its evidence does not rely on the metaphorical level, as was often the case in the chapters dedicated to earlier episodes of liquid crystals' history, but rather on a combination of material and discursive elements. Leslie emphasises the role of animation in visual media both in terms of technology and of the imaginary (including the *images* of water and snow, recurring, as mentioned above, in representations of the performances of LCD screens). Animation becomes therefore the act of animating - bringing back to life - something that is symbolically, technically, and naturally subsumed by liquid crystals in their oscillation and indecision between stasis and movement. The fact that research in biology has underlined liquid crystal's presence on our body and their potential role in the formation of biological structures (p234) is in this sense a fascinating thing, which Leslie aptly discusses.

Liquid Crystals is, in summary, a timely and thought-provoking book that, despite its failure to fully address some pressing theoretical and methodological issues, will appeal to scholars in media history and related fields who are interested in the relationship between the human and the non-human. Leslie has the merit of having grasped and made manifest the peculiar nature of liquid crystals, whose oscillation between the animate and the inanimate might function as a call for media historians to further scrutinize the entanglement between these two realms.

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DEADLY CAPITAL

Debra Benita Shaw

Charles Thorpe, *Necroculture*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 270pp; c.£70 hardback.

The continuing relevance of the Frankfurt School to social and cultural research in the twenty-first century is hardly surprising. We seem to be living through the dystopia that they were warning us would result from the advance of consumer capitalism and its associated technicities. More to the point, the irrationality that theorists like Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse saw as emerging from the confrontation between reified and atomised individuals and a social order governed by instrumental reason seems to have emerged full blown in contemporary US politics. In what Charles Thorpe calls 'necroculture', the productivist ideology which denies climate change and promotes techno-salvationism is expressed as a complete capitulation to the perceived power of capital, not to preserve life but to reproduce it as something which transcends death.

As Thorpe demonstrates, the kind of displaced religiosity which brought Donald Trump to power is articulated in the rhetoric of the Tea Party and their unifying slogan 'Don't tread on me' (p209) which encapsulates the contradictory demand to shrink the state while, at the same time, strengthening the structures that keep the rest of the world at bay; protectionist economic policies, military power and multi-million dollar border walls. He argues that the peculiar ideology of the Tea Party is a foreseeable result, not only of free market economics but the anxieties which are magnified by the ubiquitous technologies which are necessary to perpetuate the system.

In necroculture then, capital congealed in technological devices is deadly and not only in terms of its escalated ability to distance actors in the theatre of war from the killing fields and flatten distinctions between remote death and kill scores in digital gaming. In Tea Party ideology, for instance, guns have become fetishized to the extent that gun possession is conflated with self-possession; as the only thing that stands between the individual and annihilation by 'the threatening other' (p224). This is summed up in Charlton Heston's famous proclamation to the National Rifle Association in the run up to the 2000 presidential election that his guns would need to be pried from his 'cold dead hands' (p221), a rallying cry that was so successful that he repeated it at every convention.

This kind of proclamation is effective because, as Thorpe points out, it speaks to the eschatological sensibilities of a constituency mired in contradictions. As the personal security that seems to be guaranteed by the US constitution is denied them by the very economic system that it appears to promote, they turn to a quasi-religious sanctification of the constitution itself alongside a

distrust of both power elites and those deemed to benefit undeservedly from their tax dollars. Working with Erich Fromm's concept of 'negative freedom' (p205), Thorpe demonstrates the relationship between 'anomic violence' and the atomised and repressed individual set against the 'vagaries of market forces' (p216).

Negative freedom is, essentially, freedom *from* what are perceived as coercive conditions set against the rights of individuals to complete self-determination which, as Thorpe points out, is not only 'the primary language of justification for the legal protection of private property but is also ideologically identified with the character of [the US] itself' (p205). Positive freedom, for Fromm, in opposition to negative freedom, necessarily entails a wide-ranging social contract which recognises that human beings are only realised in agency conferred by mutual exchange and co-operation. Chillingly, he recognised that the self-defeating nature of negative freedom would 'spur escape into submission to fascism' (p206).

Fromm was an early member of the Frankfurt School who disagreed with Adorno and Horkheimer, who rejected his revision of Freudian ideas, and he has largely been excluded from the history of critical theory and thus from the debates through which it was incorporated into New Left critique from the 1960s onwards.¹ Nevertheless, as Thorpe proves, his arguments in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) are acutely relevant to the contemporary conjuncture, not least because he seems to have anticipated the psychological effects of social lives wholly mediated by technology (pp23-4). Furthermore, Thorpe's revival of Fromm's ideas in the context of necroculture enables him to expose the structural relationship between the subsumption of labour and the expression of negative freedom, not only in the neo-fascist tendencies of the Tea Party and their Trump supporting allies but in the deathly trajectory of biotechnology as it is currently expressed in the techno-utopianism of transhumanists like Hans Moravec, Ray Kurzweil and Eric Drexler.

For those unfamiliar with them, these ideas can sound like the plot of a bad science fiction movie. Drexler, Kurzweil, Moravec and their many allies in organisations like the Extropy Institute and Humanity+² are engaged in working towards what amounts to the production of a successor species; an evolutionary step beyond the human guided and directed by advanced technologies and provided for through massive investments by corporations like SoftBank, Google and Space X as well as the US government and the European Union (pp96-7).³

This quasi-religious expression of necroculture promotes transcendence of both the body and the contradictions of capitalism. Essentially, labour congealed in the machine is deified as furnishing the means to leave behind both the inconvenience of death and, eventually, the planet. Cryonic suspension, uploading human brains into computers and space travel are all tools in the transhumanist arsenal. In these 'apocalyptic speculations, the linear time of technology and capitalist growth moves towards a nirvana in which mind and

1. See Neil McLaughlin, 'How to Become a Forgotten Intellectual: Intellectual Movements and the Rise and Fall of Erich Fromm', *Sociological Forum*, 13:2, 1998, pp215 - 246.

2. See www.extropy.org and humanityplus.org (both accessed 09/07/2017)

3. See also Steve Fuller, *Humanity 2.0: What it Means to be Human Past, Present and Future*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hants., UK & New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011 and Peter Rejcek, 'Can Futurists Predict the Year of the Singularity?', *SingularityHub* <https://singularityhub.com/2017/03/31/can-futurists-predict-the-year-of-the-singularity/>, 2017, (accessed 11 June, 2017).

matter, consciousness and the universe, have become one' (p128). Techno-futurists, like the preppers that secure themselves against the coming apocalypse by practising the techniques and hoarding the accoutrements of back-to-the-land self-sufficiency (including, of course, guns, p211), are leaving nothing to chance. Kurzweil, apparently terrified that his inadequate flesh body will fail before he realises the personal transcendence he craves, subjects himself to constant monitoring (p113).

But as Thorpe points out, this version of accelerationism is peculiarly limited in its ability to imagine *social* change. Informed by the ideology of negative freedom and promoting the fetishisation of technological commodities as a route to transcend the contradictions of alienated life, the techno-futurist creed makes no allowance for potential changes in the relations of production or their expression in social life. What this amounts to is a blind belief in a sort of reinvigorated social Darwinism. The trajectory of capital accumulation in its current form and its expression in advanced technologies is given the character of a natural law. The waste of both human life and natural resources that these technologies entail is presented as an evolutionary imperative; human deaths through war and climate change induced 'natural' disasters can thus be understood as a necessary weeding out of those not fitted to survive to enter the 'singularity' (pp103-5) and become one with the universal mind.

Needless to say, global warming and the deleterious effects of capital's constant need for ever greater volumes of raw resources do not even need to be denied because they are, in the techno-futurist scenario, sacrifices on the road to transcendence.

The twin trajectories of contemporary capitalism then, are towards '[a] dead planet and artificial life' (p55). Or, put another way, towards the annihilation of what we understand as life in order to be relieved finally of its uncomfortable association with death. Death, as Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, was always modernity's dirty little secret; the single inevitability that not even bourgeois culture and its drive towards conspicuous living in the form of commodities could avoid.⁴ Necroculture, expressed in the zombie hordes that march across the wastelands of globally franchised screen entertainment, is the assurance that the undeath that always threatens to overwhelm those that fail to heed the call to invest in self-enhancement is reserved for others. The right technology (figured, in most zombie productions, as weapons) in the hands of the *right* people, is associated with resourcefulness, stamina and, of course, longevity.

This, then, is negative freedom as eschatology/manifest destiny and, in Thorpe's analysis, it also expresses itself in the rise of new forms of human slavery, sex trafficking and pornographic degradation. It could be argued, of course, that there is nothing particularly remarkable about the torture of prisoners in war or expressions of sadistic sexuality enacted on the bodies of women and children. These things are all too familiar. What Thorpe makes clear, however, is the sheer *visibility* of these practices in necroculture, alongside their rapid dissemination through online forums.

4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies*, Oxford & Cambridge, Polity 1992, p134.

Although not made explicit, there is an equivalence set up here between the gun and the computer as technologies that effectively immure the individual from meaningful social contact and thus from responsibility towards others. As symbols of the bunkered mentality of Tea Party affiliates alongside the ‘Don’t tread on me’ ideology, guns imply that the death of others is preferable to their encroachment on the private property of the person. At the same time, computers frame a private space where only the visual sense is ever truly engaged and violent pornography is accessed through the same techniques required to perform the mundane tasks of everyday working life. Persons are reduced to objects ‘behind’ the screen and the violence is experienced as a function of the interface rather than willed by the viewer (p185).

Of course, ‘persons’ here needs to be qualified. It is still predominantly the bodies of women that are subjected to de-personalisation in the service of maintaining the fantasy of pneumatic masculine sexuality and the machine becomes a proxy for the enhanced, high performance penis. Unsurprisingly, a genre of ‘machine fucking’ has emerged in which the ever passive woman is raped by, literally, a specially designed fucking machine (p183). The development of rudimentary AI has also spurred a new industry in interactive sex dolls which are set to drive the advance of robotics in the same way that innovations like streaming video and online payment systems were driven by pornography. Thus ‘[c]ybernetic man channels his death orientation into his love affair with machines’ (p182).

As a thinker primarily associated with Science and Technology Studies, it is hardly surprising that Thorpe’s emphasis is on the machine as the embodiment of dead labour alongside the living death of alienation in developing his argument for contemporary necroculture as the distillation of tendencies identified by Marx and Engels over a century ago. But what is distinctive here is that he turns to Fromm rather than, for example, Marcuse to explore the necrophiliac subject and its orientation towards fascism. This was, after all, the core project of the Frankfurt School and the reason that psychoanalysis was an essential component of critical theory. Fromm’s unorthodox approach, lambasted by Marcuse, may, on the evidence here, provide the grounds for a more thoroughgoing enquiry into contemporary alienation and its effects. The Tea Party (and sexbots) aside, transhumanism may seem like a joke but the seriousness with which it is being studied (and funded) has considerable implications in terms of escalating inequalities and lending power to destructive neo-Darwinist ideologies. This book may go some way towards inaugurating what needs to be a substantial and effectively responsive critique.

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IDEALISING ‘THE POLITICAL’

Sean Phelan

Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory*, Cambridge, UK. Polity, 2014, E-book edition, 247pp; £16.14 e-book.

References to ontology have increased across the social sciences and humanities in the last twenty years. Much like researchers in the 1980s might have been dutifully expected to clarify their epistemology or subject position, it has become a more common expectation - at least in some contexts - that people have something to say about ‘their ontology’. This tendency has been notable in the field of critical political theory. The concept of ontology has acquired a set of expansive meanings that go beyond its traditional usage in philosophy as a prompt for inventory-style answers to the question of ‘what is being?’.¹ The reimagining of ontology as a category for talking about the political constitution of society has been a source of productive theoretical inquiry, and generated an intellectual excitement that marked my own introduction to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Their insistence that politics needed to be conceptualised in ontological terms imbued a sense that grappling with ontological questions was a mark of my own theoretical seriousness, in contrast to those who cannot see beyond the common sense assumptions of everyday political discourse. At the same time, with no training in philosophy (or, for that matter, political theory), I sometimes wondered if I knew what I was talking about when I talked about ontology, a feeling that can still be triggered today when I encounter an abstruse, knowing, or simply waffly use of the term.

The influence of the so-called ‘ontological turn’ (p18) informs Lois McNay’s rich critical assessment of a strand of poststructuralist radical democratic theory that has privileged abstract interpretations of politics. Mouffe is one of her targets, though she extends the argument to Wendy Brown, Linda Zerilli and William Connolly, and even Jacques Rancière and James Tully despite their shared disavowal of the discourse of ontology. McNay argues that the preoccupation with developing an abstract philosophical account of the political cultivates a ‘one-sided’ (p21) mode of theorising, which becomes detached from an analysis of the social conditions that impede the emergence of a radical left politics. This ‘transcendental mode of reflection’ (p11) is schematised in conceptual distinctions that replicate Heidegger’s demarcation of the ontological and the ontic. The ontological-level category of ‘the political’ is consecrated as the site of theoretical distinction, while the ontic-level horizon of the given social order is situated as a largely dull realm of ‘inert positivity’ (p22). McNay cautions that her argument is ‘not

1. Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, London, Routledge 2007, p264; Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2000, p173.

an argument against abstraction per se' (p11); she recognises that 'to some degree or another, ontological reflection is an unavoidable aspect of political thinking' (p19). Nor is she dismissive of a theoretical approach to thinking about politics that has 'breathed new life into democratic theory' (p11). However, she questions whether the 'turn to ontology is the most conducive way of thinking about transformative agency and change' (p11), because of the concept's tendency to assume a particular understanding of the political that elides the heterogeneity of existing political practices. Accordingly, despite their aversion to the 'ideal theory' (p12) of Rawls and others, she criticises radical democrats for producing their own version of an idealised theory that fails to satisfactorily bridge the gap between the ontological and empirical.

McNay draws primarily on Bourdieu to interrogate what she characterises as the 'social weightlessness' (p11) of radical democratic theory, and prescribes a form of immanent and disclosive critique that emerges out of the work of Axel Honneth. The use of Bourdieu as a theoretical counter allows her to highlight the arid view of sociology presupposed in the work she critiques, emblematic of a scholastic tendency that finds general theoretical expression 'in a persistent downgrading of social experience as the merely empirical' (p29). McNay argues Bourdieu brings attention to a situated phenomenological world that is largely invisible to radical democrats, because of their focus on developing generalised theories of political agency that are uninterested in understanding the social conditions that delimit people's political capacities, and miss the 'politically invisible' (p31) forms of oppression that are subjectively internalised in capitalist societies. Honneth is similarly commended for his focus on ordinary social suffering, though McNay distances herself from a 'reductive ontology of recognition' (p35) in his work that does not satisfactorily capture the potentially distorted nature of recognition. She aligns her own understanding of critique with Honneth's affirmation of the (not yet fully realised) 'radical potential' of critical theory's 'insights into the intertwining of fact and norm' (p52), but with an attentiveness to the phenomenological complexity of empirical domains that she cannot discern in the shared impulses of the radical democratic tradition.

McNay begins her specific critiques with a chapter on Mouffe, whose work best illustrates the general argument of the book. Mouffe has been influential in popularising a concept of agonistic democracy that constructs itself in opposition to the strong universalism of Habermas' discourse ethics; indeed, the argument for Mouffe against Habermas has become something of a formulaic shorthand, where the former's emphasis on dissensus and the antagonistic logic of the political is contrasted with the latter's valorisation of consensus and stifling of political and discursive differences that depart from his own idealised model. McNay is not interested in defending Habermas. Instead, she turns Mouffe's critique of Habermas against her, suggesting that the neglect of 'embodied praxis' (p72) that Mouffe attributes to Habermas is equally apparent in her own work. Mouffe's appeal to practice is unconvincing

because she conceptualises political agency through a ‘generalised theory of signification that is unable to capture embodied dynamics of oppression in anything other than the most formulaic dualisms of stasis and flux, inclusion and exclusion, essentialism and anti-essentialism’ (p82). Quoting Bruno Bosteels, McNay suggests that Mouffe’s reliance on such dualisms inculcates an ‘eschatological even catastrophic desire for radicalisation’ (p99), which diminishes the significance of substantive political demands that don’t fit with her notion of an authentic political vision. McNay’s stark reading of Mouffe certainly goes against the grain of some left critiques of agonistic democracy, which see little more than a combative reformulation of liberal democratic conventions. Her precise target is Mouffe’s idealisation of an ontological understanding of politics, which ‘empties identities of any existential depth’ (p85) and therefore cannot adequately speak to the world of lived experience.

Chapter 3 discusses feminist theory, focusing on the account of political subjectivity developed in the work of Wendy Brown and Linda Zerilli. Both theorists are important for their ‘influential interventions in the post-identity debate’, McNay suggests, and their ‘formulations of the idea of radical political agency through the trope of indeterminacy’ (p100). Unlike her imagined interlocutors, McNay is wary of the theoretical shift from an identity to a post-identity frame, which she maintains takes the form of an argument that criticises strands of feminisms for perpetuating a ‘narrow preoccupation with issues of gender identity and subjectivity’ (p101) which hinders the development of the kind of hegemonic alliances valorised by radical democrats. McNay has no trouble with arguments recognising the entanglement of feminist and anti-capitalist struggles. Rather, she sees the critique of identity as too emphatic and one-sided, and ‘unmediated by any analysis of the dynamics of the actual’ (p109). Drawing on her previous work on Michel Foucault, McNay also questions Zerilli and Brown’s appeal to Foucault to support their ‘turning away from the given’ (p112), arguing that unlike Hannah Arendt’s intentional withdrawal from the social, this analytical strategy is not inherent in his work on ‘critical ontology’ (p113).

The chapter on Jacques Rancière is the most counter-intuitive of the book, since he explicitly distances himself from the project of developing a political ontology. McNay justifies his inclusion by maintaining Rancière likewise treats the given social world as ‘a kind of alien blob’ (p156), recalling the ‘anti-sociological sentiments’ (p146) that have animated his critiques of Bourdieu since the 1970s. Compared to her other targets, McNay commends Rancière’s ‘anti-ontological’ (p133) conception of the political, or what he simply calls politics, because it doesn’t come prefabricated with a prescriptive notion of political agency (his approach is unapologetically socially weightless), but is instead grounded in the axiomatic assumption of a radical equality between individuals that is enacted through negations of the existing social order. Nonetheless, McNay thinks the merits of Rancière’s work are undercut by an ‘all or nothing’ (p131) conception of politics that rests on a ‘quasi-mystical’

demarcation of the political from a technocratic ‘police’ order that manages a default condition of anti-politics (p163). Consequently, he cannot satisfactorily explain how political agency ‘arises mysteriously from the asymmetrical order of the police’ (p160), which leaves him assuming what McNay characterises as a curiously depoliticised posture of his own that is either dismissive of contemporary (anti)political struggles or nostalgic for the nineteenth-century figures that he takes as emblematic of politics proper.

The penultimate chapter of the book discusses the work of William Connolly and James Tully, who, although quite different theorists, are brought together because of what McNay sees as their shared commitment to a ‘practice-centered approach to radical democracy’ (p165) that highlights the plurality, diversity and creativity of everyday political struggles. In Connolly’s case, this takes the form of a political ontology that stresses the positivity and generative character of the social, alongside the agented capacity of non-human material forces, in contrast to the negative and linguistically-based ontology of other radical democrats. McNay criticises Connolly for propagating an ‘exoticised idea of becoming’ (p176) that privileges the concerns of ‘those who already have a political voice’ (p186) and ‘ignores negative aspects of the lived reality of inequality’ (p. 176). Tully is likewise interrogated for presupposing a ‘certain degree of political agency on the part of oppressed groups that may not in fact be there’ (p194), and for exhibiting a romantic faith in the possibility of dialogue. His stress on the transformative potential of the ‘games of freedom’ (p189) played by citizens cannot capture the difficulties faced by disempowered groups in contesting and transforming ‘the rules... of the political game itself’ (p48), illustrating an inadequate understanding of power that McNay also discerns in his exaggeration of the decentered character of neoliberal governance.

Readers coming to the book with affinities to the different theorists will question various aspects of McNay’s readings, or point to other post-foundational work that belies some of her claims. Her argument about the over-reliance on a stylised division between ontological and empirical levels of analysis is well made, though the implication that this necessarily leads to a prescriptive, formulaic or explicitly normative account of politics is less persuasive. I found the engagement with Connolly the most unconvincing aspect of the book, particularly when McNay accuses him of articulating a ‘quietest’ (p186) and insufficiently radical vocabulary of politics. The argument reverses the critique made against Mouffe earlier in the book, whose absolute view of the political is unfavourably contrasted with more gradualist and micro-political forms of political agency. It also misses aspects of Connolly’s work that seem to resonate with McNay’s own conception of critique, not least his commitment to working with, while also radicalising, given understandings of pluralism.

These quibbles aside, *The Misguided Search for the Political* is a superb book, which ultimately offers arguments for strengthening, rather than discarding,

the radical democratic tradition. McNay is a formidable political theorist in her own right - and an excellent writer - and she ends the book with different suggestions for reinvigorating the approaches she interrogates. These cohere in her desire to see radical democrats embrace more interdisciplinary 'dialogue with different modes of inquiry', particularly social theory, with the 'aim of grounding political theory in sociological reconstruction rather than ontological construction' (p211). The hope is to cultivate a form of radical political imagination that, as Bourdieu puts it, thinks in accordance 'with the tendencies of the world' (p214), while also disclosing a more concrete sense of how those tendencies could be otherwise.

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