Mind The Gap

Ben Highmore

Marc Augé, *In the Metro*, Tom Conley (trans), Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 125pp; £43.50 hardback; £15.50 paperback.

One of anthropology's characteristic ways of operating is to take the ordinary surface details of daily practice, and with these details weave tales of epic proportions. Eating, dwelling, washing, and the like, are viewed through an optic that wants to understand the world in terms of the big stories; birth and death, love and hate, shame and honour, power and weakness. Or rather: what has characterised anthropology in the past is its interest in viewing bits of the world in this way, bits of the world seen as pre-modern, or traditional, or – to use an older, more obviously problematic vocabulary – native and savage. Yet anthropology is changing, and has been changing for some considerable time. The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, for instance, in his wonderful *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, describes how, at the end of a visit to his prospective in-laws, he put the daily breakfast rituals of this North American family under anthropological scrutiny. Sitting at the breakfast table, and with 'tender malice', Rosaldo launches into his ethnographic description:

> Every morning the reigning patriarch, as if just in from the hunt, shouts from the kitchen, 'How many people would like a poached egg?' Women and children take turns saying yes or no.
>
> In the meantime, the women talk among themselves and designate one among them the toast maker. As the eggs near readiness, the reigning patriarch calls out to the designated toast maker, 'The eggs are about ready. Is there enough toast?'
>
> 'Yes' comes the deferential reply. 'The last two pieces are about to pop up.' The reigning patriarch then proudly enters bearing a plate of poached eggs before him.
>
> Throughout the course of the meal, the women and children, including the designated toast maker, perform the obligatory ritual praise song, saying, 'These sure are great eggs, Dad'.[1]

Rosaldo performs what on the face of it might have seemed little more than a parlour trick and receives, somewhat to his relief we assume, gales of laughter. But for Rosaldo this performance and its reception makes him 'wonder why a manner of speaking that sounds like the literal "truth" when describing distant cultures seems terribly funny as a description of "us"'?[2]

1. Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989, p47.

2. Ibid., p48.

Anthropology is caught in the asymmetry of colonial histories, histories that still separate the vanquished and the vanquishing. It can't operate as if such histories didn't impact at every level of its project. Yet despite, or because of the epistemological minefield it operates in, there is something wonderfully ambitious about its desire to continue to opt for the big stories, to talk about what in life is significant, rather than simply what signifies.

Marc Augé is an anthropologist who, since the mid 1960s, has specialized in the study of African societies, particularly in the regions of Ghana, Ivory Coast, Togo, and Nigeria. But unusually, Augé has also written a body of work that could be considered under the heading 'anthropology in reverse' – work that treats aspects of contemporary French culture to ethnological analysis. In a number of books Augé has topics such as football, up-market real-estate advertising, airport lounges and motorways, the auto-ethnography of the everyday, and, in the book under consideration here, the Paris metro.[3] Anthropology redirected – a perspective with which to imaginatively estrange the most taken for granted aspects of contemporary *Western* culture – is not without precedent, of course, and it has not always solicited laughter. Such an operation was fundamental to the dissident surrealist tradition exemplified by Georges Bataille. In another vein you can glimpse its appeal in an array of British projects: for instance in the work of 'Mass Observation', the early ethnographic practice of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, and the work of anthropologists such as Marilyn Strathern, Tim Ingold, and Daniel Miller.

There is a politics associated with a general redirecting of anthropology, and it is most succinctly summarized in the words of Paul Rabinow:

> We need to anthropologize the West: show how exotic its constitution of reality has been; emphasize those domains most taken for granted as universal (this includes epistemology and economics); make them seem as historically peculiar as possible; show how their claims to truth are linked to social practices and have hence become effective forces in the social world.[4]

Such a project can be seen as a response to a number of critical moments: not least the moment of postmodern distrust of the legitimating narratives of Western civilization (so-called), and the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism (though, as Rabinow makes clear elsewhere, the disastrous saga of the Vietnam war also did much to politicize a generation of anthropologists). 'Anthropology in reverse' would work not to right (or re-write) the wrongs of ethnocentric anthropology, but to cause a partial reverse in the global order of knowledge. Classically this has meant hunting down the irrationality at the heart of the rational, of bringing to light the mythic beliefs of secular cultures. Rabinow himself has proven as good as his word, swapping 'fieldwork in Morocco' (work which already contained a nuanced reflection on the anthropology of 'the distant') for archival work on French

3. As well as Tom Conley's excellent 'introduction' and 'afterword' in the volume under review, Michael Sheringham has provided a particularly useful and critical overview of this aspect of Augé's work; see Michael Sheringham, 'Marc Augé and the ethno-analysis of contemporary life', *Paragraph*, volume 18, number 2, (1995), pp210-22.

4. Paul Rabinow, *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, p36.

colonial governmentality, and ethnographic studies of contemporary corporate science industries.[5]

Augé's achievement needs some careful differentiating from this orientation. Not that Augé would find much wrong in such projects; indeed he is evidently sympathetic to these politics. But what needs filling in is the particular French intellectual context of Augé's work. The everyday as an object of intellectual attention is peculiarly rich and complex in France. The sociological and anthropological tradition of Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi-Strauss are a persistent point of reference, but more implicit is the approach to everyday life diversely fashioned through Surrealism, the Marxist critiques of Henri Lefebvre, the Situationists, the sociology of Edgar Morin, the work of Barthes (*Mythologies*, but also his much later work), the writing of novelists like Nathalie Sarraute and Georges Perec, and on to Michel de Certeau. At stake here is not simply the critical project of directing attention to different objects (everyday life in France); the distinctiveness of this tradition lies partly in its concern with finding a new poetics with which to register the submerged terrain of the everyday. This has at times resulted in ethnographic work that is experimental, that foregrounds aesthetic concerns (the sensual forms of experience, and the poetics of re-presenting such experience), and which is prepared to turn the epistemological foundations of the social sciences on their head.

Take for example Augé's preface to an earlier translation of some pages of *In the Metro*, where he describes his approach to the Paris metro:

> As an ethnologist in the metro, I have tried to be my own 'native', my own informant; I have tried to surprise myself with the questions I asked myself as I had no doubt surprised others when I questioned them; I have tried, in sum, starting from the subjective, yet directed exploration, to understand (forgive me a little!) what culture, as personal experience of shared identity and recognized alterity, was.[6]

The distance between knower and known, between the ethnographic roles of 'participant observer' and 'native informant' is problematised, muddied, imploded. This distance is what secures knowledge for much anthropology, and legitimizes its claims of specialism. Distance is what is needed to guarantee that insider know-how is interpretively explored through the authority of outsider knowledge. But if the first move is epistemologically devastating, the second is curiously enigmatic, and seemingly unstable ('forgive me a little'). The enigma results from the suturing of opposites that are used to characterise culture: personal/shared, recognition/alterity.

Central to Augé's project is what Michel de Certeau designated as a 'science of singularity'. At first this seems like a straightforward oxymoron: if the object of study is irrefutably singular, particular and specific (the endless heterogeneity of metro experiences), then how can science, whose currency is the repeatable and the general (The Metro), describe the inquiry? Such

5. See, Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977; *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989; and *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

6. Marc Augé, 'An Ethnologist in the Metro', *Sites*, volume 1, number 1, p270.

contradictions might simply describe a head-on collision, a derailment of any productive work. Yet a 'science of singularity' has, in the hands of de Certeau and Augé, shifted the focus of investigation away from the mapping of general patterns of meaning ('for riders on the metro the turnstiles signify a zone of liminality', for instance) to the speculative study of the patterns of experiential commerce with the world. The shift is from culture as something like a lexicon of meanings, to culture as practices of combination, selection, and displacement, where meaning can never be guaranteed in advance. In other words, a science of singularity takes the study of everyday operational performances as its object. The gamble for such a science is enormous: if bets are off on there being general structures of meaning, a science of singularity is still prepared to wager on a general logic of everyday practices, a range of techniques and methods alive in the everyday world.

Augé's approach to ethnology requires a methodology capable of continual adjustment, a methodology that 'pays attention' (as de Certeau would put it). When advising an imaginary apprentice ethnologist to study the metro, Augé is adamant; 'no strategy of inquiry can be found here' (59). The ethnographer proceeds by intuition, guesswork, trial and error. Against the protocols of positivist social science (interviewing, interrogating, and polling) Augé suggests a 'soft' and open methodology of observation, listening and conversation. What results is the amassing of ethnographic snapshots: 'The apprentice can try to classify them by genre; maybe then the resulting inventory will begin to take shape, in a promising way, with a little optimism and imagination: a thousand items recorded, a hundred possible poems, ten future novels - which correspond to ten vocations' (60). Interdisciplinary and endlessly accumulative, ethnography is also an invention (what else could it be?) that requires inventiveness.

But the real problem is still how to manage the contradiction between the absolute singularity of experience and the collectivity of the social. As Tom Conley puts it in his 'afterword': 'Each subway rider, too, discovers that his or her daily journey is unlike any other, including those of the traveller in his or her past, but that it resembles to a T so many that consume the minutes and hours of a lifetime. Entering the fray are the figures of difference and repetition, of reiteration, routine, habit, and listless drift' (84). The simultaneous experience of collectivity and solitude is a central figure for Augé's account of metro life, and allows him to describe a space where social difference is emphatic, and yet where some sort of collective alterity is also ever-present:

> I see them go by every evening, at Sèvres-Babylone, squeezed together like sardines in the subway cars or sprinting down the corridors - men and women, old and young, schoolchildren, secretaries, professors, employees, bums, Europeans, Africans, Gypsies, Iranians, Asians, Americans - all these subterranean travellers so different from one another, whose regular movements (like those of the Atlantic Ocean,

with its high and low tides and its periods of strong or dead waters) suggest nonetheless that they are animated, shaken, tossed together, and dispersed by the same force of attraction.

For Conley, Augé's work provides a 'cartography of affect' (111). And affect is an organising principle of the book, as it moves from 'memories', to 'solitudes', to 'correspondences'. Describing affect for a science of singularity means locating it at precisely those levels of general performativity where identity and alterity are transformed: 'for such is, really, for those who take it every day, the prosaic definition of the metro: collectivity without festival and solitude without isolation' (30).

Marc Augé is, I would imagine, best known in the English-reading world for his book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*.[7] The non-places (*non-lieux*) of supermodernity are those peculiarly empty, homogenous bubbles of space, over-filled with a signage that performs mostly negative description and commands. So London's Heathrow airport is like Beijing's airport, which is like the one in Detroit, and so on. All thrive on offering you images that are significantly absent from the actuality of the place, and all seem keen to tell you what not to do. Likewise when you are driving along a motorway, most of the time you could be any place, yet what tells you where you are is often road-side hoardings describing what you are missing: 'you are now passing Constable country'. Such empty-fullness is seen as peculiarly thin in harbouring the density of experience: memory finds little foothold.

7. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, John Howe (trans), London, Verso, 1995.

Non-Places was first published in France in 1992, and in English translation just three years later. *In the Metro* (*Un ethnologue dans le métro*), was originally published in France in 1986, and has waited sixteen years for translation by the indefatigable Tom Conley. The difference in time-lags may be telling. *Non-Places* seemed to find an easy place amongst the literature on postmodernity; indeed, as a work of 'cognitive mapping' of the spatiality of postmodernity it must surely be a key text. *In the Metro* doesn't seem to fit any established genre of Anglophone academic writing, though its vacillation between vividly autobiographical writing and methodological reflection might well constitute something of a sub-genre on the margins of academic and more public modes of address (think of some of the work of John Berger, for instance). In some sense, then, it would seem 'occasional' if it weren't for the fact that Augé has pursued this aspect of his work with considerable tenacity and invention. Perhaps its recent translation signals the opening up of Anglophone cultural studies to a more experimental approach to the ethnography of the everyday.

In translation, furthermore, the order of publication of the two books has been reversed; and such re-ordering offers a chance for reflection. In France *In the Metro* was followed, some years later, by *Non-Places*, and suggested a momentum by which the fullness of space, instanced by the Paris metro, was gradually (or amazingly quickly, depending on your analysis)

replaced by a new empty spatial functionalism. Read in translation, in reverse order, *In the Metro* reminds us precisely of the kind of spaces consistently ignored in the over zealous mapping of postmodernity. It reminds us of the tenacious presence of older systems, spatial orders, and technologies in the everyday. But it also raises a question: is there some ontological difference between the non-place of the airport lounge and the place of the Paris metro? Or are such differences an effect of historical time, where the metro has become both outmoded and available for nostalgia? And when a new super-supermodernity ushers in newer modalities of space, can we expect the non-places to become places, replete with mnemonic potential? The outmoded, as the surrealists knew, harbours lost dreams and broken promises. Perhaps only time will tell if the non-places of a new shopping mall can become the richly experienced place of the metro. We will need to wait for a further generation of ethnographers, searching out the outmoded spaces of the future …

Deleuze: Ontologist Of The Virtual

Claire Colebrook

Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Continuum, London, 2002; 242pp; £16.99 paperback; £55 hardback.

Despite its claims not to be a book for Deleuzians, and despite its apparent terminology that draws from mathematics, physics and biology, Manuel DeLanda's *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* is a profoundly Deleuzian book. Reading a great philosopher, Deleuze insists, requires looking beyond the manifest text to the problem that motivates the work. A problem differs from a question precisely to the extent that it inaugurates a new sense, a new way of thinking, a new orientation and conceptualisation - establishing a new plane in which philosophy takes place. Not only does DeLanda insist on the problem that makes sense of Deleuze - the problem of an ontology of the virtual, rather than already given essences; he also fleshes out, illuminates and *justifies* the problem. This is not one of those Deleuzian books that repeats the surface of Deleuze's text - his terminology of rhizomes, nomads, lines of flight, schizos or BWOs. Indeed, DeLanda's book concludes with a translation of Deleuze's terminology and a note on Deleuze's need to shift similar terms to different problems. This is, perhaps, a book that undertakes what Deleuze would refer to as profound repetition, for it aims to repeat the force that gave rise to the Deleuzian corpus.

DeLanda's book is a rare act of philosophical responsibility that sets itself against all those 'postmodern' appropriations of Deleuze's language without assembling the sense and justification of that language. DeLanda reads and explains Deleuze's terminology through developments in mathematics, thermodynamics, biology and physics. The main tenet of the book is Deleuze's translatability. What might appear to be a reactive endeavour - to render Deleuze palatable to the analytic philosophical community - provides an opportunity to consider just how Deleuze's work alters and enhances the possibilities for doing philosophy. If Deleuze's arguments are valid and have force then they ought to have a sense or truth that is capable of being re-presented beyond their original context and terminology. For this reason, DeLanda's attempt to convert 'analytic' philosophers to Deleuze is less an attempt to win over the hostile but more respectable members of the academic community and more an engagement with mathematics and those who profess a deep commitment to the *literal*. If Jacques Derrida's 'deconstruction' is too readily assimilated to an attack on philosophy that valorises text and writing, it was nevertheless Derrida himself who suggested that there can be no such thing as mathematical

metaphors.[1] The mathematical is the pure function of relation before all image and affect. It is this aspect of the mathematical, its absolute priority and virtuality, that DeLanda hopes to release from Deleuze. If there is a truth to what Deleuze says then we must be able to re-state that truth beyond its textual vehicles. De Landa's passage to this literal, translatable truth is also a passage to the very genesis or origin of *life*. We must not, he insists, begin from a world of formed organisms, of types, of stable states, or of essences or natural kinds; for these objective illusions are *effects* of the force of life. And this force can be traced back from the metric space of distributed, bounded and stable identities to the intensive differences, which are the mobile and dynamic tendencies of these organisms. From tendencies we can go further back (or upwards) until finally we reach the force of life from which these various dimensions of difference emerge.

By *explaining* Deleuze's formed terminology, DeLanda moves back to the truth of the virtual continuum - the space of spaces, which is the genesis of the differences that we observe. Deleuze, then, is justified and given sense through the description of developments in science and mathematics. One of the key explanations is DeLanda's elucidation of state space. Here, what a thing *is*, its recognisable identity or kind, is the outcome of a process. First, there is the production of a space with a certain degree of freedom or power of variation. These powers are not *possibilities* - what may or may not happen to an actual thing - but *real* potentials; the space is the real virtual existence of a power for various states to emerge, or various branches to be actualised, with nothing in the space determining what will actually be selected. This space is inflected by singularities or points, towards which movement may tend, and from this distribution of singularities further transformations and bifurcations may irreversibly shift all these forces into an entirely new configuration. The new, therefore, is not determined by the past, but the potential for this unpredictable and open newness is nevertheless real: the reality of the virtual. The virtual should not be read back from the real as a mere thought - as what may or may not have happened; the virtual is a reality from which the actual world that we know has happened to emerge. DeLanda's virtual reality is a world of non-linear equations, where the possibility of multiple outcomes is crucial to what something is. This is not, then, an ontology of essences: stable states or ideas that are then exemplified in actual bodies. This is a world of the virtual where the power or force to differ creates populations from which 'we' observe points of relative stability. To reduce the world or reality to observed relations is the 'objective illusion' against which DeLanda's Deleuze is set.

If this book is Deleuzian in its passage to the literal genesis of difference, there are also aspects that appear to work against the ultimate Deleuzian imperative: ask not what it means but how it works. DeLanda's book answers Alan Sokal's glib attack on French philosophy[2] by insisting on Deleuze's scientific rigour and on Deleuze's possible contribution to science and

1. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass (trans), Sussex, Harvester, 1982, p227.

2. Alan D. Sokal, *Impostures Intellectuelles*, Paris, Éditions Odile Jacob, 1997

analytic philosophy. But in what sense, then, is Deleuze's work read as philosophy? In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari make a distinction of kind between science and philosophy: philosophy is not the grounding of science; nor is science a more rigorous version of philosophical vagueness. If science is the power to observe the world literally - from any point whatever - philosophy is the creation of concepts which, having observed or perceived the world, allow one to imagine the world of thought in its figural dimension. If art's figures are affective or sensible, philosophy's are enabling and potential, allowing thought to create images of its own creative power. DeLanda's approach to Deleuze from the history and philosophy of science may lead us to question just what the Deleuzian legacy is. Do we take the idea of philosophy as it is affirmed by Deleuze to move beyond science, or do we take the thought of science as it is affirmed by DeLanda to give legitimacy to philosophy?

.

The Irish Difference

David Alderson

Claire Connolly (ed), *Theorising Ireland*, Houndmills and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 215pp; £16.50 paperback, £49.50 hardback.

Irish Studies is a peculiarly heterogeneous field, though not one which is always happy with its constitutive differences. In terms of disciplinarity, two of its most important constituents are history and cultural criticism, though by and large each has a tendency to speak disdainfully of the other: empiricist history sets its teeth against theoreticist cultural studies, whereas cultural critics tend to lament the theoretical naivety of historians. Then there is the matter of ideological differences and conflicts, of which, needless to say, there are many. It's not the kind of field which might be united by certain presuppositions - as, say, postcolonialism largely is - and the status of postcolonial theory and its relevance to Ireland is a particular bone of contention for all concerned. Ireland tends to be marginalised within postcolonial studies, whereas postcolonialism - both because of crude anti-theoretical views and because such theories are perceived to be on the side of nationalism - is regarded scathingly by some in Irish Studies.

In many respects, this perception of an affinity between theory and nationalism is confirmed by the collection under review. No-one here challenges the former colonial status of Ireland, and critiques of nationalism tend either to be feminist or, as with David Lloyd's, directed specifically at nationalisms which aspire towards state formation. (Lloyd's work elsewhere expresses sympathy for non-modern, by which he means non-state-oriented, forms of nationalism). An interesting question is therefore raised about what qualifies as theorisation of Ireland. Perhaps Edna Longley's tendency to accept that theory = nationalism disqualifies her from inclusion in this book, but it would have been valuable to have something from Francis Mulhern - his brief attack on 'postcolonial melancholy', for instance, or, even better, part of his rich, moving and thoughtful introduction to *The Present Lasts a Long Time* - as a genuinely dissenting yet resolutely theoretical voice.

That said, Claire Connolly has done Irish Studies a service by bringing together a rich and at times surprising collection of materials which speak well to each other. She declares that a desire to 'show how theory has helped mark out a space between scepticism and reverence' towards (official) Irish culture governed her decisions about what got included (p10), and in this respect it is appropriate that the collection begins with Seamus Deane's account of Yeats and Joyce, two figures whose responses to Irish culture prefigure a great many others since – in the form, respectively, of 'spiritual heroics' or the tendency to make 'a fetish of exile, alienation and dislocation'

(25). Deane expresses the need - one which informs the project of Field Day - to move beyond such a sterile opposition. (Shaun Richards's piece here critically scrutinises the success of that Field Day project with particular reference to Stewart Parker's play *Pentecost*.)

But within this space, substantial differences open up, many of which relate to Ireland's modernity, the desirability or otherwise of such modernisation and the affinities between Ireland's cultural and political forms and those of postmodernity. Angela Bourke, for instance, retrieves from the condescension of posterity an oral, subaltern discourse about fairies, finding in the analogy of virtual reality a means of revaluing that discourse; Christopher Morash discovers proto-Foucaultian ideas in the writing of John Mitchell. Also of relevance here is David Lloyd's 'The Spirit of the Nation', which considers the discourse of Young Ireland and its complicity with unionist ideology, since 'the programme of Young Ireland comes to replicate the very aesthetic history that legitimates the subordination of the Celtic races … It is the failing of Irish nationalism never to have questioned the idealism of identity thinking, which, even in its resistance to imperialism, links it closely to imperialist ideology' (172). This, of course, establishes Lloyd's close affinities with a significant strand of postcolonial theory, but it is not an argument which goes unchallenged elsewhere in this collection. Terry Eagleton, for instance, adopts a characteristically dialectical view of nationalism in his essay on the ambiguous position of Ireland as a colony *within* the Union. For him, 'There is certainly a fair amount in nationalism which mimics the power it opposes; but the criticism, as it stands, is altogether too facile. There is no contradiction in the fact that radical movements are products of the system they seek to contest; if they were not, but moved instead in some metaphysically distinct space, they would be incapable of challenging it' (90). In an explicit critique of Lloyd which contains a valuable discussion of the history of the concept of 'the subaltern' from Gramsci to Spivak and beyond, Colin Graham highlights the dangers of conceiving (female) subalternity as authentic only if untainted by the power which comes with success - that is, with the achievement of hegemony.

If there has been one way through which body and state in Irish history have conspicuously been brought together it is through the figuration of Ireland as woman, and this perhaps has something to do with the fact that the three essays in this collection which focus most closely on aesthetics are by women. Connolly has chosen two essays - Patricia Coughlan on Heaney and John Montague; Siobhán Kilfeather on the nineteenth century novel - which pay close attention to the ways in which femininity, and particularly feminine sexuality, are represented in relation to both Irish nationalism and British colonialism. Coughlan's conclusions are perhaps the ones we might expect, but are none the less arrived at through meticulous readings of the work, whereas Kilfeather revises received opinion about the nineteenth century Irish novel on the grounds that it entails an occlusion of women's writing. Clair Wills's sense that in the work of McGuckian, Muldoon and

Paulin the conventional distinctions between public and private are called into question is clearly also informed by a feminist impulse to deconstruct the relation to these two spheres, though her concern is explicitly with these relations in the politics of (Northern) Irishness.

The state figures prominently in Irish Studies not only because of the failures or otherwise of the Irish Republic, of course, but because of the divided statehood of the land. As many commentators have noted, this division ideologically determines many attitudes towards Ireland and Irishness even in writing not explicitly concerned with partition. There is nothing in this collection to represent any shade of Unionism, but in Richard Kirkland's discussion of the Ulster Museum - devoted to the nine, rather than six, counties and bound up with a regionalist discourse which includes the writings of the poet John Hewitt - there is an acute examination of the ways in which land and politics enmesh in complex ways, particularly in Unionist discourse.

At first glance, *Theorising Ireland* appears a rather eclectic mix, but that appearance deceives, since there are numerous themes and debates going on throughout these pieces. Some of these essays are from texts which have established themselves as seminal in Irish cultural studies; others relate to seminal cultural figures. But Connolly's selection is not what one might have predicted: it includes important emergent voices as well as dominant ones and covers a range of cultural forms - poetry, fiction, drama, material culture, political discourse. It therefore provides an excellent introduction to general concerns through examples of some of the most stimulating cultural criticism in the field.

The Tyranny Of Already Existing Interpretations

Kelwyn Sole

Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 290 pp; £45.00 hardback, £16.95 paperback.

Both as a method of study and a revolutionary practice, Marxism approached its nadir around the time of the collapse of Eastern European communism. Nevertheless, and despite its doomsayers, it has not disappeared into oblivion as simply another teleological master-narrative rendered obsolete by postmodernity. In fact these days it seems to be staging something of a recovery; and one of the areas of recovery is the interdisciplinary field which has come to be known as postcolonial studies. The introduction and twelve essays contained in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* attempt to address this phenomenon, and to map out the contours within which Marxism can speak to, or interact with, this field more productively than in the past.

The first few essays in this collection concentrate on re-examining the category of the 'West' as used within current formulations of postcolonial studies. These are in the main cogent and powerful. August Nimtz and Pranav Jani tackle the conviction that Marxism is fatally flawed by a tendency to portray European modernity as a necessary, if brutal, harbinger of 'progressive' relations to precapitalist non-Western societies, and therefore merely an adjunct of the Eurocentric assumptions Marxists wish to critique. Marx's newspaper articles on the Indian Revolt of 1857 are crucial for both of these writers - as indeed they are for Marx's detractors. Jani and Nimtz, however, emphasise the changing nature of Marx's opinions in these articles. Under the impact of the Revolt, Marx moves from the inflexibility of the 'Asiatic Mode of Production', and an exclusive focus on the effects of the Revolt on Britain, and begins to analyse mechanisms of colonial exploitation and theorise the struggles of colonial Indians. For Jani, it is the dialectical method of historical materialism that allows Marx to move beyond the prejudices of the early articles towards a more complex understanding of agency in anti-colonial struggles. Nimtz notes that postcolonial thinkers' disposition to view Marxism as Eurocentric is based more on already existing interpretations (such as Said's) than on any close examination of the texts of Marx and Engels. He argues for their credentials as revolutionaries struggling for a global perspective and an understanding of capitalism's operations; he also rejects the common perceptions that, for Marx and

Engels England was the exemplary model of capitalist development, as well as claims that Marx was dismissive of the presence of the peasantry as a factor in global development.

The articles by Neil Lazarus and Giovanni Arrighi in the same section focus on different areas. Arrighi cites with approval Andre Gunder Frank's critique of the belief that Europe was the epicentre of the world economy, from where it began spreading outwards in the fifteenth century. He goes on to criticise the assumption that the nation state was the single most important agent of economic globalisation (and that successfully modernising states necessarily follow a putative 'European' model), and demonstrates the importance of interstitial institutions and alliances for capitalist development. The influence of a pre-existing Sinocentric system of trade and tribute on the forms taken by industrialisation within Asia, and the importance in Europe of the Genoese-Iberian complex with its constellation of city-states, are mentioned as important additional mechanisms. The essay demonstrates by example the need for more precise and contextualised versions of the relationships of Europe with its 'Others' than most postcolonial studies have allowed. Moreover, it implies questions about the manner in which postcolonial theorists have typecast Marxism as necessarily Eurocentric and unable to conceptualise colonial agency outside simplistic binaries of resistance or submersion. The suggestion resonates with the shrewd dismembering of Parthak Chatterjee by Priyamvada Gopal elsewhere in the volume.

Lazarus makes short shrift of the article of faith in postcolonial studies that global modernity can be viewed simply as an 'effect of the consolidation and subsequent dispersal of a [Western] civilisation or cultural logic' (p47). Said's *Orientalism* is, of course, central to this; and while Lazarus praises the manner in which that work lays bare the artifice of a constructed notion of 'Western' 'civilisation' which powerfully abetted European colonial penetration, he lays bare the logical *non sequitur* that allows Said and his followers at the same time to reveal this as an ideological construct *and* use it as a lynchpin of their own subsequent analysis. Taken as a metonymy, the 'West' has come to assume a transhistorical cultural, political and economic unity which ignores the region's own historical discontinuities, social struggles and contradictions. As such, in Said et al it has come to be used in an essentialised and rigid manner dependent on an obsessively cultural prism. This is not the first time such points have been made; but Lazarus's argument is noteworthy for its incisiveness; and the manner in which he uses it as a launching pad for (albeit short) critiques of those who have been associated with postcolonial studies (Mohanty, Said) and others who have not (Ngugi, Chinweizu, Rodney) will no doubt bear further fruit.

The middle section, entitled 'Locating modernity', contains something of a rag-bag of essays which do not sit easily together. This does not mean to say that some of them are not fascinating. Helen Scott's interrogation of the relationship between racism and capitalism explores areas adjacent to

Lazarus. Her intervention manages to avoid crude economistic explorations while maintaining the connection between the two; and is persuasive both in its exploration of the (contingent) reasons plantation owners in the New World came to prefer labour from Africa, and in its discussion of the manner in which the competing claims of individual rights vis-à-vis ownership of property allowed slavery to be rationalised within early modern Europe. The critique of Winthrop Jordan's interpretation of Hakluyt that follows is long overdue. On a different topic, Joe Cleary's narrative of the conditions of emergence of postcolonial studies within Ireland demonstrates the need to research and understand local, and differing, intellectual, political and other factors which condition the emergence of local forms of colonial modernity. Cleary's comparative study not only explores Ireland's credentials as a colony, but highlights the manner in which postcolonial studies might add a global and interdisciplinary dimension to the delimiting geographical isolation in which most 'area studies' were and are conducted. At the same time, the essay utters a warning about generalising studies which do not pay sufficient attention to context.

Of course, it is no longer possible (if it ever was) to talk of Marxism in the singular. Despite Crystal Bartolovich's assurance that there might be 'more productive ways of dealing with … differences [between Marxism and postcolonial studies] than have been exhibited hitherto' (p1), it is noticeable that not all contributors to this volume appear equally sanguine about the prospects of a dialogue between the two, or agree on the terms through which this could be conducted. What is currently called 'postcolonial studies' has emerged, as Timothy Brennan notes, hand-in-glove with a particular kind of 'post-al' theory, in the form of 'genealogical displacements, psychoanalytic treatments of the subject, analyses of discursive power, and programmatic demands for decentring' (p185). Thus the academy has given a particular theoretical matrix a currency from which this book's contributors wish to distance themselves. A number of essays point out how the current postcolonial canon pre-empts criticism of its own silences and contradictions; further, that the destabilising of Western hegemonies and the empowering of alternative discourses have a practical and intellectual history which precedes this particular brand of 'theory' by many decades. The most apparent of its predecessors was, of course, Marxism. In the final section of the book, a number of essays draw attention to the importance and continuing relevance of this prior tradition for postcolonial studies, by examining the histories of anti-colonial intellectual and artistic movements and texts. In so doing they expose the limited and stereotyping readings postcolonial luminaries and their forebears (such as Althusser) have made of Marxism. Of these readings, Neil Larsen's discussion of Spivak's (deliberate?) misreading of a passage in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is particularly convincing.

Larsen is to the point when he notes that, in order to move beyond such symptomatic and self-serving readings of Marx, it is necessary to restate

Marxism as 'a *method* [implying] a *necessary* relation of theory and practice' (p205). In the spirit that informs some of the contributions here, it might be possible for postcolonialists embedded in poststructuralism, or writing from the perspective of postmodern politics, to utilise some of the insights of Marxism to enhance their weak areas of analysis, just as it might be possible for Marxists to return the favour. Up to a point, the contributions here demonstrate some of the ways Marxists have had to realign their questions and areas of focus in the face of poststructuralist criticisms. However, as one or two of the contributors note, there are profound methodological and philosophical disagreements between postcolonial studies in its present theoretical turn and Marxism in some areas, and it is less than obvious how such disagreements can be bridged in any so-called 'equal' dialogue; for example, as Larsen notes in passing, the dialectical method of historical materialism must be anathema to a deconstructionist such as Spivak (as, presumably, would be the neo-Hegelian sweep of his own logic).

The book's strength is the powerful, long-overdue critiques of postcolonialist articles of faith it contains; postcolonial thinkers also come to wallow in their own stereotypes and binaries, as Sumit Sarkar has pointed out.[1] Yet it is the final theoretically-oriented section which is most crucial to this project; and it is this section that emerges for me as simultaneously tantalisingly suggestive and less than adequate. This might in part be a problem of space: Larsen's interesting discussion of 'labour' as category and social reality in a changing global arena seems to be an afterthought, and its succinct nature is to be regretted. Even if the suggestions he makes about more productive ways to redefine subalternity in line with recent structural transformations in labour globally are controversial, they are made in a spirit of enquiry about Marxist categories that is obligatory in a book such as this.

1. Sumit Sarkar, 'Post-modernism and the Writing of History', *Studies in History* vol. 15, no. 2 (1999), pp315-16.

It is surely correct to note, as a number of contributors do, that one of the most glaring silences in postcolonial studies relates to the study of capitalism; this is an area where Marxism has obvious strengths - accusations that some of its premises are outdated notwithstanding. Yet to reiterate the need for scrutiny of the economy in understanding postcolonial social relations brings up the (here relatively neglected) issue of social determination(s). It should not be forgotten that one of the loudest condemnations of Marxism made during the emergence of postcolonial theory bore on its supposed economic reductionism; and issues of mediation and determination (and even the old base/superstructure model) raise their ghostly heads at points in the arguments of a number of essays. Often direct confrontation with the problem would have been useful: the single exception by E. San Juan - although pertinent - serves to highlight the lack of discussion of this area elsewhere. This is especially the case given contemporary Marxists' recognition of the manner in which globalisation has spawned an intricate web of determinations (what Bartolovich refers to as the 'density of mediations … that make … intrication with political economy obscure,

but not ... unreadable' - p12) seems far more productive than the poststructuralist tendency to eschew the concept.[2]

It is certainly accurate to point out (as a number of these essays do) that the problems in the poststructuralist and linguistic turns of postcolonial studies are becoming clearer. One can only agree with Keya Ganguly that it is time to look afresh at the concepts and objects that postcolonial studies - in its poststructuralist and deconstructionist turns - 'swept to the wayside on the march to self-reflexivity' (p241). And so - though I remain unconvinced that the notion of 'authenticity' is anything but a conceptual landmine, even if read through Adorno - her urge to examine such concepts, rather than accept them as matters of faith, is compelling. Indeed, in differing ways, both her and Brennan's arguments could have been strengthened with reference to Gregor McLennan's observation that the rejection of the methodologies of modernity by 'post-al' theories has been less absolute than claimed; that in fact, studies conducted within these paradigms still commit a number of conceptual and methodological 'sins' such as essentialism and reductionism.[3]

Yet, postcolonial theory aside, it is surely important to look at some of Marxism's own dilemmas. If postcolonial studies have had any effect, it has surely been to incline Marxists to use some of their own terms and concepts in a more wary, problematising fashion. The most worrying aspect of this collection is the manner in which more salient existing critiques of the history of socialism as a practice go unanswered. Its dissections of postcolonial studies as presently constituted are powerful; yet, especially if one views Marxism as a theory which demands praxis, it is uncomfortably true that there were certain failures in this regard which made necessary the critiques conducted in postcolonial studies (and elsewhere) in the first place. It is difficult to see how Brennan can refer to the Third International in the inter-war period and not pay more attention to the dire effects of Comintern policy within the programmes of *inter alia* the anti-colonial movement of the time. Similarly, there is no attempt in his article to contextualise Althusser's poststructuralism (both in theory and as regards its implications for praxis) as a response to the crudities of the concepts and programmes of the French Communist Party. I looked in vain in the essays by Benita Parry and San Juan for discussion of the conceptual and practical problems of Marxism in its anti-colonial avatars. It was, after all, Amilcar Cabral who coined the phrase, 'tell no lies, claim no easy victories'; and some scrutiny would have been useful of the crippling political problems that occurred in Guinea-Bissau and elsewhere as a result of the rhetorical smoothing-over effected by the notion of 'class suicide' among activist intellectuals. While Parry is doubtless correct to say that the ignoring of African Marxist theorists by metropolitan postcolonial critics is as much a silencing of non-Western knowledges as the other examples they themselves abjure, one cannot escape the feeling that some of the less attractive (and less successful) features of Marxism-Leninism as espoused in Africa - such as rote adherence to

2. As an example of the type of study I believe is missing here, see Peter Osborne's 'Radicalism Without Limit?', a magisterial defence of the concepts of articulation and determination in the face of Laclau and Mouffe's proclivity to see identity politics as 'free-floating', in Peter Osborne (ed), *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism*, London, Verso, 1991.

3. Gregor McLennan, 'Post-Modernism and the 'Four Sins' of Modernist Theorizing', *New Left Review* 218 (1996). McLennan's discussion is aimed in particular at 'post-Marxists' such as Barrett, Laclau and Mouffe; but many of the points remain valid in this context.

vanguardism and the one-party State - could have done with more direct commentary; while some of the non-Marxist work on consciousness by people like Achille Mbembe could have entered her purview. Only Jani appears alert to the kind of problem I am signalling here, pointing out the shortcomings of trying to read Marx's Revolt articles as a justification for a later Leninist thesis of national self-determination (and, one could add, the dire effects of stagist Stalinism on many Marxists' strategic thinking about nationalism and national independence generally).

However, despite the relative inattention to topics such as these, this is an excellent book. It contains a number of essays which are crucial for any reader who might be puzzling over this general area. Some will also prove to be extremely useful in provoking discussion in classroom situations, and thereby act as a gateway for students wishing to seek out theoretical perspectives and analyses of global situations and relationships deeper and more wider-ranging than the many flummeries and evasions spawned within the canon of postcolonial studies so far.