

UNOFFICIAL ATTENTION

David Bate

Adam Phillips, *Attention Seeking*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2019, 144pp, £6.99.

Covid-19 'lock-down', as it was called in the UK seemed like a good time to read about 'attention'. Why? Because a great number of people (including myself) found their attention wandering away from what they were supposed to be doing towards something else, even vaguely for instance wondering 'is this what I wanted in life?' This wondering and wandering away from what Phillips names as our 'official attention' to an 'elsewhere', which he calls our 'unofficial curiosity' shows that what we actually pay attention to, is not always within our control. This is not as simple as saying that we pay attention to the things we want, even or especially if we don't even know we want them. Such issues are the focus of this little book.

Attention, and its apparent opposite distraction, have of course, already been a long-standing subject of concern to many fields of study as diverse as cultural theory and social management, and with as many different implications on various aspects of our social and institutional lives that they relate to. From questions about the attention of children in schools, to bored workers in factories, to issues of spectatorship in cinema, attentiveness to the textuality of literature, techniques in the theatre, and the perceived 'instantaneity' of popular culture, social media and entertainment values all involve critical problems of attention and distraction. In these and many other domains the question of what we pay attention to, how, where, when and why remains a fundamental human question, if not enigma. (If it remains an enigma it is because we do not always know what we want ourselves.) Attention is a crucial dimension of almost every aspect of life.

Adam Phillips addresses these social issues obliquely, as he often does in his books, informed by psychoanalysis, with a relentless focus not only on what 'attention' actually is, but also on what it isn't. Written as three separate essays, with an appendix (an earlier essay on Stephen Greenblatt's literary relation to distraction), this book works through the vicissitudes of attention and its supposed evil opposite of distraction.

However, for Phillips, distraction is not the opposite of attention, but rather shows the unsettled boundary of what we call attention. The argument is not a simple academic deconstruction of the often-moralised binary distinction between 'attention/distraction', nor is it an easy reversal of it (all attention is distraction). Instead, Phillips draws close attention to the human indeterminacy of these categories, their constant unsettled status and situation, and their mutual relationship to what we want and desire.

If distraction counts as a different type of attention, observable in art and literature as much as in everyday life, as Phillips argues, then he also reminds us that psychoanalysis itself has drawn on this as a practical technique, since its very form of treatment is also based on ‘inattention’ as a positive condition. He cites the neglected work of 1930s psychoanalyst Marion Milner (from her 1934 book *A Life of One's Own*) and draws on her handy categories of ‘wide-angled’ and ‘narrow’ attention to suggest how we might develop a more sophisticated – and therefore more useful – understanding of what we mean when we say we are ‘concentrating’ on something. What is called ‘inattention’, he argues, is also undervalued for its affinities to both categories of attention and distraction. Drawing on Lawrence Sterne’s novel *Tristram Shandy* (and other novels throughout the book), the virtues of ‘inattention’ become apparent as aspects of a character (Hamlet is a good example), but also separately as an analytical tool, as itself a critical mode of attention. Being distracted, he writes ‘is another form of attention, we may not always be able to tell which the distracted state of mind is. The authorities can tell us’ (120).

As a child psychoanalyst, Adam Phillips understands these problems and questions very well, and the arguments are clearly informed by his experience of its practice. Firstly, there is the practice of ‘free-floating attention’ already embedded in psychoanalysis (as introduced by Sigmund Freud). Secondly, what people tend to ordinarily call ‘distraction’ is but one name for many symptoms of a wandering of the soul, which becomes a theoretical and thus cultural or even philosophical question about human existence. These wanderings are experienced in night dreams and day-dreams (isn’t distraction really a day-dream?), Freudian slips and so on. Isn’t the dreamer paying unexpected attention to their own lives, he asks? Conversely, attention is not everything it is supposed to be, we can block out other things by obsessive attention to one thing, which is when it might become problematic. The question is thus not only *what is* attention, but what is it that we wish to give our attention (or wide-angled inattention) to – as artists, writers, critics, teachers, students, intellectuals, but also of course as ordinary people living lives. Over time, in work, pleasure and leisure the attributes and focus of our selective individual attentions and the things that distract us, begin to inform our identities, assembled throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood, organising our identifications, navigated via the social models and cultural environments in which we live. What we ‘pay attention’ to (Phillips notes the idea of a price to be paid in the English expression to ‘pay attention’) or are distracted by is thoroughly important to who we are. The attention we seek even in our inattentive moments is a question for us all.

One of the striking things missing from this book is attention to the new computing industries of attention and distraction (if we may call them this). Advocates of cognitive science may be disappointed here. He does

not speak about the way attention and distraction is being 'automated' by electronic devices and algorithms into patterns of 'predicted' attention by the array of now vast invisible Internet corporations, many dedicated to finding out what we all want, or don't want. (My mobile phone tells me it has a facility to check my 'attention-awareness', meaning how much attention I actually pay to it.) Phillips mentions social media in passing, but does not consider the way attention and distraction have become algorithmic activities, as indicators of the things, people, objects, spaces and processes that preoccupy us online, and which certainly have an impact on our social identities, cultural values and shopping practices. Indeed, in a culture of distraction is the idea of 'attention' tenable or even a thing of the past? This is certainly a popular anxiety: that adults or children can no longer concentrate for longer than reading a tweet. But Phillips reminds us that anxieties are themselves often forms of distraction. (One of the great fears about social media algorithms and global internet corporations harvesting data about our browsing habits is perhaps that they can often compute better what we want than we can admit to ourselves.) Children cannot concentrate, it is said, because of technological distractions and adults suffer from the same thing, diagnosed as 'attention deficit disorder'. When children do not pay attention is this a way of seeking attention? Distraction can also be a way of hiding he says, and surfing a computer screen endlessly clearly enables this very easily. Yet I doubt whether Phillips would support the idea that attention can be really measured in any beneficial way here. Even if Phillips does not deal directly with these mediatized social issues in the book, it does offer important insight into fundamental issues raised by them. 'Can we tell the unconscious to pay attention?' he asks, without answering his own question. The book opens up the space between intentional and unintentional attention, which is where what we might call a cultural politics of attention today surely lies.

The title of the book *Attention Seeking* does suggest it might pay attention to or be about those people who are attention-seeking in a conventional sense. Those people who make a habit of insisting on making their presence felt wherever they are, photo-bombing others pictures or selfie identifying with everyone they meet. And maybe they deserve the attention they get. Phillips is curiously optimistic about this urge, suggesting that while attention-seeking can become 'a programme rather than a form of curiosity.', it is 'at its best a means (and a medium) with no foreseeable end', in the sense that it is a project with no aim. However, Phillips suggests, such attention-seeking offers the possibility 'of new forms of sociability.'

What Phillips brings to all these social and cultural questions is close attention to the dynamics of the human psyche in the dialectical relation between attention and distraction. Using literature, psychoanalytic theory and cultural thought he weaves a set of dialogues between them, never subjugating one to the other. It is an instructive model of writing that enjoys

the free-floating of thought practiced in the arts, literature and culture and proposed at least in some forms of psychoanalytic theory and practice. It is not a pun to say 'attention' merits our attention. Yet I wonder now if writing a review is itself not a form of attention, which merits distraction?

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THE COMPANY WE KEEP

Michelle Henning

Paul Frosh, *The Poetics of Digital Media*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, 220pp, £16.99.

In the early 1990s, I was working intensively on a project on an Apple Mac computer. The command key (now labelled ‘command ⌘’) had the Apple logo on it, so that each time I copied, pasted or deleted, I recited to myself, ‘Apple C, Apple V, Apple X’. At night, I awoke from nightmares shouting ‘Apple X, Apple X’. I was trying to delete whatever monsters were attacking me.

Paul Frosh seems to be unusually attuned to the ways that we live and dream with media, as well as to monsters as means of thinking through media. He commences *The Poetics of Digital Media* with the opening scene from the film *Monsters Inc.* This scene, and indeed the whole film, he argues, draws attention to the reality of imagined beings and their effectiveness in shaping our everyday experience. John Durham Peters has written that ‘media are our infrastructures of being’, and Frosh shares this approach.¹ But *Monsters Inc.* also provides Frosh with a means of describing the energy that pulses through this infrastructure: just as children’s screams power Monstropolis, ‘poesis’ drives our media worlds. ‘Poesis’ is a key term here, and Frosh links it to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of poiesis/praxis as a coming-to-light or unveiling. Poesis, for Frosh, both drives and discloses worlds.² It is also a means to forefront aesthetics and to challenge a tendency amongst theorists to abandon aesthetic questions in the face of digital media.

In his chapter on the selfie, a revised version of a key journal article from 2015, Frosh sets out to revitalise the aesthetic project of photography theory, against the existing polarisation between critiques of photography as a ‘socio-technical practice’ and ontological studies of its essence. This turn to the aesthetic is not necessarily about visual form, but about an attentiveness to the everyday, sensual, and haptic aspects of media. It is a ‘poetics of the prosaic’ (p11). Frosh refutes the view, particularly pervasive in recent writing on networked photography, that digital photographs should be primarily analysed in terms of data and algorithms. The reaffirmation of the aesthetic is also an affirmation of the *kinaesthetic*, of our proprioceptive engagement with media and the kinds of responsiveness that facilitates.

Using *Monsters Inc.* to think about parallel or adjacent worlds, Frosh suggests that we do not face media, as an audience faces the screen in a cinema, but live alongside them. Ubiquitous media keep us company, they are our neighbours and companions. The technological infrastructure that is the support system for our lifeworld, he argues, ensures that always in the background is ‘the rustle of media’ (p5). Through media we gain access to

1. John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2015, p15.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

worlds beyond our immediate experience. These media worlds are immanent to our own, and are not necessarily populated by fictional characters: they include people, and other entities, such as digital artefacts (cursors, icons, windows). This challenge to the front-on model of media encounters also entails a rejection of the 'attentive fallacy', that is, the assumption of an ideally attentive audience and a discrete and unified text. Against it, he marshalls Ben Highmore's notion of distraction as 'a form of promiscuous absorption'.³ Frosh shares Highmore's interest in inattention and the unattended-to, though he notes that Highmore ultimately justifies distraction for the intensities it produces. Instead, his own concept of living with media describes a kind of mundane cohabitation, with no moment of rapture or rupture. Contrary to accounts in which even the most 'grey' media can be dramatised as 'evil', or in which boredom leads to revelation, Frosh wants to retain the ordinariness of disregarded objects, even while he pays them some regard. Inattention is not a deficiency to be corrected, nor a resistance to discipline but 'an ecological achievement of mediated sociality' (p51).

Frosh does not address the arguments, by Sherry Turkle and others, that mobile devices have won the battle for our attention, to the extent that we relinquish other kinds of connectivity in their favour.⁴ This is a shame because his own analysis suggests a challenge to the notion that certain interactions and media facilitate more care (or more authentic care) than others, but also because he shares Turkle's sense of the importance of companionship. For example, he argues that living alongside media means living in the company of strangers, often in a state of mutual indifference: Simmel's 'blasé' attitude remediated. Against arguments that this is a negative thing - that non-reciprocal mediated relations hinder the mutual care to be found in public spaces - Frosh suggests that public interactions with strangers are just as likely to be characterised by hostility and suspicion as by care, and that media such as television may facilitate what he calls 'civil inattention', by allowing strangers into our intimate lives without threat (pp53-4).

Discussions of encounters with strangers, with monsters and others, recur throughout *The Poetics of Digital Media*. Frosh is particularly concerned with the place of media as mediators of the 'thin relations' between people who may have nothing in common, that is, of 'moral' rather than 'ethical' relations.⁵ Media put us in the position of witnesses, requiring moral responses. Yet, in some ways, digital media seem antithetical to the kind of responsiveness required to bear witness: Frosh discusses how difficult it is to maintain the ideal attentiveness required by video testimonies of Holocaust survivors, when they are experienced on a computer screen, interrupted by both the peripheral distractions on the screen, and the connection to an external network. Yet, another kind of responsiveness emerges in the fact that the relationship of viewer to screen is haptic and gestural: 'pointing, clicking, dragging, sliding, swiping and tapping all generate relations between the viewer and represented objects that appear simultaneously embodied and

3. Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, London, Routledge, 2011, p134.

4. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York, Basic Books, 2011.

5. This distinction derives from Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2002

causal' (p156). This responsiveness does not translate automatically into moral responsibility but nor does it replace action with 'pseudo-action' as is sometimes claimed. Rather, it means fingertip actions have consequences and require 'moral choice'.

Frosh is at his finest when addressing the trivial and everyday aspects of contemporary media. He attends to practices of tagging in social media, to the graphical user interface, to the screenshot and the selfie, the most ubiquitous and mundane media forms. He mobilises the screenshot powerfully against Lev Manovich's characterisation of analogue media as fixed in comparison to fluid digital media, and of the technical development of media as moving from static documents to dynamic performances.⁶ Instead, he agrees with Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, that the fixity/fluidity binary is a false one.⁷ The 'death of fixity' argument can be countered by demonstrating that analogue media were never fixed and stable (as I have tried to do in my writing about photography) or by demonstrating, as Frosh does, that documents can be characterised in terms of fixity *and* mobility. Screenshots of Tweets are reproduced in the news, hardening the 'softimage' (as Ingrid Hoelzl and Remi Marie call it) of digital media.⁸ Like photographs, screenshots appear as 'frozen slices of time' and as cuts that imply an endlessness beyond the frame (p77). Reproduced in a newspaper or on a news website, the screenshot helps to produce the Twitter stream as a world of constant flow, of evanescent discussion - especially for readers or viewers who do not use the platform. It constitutes 'the social network as an actual, witnessable world' suggesting that there are, on social media, 'missable events' (p86).

The benign appearance of everyday media companionship is disrupted by the practice of tagging social media photographs. While Frosh sees tagging in the context of his larger interest in the 'phatic' aspects of digital media - that is, their role in 'the production, expression and maintenance of sociability' - he also describes it as an Althusserian interpellation, a hailing by the network itself (p129). He compares being tagged to the feeling of being 'handled': by others, by discourse, but most of all by the apparatus. As if by magic, the incantation of a name conjures up images of the named. These images seem to affirm individual identity and simultaneously undermine it. Tagging enables images to circulate through the network, not for the benefit of users but for the benefit of the network itself. It demands a response and drags the imaged body into sociability regardless of the wishes of the person pictured. Tagging, he argues, helps to make the network palpable as a social body. It uses names to propagate and proliferate, extending the self to the point of disintegration and dissolution, 'wrapping symbolic and figural flesh on informational bones' (p112.).

The Poetics of Digital Media vividly encourages us to reflect on the collusions of gesture and imagination, the embodied and quasi-magical properties of our interactions with media. Frosh describes the sense of a 'live connection, incarnated in the cursor' between our own bodies and the objects appearing

6. Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013.

7. Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2012.

8. Ingrid Hoelzl and Remi Marie, *Softimage: Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image*, Bristol, Intellect, 2015.

on screen (p157), and draws attention to the 'digit' in digital: 'digitality as a human-computer hybrid magnifies and glorifies the power of the digit, the human finger, as an actor in a world of vast extension' (p160). These chapters seem to suggest that the offer of everyday companionship, characteristic of twentieth-century mass media, changes in the face of a digital networked media characterised as ever-ready, attention-demanding, and accompanied by 'a new gestural repertoire... a technologized posture of bodily agitation' (p164). However, Frosh is explicit that this is not the straightforward replacement of one regime of attention with another. Instead, *The Poetics of Digital Media* suggests that we are witnessing and participating in a thickening and intensification, an extension and expansion of the world-making, world-disclosing power of media.

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WHEN SPEAKING OF POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

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Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology After Laclau*,
Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 255pp; £19.99 paperback

1. Ernesto Laclau
and Chantal Mouffe,
*Hegemony and
Socialist Strategy*,
London, Verso,
2001.

When Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe published their influential book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985, its reception was mediated by antagonisms that still shape perceptions of both authors' work four decades later.¹ Some of this was a result of Laclau and Mouffe's provocative description of their 'intellectual project' as a 'post-Marxist' project (p4). And some was because of the importance they accorded to the concept of discourse. The book captured a then avant-garde theoretical sensibility that highlighted the discursivity of the social. For its admirers, the book offered a new post-structuralist vocabulary for talking about the contingency of social structures that retained the critical impulses of Marxist theory but promised theoretical liberation from what Laclau and Mouffe framed as the dogmatic assumptions of orthodox Marxism. To its detractors, all the talk of discourse attested to the 'idealism' of Laclau and Mouffe's argument, and their neglect of 'materialist' concerns and perspectives. These perceptions were reinforced by the subsequent naming of Laclau and Mouffe's approach as 'discourse theory', which suggested a prioritisation of certain questions and concerns over others. One legacy has been a mode of engagement with Laclau and Mouffe's work, and especially Laclau's, that sometimes seems preoccupied with the question of how to properly define the scope and limit of discourse. I am describing a polemical atmosphere that was likely more vivid in the 1980s and 1990s, but the point still resonates today. I sometimes jest with students who plan to use discourse theory that they should save themselves some bother by not using the word 'discourse', such is the confusion that can still be generated by the term.

Oliver Marchart's book *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology After Laclau* not only helps us understand why the responses to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* would lead to an enactment of the political-intellectual antagonisms that the book itself described and constructed, but it also offers a brilliant new framework for reassessing the significance of the post-Marxist theoretical intervention four years after Laclau's death. Marchart's argument rests on a simple claim about Laclau's work that has perhaps been obscured by its over-association with the concept of discourse (and more recently populism): that Laclau's 'most decisive theoretical contribution' is 'his conception of antagonism' (p20). 'What is rarely seen... is that [Laclau's] influential work is organised around a key philosophical problematic' based on the question: 'What is an antagonism?' (p2-3). Marchart partly takes his lead from what

he calls 'Laclau's question', which he reformulates as 'what is a conflictual relation and what are the laws that govern this relation'? However, he poses an even 'more fundamental question' that he suggests was glimpsed by Laclau but never satisfactorily explicated: 'what is antagonism?' (p2-3).

A surprising amount hinges on the elision of the little word 'an'. The question 'what is an antagonism?' frames antagonism as some kind of identifiable thing or object. For Laclau, this object took the default form of an antagonistic representation. An identity defines itself in opposition to some Other that is rejected. 'The political' is conceived as a domain of friend/enemy relations. Marchart's problem with this conventional understanding of antagonism is that it fails to think through the full implications of Laclau's own contention that antagonism is a name for an ontological condition that 'grounds' – by never fully or permanently grounding – the logic of the social. Marchart describes this ontology as one that signifies 'the ineradicable moment of negativity' (p43) that structures the articulation of all positive social identities; a mode of social being 'which undermines the very positivity of "positive facts"' (p10). Taking inspiration from Foucault's notion of an 'ontology of ourselves' (p159), Marchart highlights how our own analyses of social antagonisms are 'self-implicated' (p27) by the very same ontological presuppositions that we project onto the phenomena that we analyse. In other words, the 'moment of negativity' structures the identity of not only the object of analysis that is acted on, but also the subject of the action, or the 'subject of thinking' (p197). As the argument unfolds over the different chapters, Marchart's book becomes nothing less than an attempt to rethink the nature of political thought and reframe the relation between the subject and object of social and political analysis as a relation conditioned by the ontology of antagonism (which is another way of saying that thought itself is inescapably political). This might sound like a scholastic exercise on the surface. Arguments about ontology can be philosophically complex and intimidating, not to mind sometimes vague and perplexing, particularly when talking about 'one's ontology' can become a generalised expectation of research in the social sciences and humanities. However, it is to Marchart's great credit that he brings the argument to life in an illuminating way that recasts antagonism as a very familiar dimension of human experience. To think antagonism is to affirm a 'politicality of social life' (p30) that can potentially be 'experienced everywhere' (p32), be it the world of work, family, friendship, love, or our engagement with different institutions, including the academy.

The argument is partly set up as a response to criticisms of the political ontology literature, for what Lois McNay suggests is its reification of 'the political'.² It is a tendency sometimes evident in the work of Laclau and Mouffe: exemplified by their construction of schematised distinctions between politics and the political, the social and the political. To critics of the 'ontological turn', these dichotomies suggest a hierarchy of value for

2. Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2017.

determining what is and isn't really political. That which is consecrated in the name of the political assumes a kind of radical aura and potential, in contrast to the dull empirical world of existing political institutions and practices. The concept of the political signifies theoretical recognition of the inherently antagonistic and conflictual nature of social life, as an argumentative counter-force to depoliticising tendencies that have been a defining feature of the neoliberal era.

Marchart responds to these criticisms by retaining the basic scaffolding of the formal dichotomy between the social and the political. Yet, he constructs it as a fluid and processual distinction that militates against any unthinking representation of existing social practices as inherently apolitical. He develops the argument by explicating the distinction's indebtedness to Heidegger's notion of the 'ontological difference': that is, 'the relation of ontic beings to their ontological beingness (the realm of being-qua-being)' (p52). We must affirm the importance of this distinction if we want to talk about political ontology. 'The key to any ontology of the political...lies in the differentiation, introduced by numerous authors, between 'ordinary' ontic politics and an ontological notion of the political (as appertaining to the entire field of the social rather than a particular field or practice)' (p13). Yet, he also argues that this 'differentiation does not imply a hierarchy where the political would be an elevated term and political practice is devalued' (p13). Marchart enacts this argument in an impressive way; one of the most likeable aspects of the book is how it confers a 'theoretical dignity' (p18) on ordinary political experiences that are neglected when we only focus on moments of grand social antagonism. Nonetheless, it might be more accurate to suggest that the differentiation should not imply a hierarchy of value; Laclau's work can sometimes suggest such a hierarchy, because of his under-theorisation of the social and tendency to dismiss 'merely' empirical and sociological forms of analysis.

Marchart tries to rethink the relationship between the political and the social by emphasising the importance of the notion of antagonism to two analytical domains that should never be construed as names for 'two separate spheres' (p97). The book begins by outlining the case for an ontology of antagonism in the introduction and Chapter 1, before developing the argument around a three-part structure of 'thinking the political', 'thinking politics', and 'politicising thought'. Chapter 2 revisits Laclau's debt to Marx, arguing that the articulation of a political ontology based on the notion of antagonism generalises insights that were already present in Marx's account of class antagonisms. Chapter 3 involves a comparative analysis of how politics is imagined in the work of Foucault, Stiegler and Loraux. Marchart suggests all three construct an ontological image of politics as war-like that, despite its affinities, should not be construed as the same thing as an ontology of antagonism. The polemological metaphor encourages 'a certain reification of antagonism' (p64). It treats the friend/enemy model of politics as a 'real

opposition' (p64), rather than recognising how these subjectified identities are themselves precarious and unstable.

Chapter 4 is the first of three chapters that focus on the world of sedimented politics: that is, the ontic, empirical-level domain that is usually opposed to ontological perspectives. It brilliantly captures the latently antagonistic character of social life, and the affective valences of the conflictual scenarios that all of us face (and routinely repress) in our everyday lives. Chapter 5 explores the resonances between Laclau's work and the tradition of Birmingham School cultural studies, a topic Marchart has written about elsewhere. He commends cultural studies for its incisive analysis of the micro-politics of the social. Yet he also criticises its dominant contemporary strands for failing to make the necessary connections to macro-political strategies and discourses, leaving him wondering whether much cultural studies work can be usefully described as political at all. Chapter 6 attempts to clarify when we might justifiably describe action (on different scales) as political, by outlining what Marchart calls the 'minimal conditions of politics' (p141). His criteria are helpful, though they sometimes suggest a sharper boundary between the political and the social that the spirit of the book otherwise disavows. The blurriness of the boundary is captured by Marchart's brief reference to the paradoxical notion of a 'sedimented antagonism' (p124). The suggestive phrase implies the co-existence of two contradictory elements: a habitual form of social subjectivity that is directly experienced as political and antagonistic, but simultaneously depoliticising and delimiting. Marchart invokes a rich metaphor of "'the social" as but a name for antagonism in a "sleeping mode"' (p96). But perhaps the never-go-to-sleep mode of today's 24/7 platform capitalism culture might offer a productive metaphorical contrast, in grasping sedimented forms of cultural politics that can seem both interminably antagonistic but also encased in a repetitive performance of identity.³

The significance of the book as a theoretical intervention in the politics of the social sciences, and most obviously in the field of political theory and philosophy, becomes clearer in chapter 7. Marchart suggests the argument for an ontological perspective on politics should be read as an 'antidote to the dominant paradigm of epistemology' (p9). Epistemology (when it is mentioned) is consistently positioned as an antagonist. It is indicted for its failure to 'think', in a fashion that recalls Laclau's antipathy to sociology. Marchart describes his theoretical endeavour as an attempt to develop an 'an alternative form of self-reflection' that does not have to 'engage in any kind of epistemological reasoning', but rather offers a form of "reasoning" in a non-epistemological mode: a mode of political ontology' (p158).

Chapter 8 opens by again underlining the limits of epistemological and scientific rationalism, suggesting 'ontological notions cannot be measured by empirical means' (p181). However, Marchart then goes against the grain of the rest of the book by inverting 'the order of priority between politics and

3. Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, London, The Indigo Press, 2019.

the political' (p183). The chapter poses the question: what are our grounds for acting politically in a world where grounding our actions in some pure conceptual foundation is impossible because of the antagonistic (and always already failed) nature of all grounding? His answer is ingenious, even if it also invites questions about the precise nature of the relationship between our ontological assumptions and our pragmatic dispositions as political subjects. We 'act in an as if mode' (p145): that is, we act as if we are the source and ground of our actions, even when we know this to be a 'transcendental illusion' (p146). The argument could sound like it suddenly consecrates an individualistic conception of politics; Marchart suggests that every form of political agency 'is based inescapably on a minimum of megalomania' (p147). Yet he emphasises not only the collective nature of politics, but also the collective nature of thinking. 'Thinking must be practiced collectively, has to overcome obstacles, must involve itself in conflicts, take sides and organise with a strategic view to achieving politico-intellectual hegemony' (p191). 'Thinking is an active effort towards affirming the politicality of the world' (p182).

The political question that animates Marchart in the final section of the book concerns the politics of academic life itself. The strategic game-playing that takes place in the academy is not only framed as a site of a specific politics. He also highlights how the line between scholarly discourse and politics 'is drawn politically' (p181); 'one has to understand that philosophy – or any other academic discipline for that matter – is inscribed into broader hegemonic formations and traversed by larger lines of conflict' (p191). The argument is made in a personal way in the conclusion, when Marchart pays affectionate tribute to his mentor Laclau. Laclau is commended for embodying a profound recognition of the mutual entanglement of politics and thought that was also exemplified by some of his radical left contemporaries like Stuart Hall. Appropriately enough, Marchart's tribute is not without its own antagonistic dimension. The 'intellectual realism' (p210) of Laclau's work is contrasted to the adventurist and dogmatic posture of other left intellectuals. Marchart describes politics as a practice of 'negating the given' (p189). Yet, like Laclau, he hasn't much time for a moralising style of theorising and politics that acts as if the given can be 'negated in toto' (p202). For him, 'negation... can only mean determinate negation... the negation of something concretely given rather than merely imagined as all-powerful totality', such 'as 'the system', 'the State', 'capitalism', 'patriarchy', and so on' (p202). Marchart's discussion reminds us of the enduring relevance of the arguments at the heart of *Hegemony and Socialist Society* about the nature of radical left political strategies. Perhaps the occasionally sharp tone articulates an understandable desire to defend a pragmatic sensibility in Laclau and Mouffe's work, against its glib portrait as an inherently reformist vision by some left critics.

Thinking Antagonism is a superb, lucidly written book that should be read by anyone with an interest in critical political theory and the future of radical

left politics. The argument is provocative and daring, not least in its critique of the hegemony of epistemologically-centred forms of social and political analysis. One wonders how that critique might be heard in a conjunctural moment where concerns about what is true and false have become matters of heightened public anxiety – indeed, one wonders what unkind fate might befall a less philosophically overconfident reader of Marchart’s book if they were to declare to the wrong seminar audience their antipathy to epistemology! Marchart’s critique is surely well justified when we imagine specific targets: a kind of self-congratulatory scientific habitus that represses, or aggressively denies, its own political underpinnings, or a style of political philosophy that is depoliticising. However, it would be interesting to see how the book’s seeming dismissal of epistemology might be construed by those who would affirm the proposition that social science and philosophy are political, but argue for a recuperation or pluralisation of epistemology. The similarities and differences between Adorno and Heidegger’s critiques of epistemology might be pertinent here;⁴ the occasionally cited Adorno seems like a significant low-key influence on Marchart’s argument despite its more obvious debt to Heidegger. Certainly, I hope Marchart will develop his critique of epistemology in future work. It would be especially appreciated by those of us working in fields where the primacy of epistemological reasoning remains largely unquestioned.

4. see Brian O’Connor, Adorno, Heidegger and the Critique of Epistemology, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 24, 4, 1998, pp43-62.

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COMMONING THE POLITICAL AND POLITICISING THE COMMON

Claudia Firth

Alexandros Kiouпкиolis, *The Common and Counter-Hegemonic Politics: Rethinking Social Change*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 263pp; £19.49.

Artistic innovation, while often characterised as a sudden single happening, is actually the result of many long-hidden hours of behind-the-scenes work. The same can be true not only of a book, often the result of many more years' work than what is visible, but also of political innovations, revolutionary moments and seismic social and political shifts. While being hidden from view, an accumulating aggregation of seemingly disorganised and unsystematic actions can nevertheless provide a pre-history for larger, more visible political actions that might openly challenge dominant power structures. This is what anthropologist James C. Scott calls the 'offstage' work of everyday struggles and political actions that go largely unnoticed.¹

In this vein, Kiouпкиolis' new book endeavours to answer the question of how disparate, horizontally organised social movements and grassroots initiatives might produce wide, sustainable and long lasting social and political change. In order to do this, he brings together recent thinking around the common, commons, and commoning with theories of hegemony. These two strands, one characterised by horizontal, open-ended, self-organising and self-managed initiatives, and the other by ideas of centralised, representative politics based on antagonism and domination, might seem at first to be essentially polar opposites and irreconcilable. However, by bringing these two seemingly incongruous 'logics' together, the book attempts to answer questions that have plagued the idea of 'the multitude' for some time. Ostensibly, the perceived lack of strategy within recent social movements, which have been criticised as being more concerned with processes of self-management than with strategic demands.

The book provides a very detailed analysis of these two strands of thinking and argues that is only by embracing a form of post-hegemonic politics that real lasting social change will be possible. The prefix post-, here, is understood not as a total break, so much as a querying or problematicising of hegemony that also goes beyond it. Kiouпкиolis argues that what the politics of hegemony offers should be tempered with a bias towards the horizontal, participatory and open-ended relations exemplified by the commons: 'the politics of hegemony (concentration of force, representation, partial unification) is not, and should not be, disentangled from the politics of the multitudinous common' (p84). This might seem like an impossible task, but Kiouпкиolis, to a great extent,

1. James C. Scott, 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 4, 1989, pp33-62.

sets out how this entanglement can, and he argues, already does, operate.

The book sits well within Kioupiolis' existing work, which has prepared the ground for this book. Here he combines new writing with several previously published articles. Kioupiolis is currently leading the research project *Heteropolitics* at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, where he is assistant professor in Contemporary Political Theory at the School of Political Sciences. While the chapters of this volume are somewhat freestanding, they successfully add up to a thorough survey and in-depth analysis of the theoretical terrain, albeit with some perhaps inevitable repetition. Starting with ontological philosophical explorations of collectivity since the historical discrediting of state communism, the book makes several moves, 'commoning the political' and 'politicising the common,' to examine both 'sides' of the theoretical divide. Concentrating the majority of its focus on Hardt and Negri's vision of the multitude and Mouffe and Laclau's work on hegemony, it also critiques Eleanor Ostrom's ground-breaking work on the commons, Autonomist Marxist writings, and major thinkers such as Žižek and Badiou. The book ends with a vision of common democracy and reflections on what bringing principles of the commons to bear on domains of government might actually mean.

Kioupiolis argues that whilst recent thinking on the commons has offered much, it has lacked an engagement with certain aspects of the political, in particular, the failure to think through power relations, conflict and the making of collective subjects and communities of struggle. Whilst visions of new societies organised around the commons and tactical ideas for reconstructing the state-and-market system do exist, there is still a conceptual gap in terms of political strategy for transition from global neoliberalism. A 'potent political strategy' of counter-hegemony is therefore necessary in order to grapple with systemic power relations, alter the balance of forces, and transform the subjectivity of large social strata (p3). Kioupiolis also argues that elements of hegemony, like representation, have in fact already played a role in horizontally organised struggles such as those of the square movements and Occupy. Using Laclau and Mouffe's framework, he convincingly describes how 'Occupy' and 'we are the 99 per cent' functioned as 'empty signifiers' around which groups could coalesce.

It is not the first time that the 'mutual interference' of these two strands of thinking or logics has been suggested.² However, this book tackles this possibility in considerable depth. Kioupiolis' dissection and reappraisal of Laclau and Mouffe's work is particularly incisive, detailing which aspects have viable potential for a revised version of hegemony and those that do not. In particular Kioupiolis draws on Mouffe and Laclau's earlier work which, he argues, relies less on centralisation than their more recent work, is more open-ended, and can successfully be brought into dialogue with commons-based theory and practices. Indeed, Mouffe and Laclau's later work has been associated with political parties such as Podemos and Syriza and some of the

2. Particularly in relation to digital technology and radical democracy. See Nick Dyer-Witheford, 'Hegemony or Multitude? Two Versions of Radical Democracy for the Net', in L. Dahlberg, and E. Siaperá (eds), *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

issues they have faced. These parties took up where grassroots movements left off, but once in power, struggled to fulfil their promises.

Calls for confluence should therefore be made with care. Kioupkiolis is clear that it is vital to be aware of potential points of friction and ‘collisions between the two logics’ (p33). Failure to do so may be very destructive particularly for horizontally based grassroots movements. Relations between progressive governments and autonomous grassroots movements can be wrought with tensions as has been seen in Latin America, and to a lesser extent in Europe and the UK. The danger is that social actors are diverted from other activities. As energies and demands are channelled into state institutions, incorporated into state or party apparatuses, grassroots movements become drained of their stamina and autonomy. Nevertheless, Kioupkiolis argues that some kind of critical engagement with institutions as well as civil society (where Gramscian common sense takes shape), is necessary. In order for it not to be subsumed by hierarchical centralisation, Kioupkiolis suggests that such a programme must be skewed towards the kinds of relations that exist within heterogeneous commons movements. This could be done through hybrid forms such as participatory budgets, local assemblies and mechanisms of rotation.

One aspect particularly of note is the discussion on the concept and definition of the political, which is placed halfway through the book, at its centre. While this discussion could feasibly have taken place at the start of the book, it is interesting that it lies effectively at its heart. What is also significant is the inclusion of feminism among other strands of thought as instrumental in redefining the political. Feminism’s contribution to theorisations of the multitude, for example, hasn’t always been acknowledged. Following feminism, Kioupkiolis’ redefinition of the political therefore includes multiple political forms and practices - political activity that runs ‘both in the formal political system and underneath, outside, against and beyond it’ (p124).

The book painstakingly deals with the commons from a number of perspectives. As would be expected from a theoretical book, the concrete practical examples are dealt with in much less depth and detail than the theoretical analysis. However, it does mean that at times, important tensions and difficulties, while theoretically acknowledged, are to some extent glossed over. This was particularly apparent in one description of the self-management of the digital commons and its potential ‘to burst beyond the socio-political confines of patriarchal regimes’ (p230). This should be tempered by the fact that often the communities around initiatives such as Wikipedia and open-source software tend to be predominantly of a white male demographic. Not only that but these communities sometimes have a tendency to organise themselves around charisma and social worth which reinforces dominance. And while Kioupkiolis is very enthusiastic about the digital sphere providing tools for communities to connect and for the organisation of protests, there is no mention of more recent issues with the digital becoming part of the public

sphere, such as the formation of echo chambers, its openness to manipulation and fake news, and its ability to stoke division. He does, however, rightly argue that the possibilities for the digital commons do only exist when embedded within wider social and political frameworks.

The Common and Counter-Hegemonic Politics certainly offers a way of rethinking how social change might take place and contains a potentially concrete programme for a transition from global neoliberalism. Throughout the book, a convincing argument is made for a comprehensive conjunction between the two frameworks. Kioupkiolis is one of several theorists currently turning to theories of hegemony and post-hegemony. Kioupkiolis' in-depth nuanced analysis is an impressive and important addition at a time when the need to develop progressive alliances and new ways of organising and governing society is ever more pressing. Kioupkiolis' work on the processes by which a 'hegemonic bloc' could theoretically be formed as a workable programme for change, clearly prepares the ground for future work on the subject. His vision of polycentric governance as a complex mix of multiple levels and scales of diverse types of organisations and governing authorities is particularly compelling.

The current hegemonic bloc constructed around neoliberalism appears potentially fragile and has been questioned from both left and right over the last few years. However, it cannot be expected to give up without a fight. Right-wing populist rhetoric may well continue to harness dissatisfaction and enable vested interests of the status quo to be reasserted. The question of how to join up multiple heterogeneous projects that have at their core, principles of the commons, such as self-management, democratic participation, decentralisation and equity, in order to produce wider social transformation, is therefore an extremely timely and valuable endeavour. It will be interesting to see whether the current pandemic and the light it has thrown on issues of inequality and governance, can contribute to the making of a counter-hegemonic bloc or a new form of common sense centred around care, compassion, and the common good.

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MINDFULNESS FOR RADICALS

Chrys Papaioannou

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018, pp160, £8.69.

Minneapolis, Monday 25 May 2020. George Floyd's murder by asphyxiation by a white police officer is preceded by the repeated vocalisation of the words 'I can't breathe', the exact same words that had been vocalised by Eric Garner six years prior. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*, published in late 2018, poignantly opens with an earnest acknowledgement of Eric Garner, and these three words that have now become a rallying cry for Black Lives Matter participants and allies. Mobilised by Berardi's own urgent sense of an 'asthmatic solidarity' (15), *Breathing* is a call to arms that urges its readers to take the psychosocial condition of breathlessness seriously. Yet, despite its attempts to provide a handbook that diagnoses current social ills and restores us to a post-capitalist utopia, Bifo's erratic conceptual toolkit produces a disembodied, non-relational category of breathing that offers little in the way of theorising the potential of human flourishing beyond computational governance.

Written originally in English and copy-edited by Robert Dewhurst (one of the associate editors at Semiotext(e)), *Breathing* treads on familiar de-territorialised ground. Bifo revisits ideas and provocations from earlier publications such as *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009), *The Uprising* (2011), and *Heroes* (2015) to suggest that our late-capitalist condition, governed by the 'chaos' of unregulated, accelerating flows of information and stimulation, can only be ameliorated through the aleatory indeterminacy of *poesis*. Breath, therefore, serves as the metaphor for an *exodus* from technological measurability and capitalist exploitation, and for reclaiming mental and corporeal autonomy. Although Berardi does not attempt to theorise breath in relation to labour, or to the class of workers he has elsewhere called 'cognitariat', insofar as it functions as a figure of corporeal autonomy and liberation, breath is tacitly posited as 'anti-work'.¹ Often reminiscent of neo-Buddhist appropriations that one may find in a yoga studio or a mindfulness podcast, Bifo's account of breath conflates tempo, rhythm and velocity, assigning breathing a slow temporality and an anti-accelerationist agenda (see 16-18, 47, 99, 128). Equally, and in keeping with a strand of autonomism that tends towards primitivist, naturalising conceptions of human corporeality (as is also the case in, say, the autonomist feminism of Silvia Federici), Berardi's conception of the subject, and of the body politic constituted by such a subject, manifestly operates within a rigid apparatus of dualisms: body-mind, affect-reason, nature-culture, life-death.

1. See Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody. Semio-capitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, London, Minor Compositions, 2009.

Breathing is arranged in nine chapters, but these can be read in any order, since the writing is marred by repetitions, and there is no apparent rationale organising the material – whether rhizomatically understood or not. Swaying between Negrian joyful militancy and Baudrillardian dystopianism, Bifo deploys the affective and rhetorical tropes that have come to epitomise his distinctive brand of agit theory *lite*: romanticised accounts of May ‘68 and his life in New York in the late ‘70s (69-70, 122-123); hagiographic David Bowie citations (141-143); proclamations supported neither by sustained philosophical speculation nor empirical evidence (24-28); literal readings of films and novels (72-79); caricaturised social portraits gleaned from websites and news stories that he happened to have read; gnostic assertions with mystical pretensions (10, 21, 142-145); and comedically absurd pseudo-philosophising (49-50, 58, 95). In these exaggerated social, psychological and philosophical pronouncements, Bifo offers us a recognisably Eurocentric image of ‘America’ that metonymically equates the United States with capitalist postmodernity, and where the online-dating, porn-consuming millennial precariat are suffering from being unable to enjoy ‘slow eroticism’ (99).

Bifo’s earlier post-*operaist* concerns of theorising post-Fordist modes of production appear to have given way to a theologically-inflected form of vitalism. Such vitalism, despite its apparent similarity to the post-humanist, ecological materialism of Jane Bennett, whose *Vibrant Matter* is explicitly drawn upon, remains fiercely – and technophobically – anthropocentric (111-114). While Bifo claims that ‘this book is about breathing as a vibrational search to attune oneself to one’s environment’ (139), his quasi-spiritual articulations of breath do not once consider breathing in its exteriority or relationality.

Nowhere is there an empirical account of air toxicity or of the materiality of breath (the particles of air that humans and non-humans inhale and exhale), nor is there a theoretical formulation of breathing as system of social relations, kinship and exchange. The material and environmental conditions that make breathing possible for some and impossible for others are simply bypassed. Consequently, the agent of such breathing emerges as an interiorised, disembodied subject, whose capacity to be in control of their own breath is unduly foregrounded: ‘My suggestion is that you should not focus on the flow, but on your breath. Don’t follow the external rhythm but breathe normally’ (47). But how can you breathe normally when a policeman is kneeling on your neck? It seems that Bifo’s anti-statist sentiment results in avoiding an analysis of the state and of state violence altogether. Similarly, and considering the subject’s ethical position from the other end of power relations, the breathing subject Bifo addresses is never complicit in participating in a system that produces uneven breathlessness. In this way, an all-too-neat distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed is held in place, and Bifo’s anti-capitalist Occupy-bred readers can retain their left-libertarian faith in the radical potential of nomadic movement. As his soothing, incantatory repetition would have it:

A nonauthoritarian society cannot be based on the community of being, but only on the community of becoming; not on the community of memory, but only on the community of experience; not on the territorial community, but only on the community of nomadic people who provisionally meet somewhere, then disperse and meet again if and when they wish (110).

Reading *Breathing* in the immediate context of Covid-19 can feel unexpectedly poignant. A section entitled 'Epidemics', referring to intimacy and social relations during the AIDS crisis (69-72), seems to come as a premonition of Bifo's more recent statements in response to the Coronavirus pandemic.² It is as if Bifo's technophobic dystopianism has now become reality:

As the epidemic engendered fear of physical contact and dissolved the very possibility of imagining happiness, social energies migrated from the space of bodily conspiracy (breathing together) to the space of disembodied communication (70-71).

Although Bifo's narrativisation of the AIDS crisis traces a naïvely linear arc of the demise of 1960s free love, causally linking AIDS to the death of *l'imagination au pouvoir* and the entrenchment of individualist neoliberalism, his lament of the affirmation of the erotic as a site of radical politics, accompanied by his trenchant critique of natalist nationalism (105-108), could potentially be productively mobilised if read alongside other, more astute, libidinally-informed critiques of nationalism and the nation-state.³ As it stands, though, Bifo's 'Eros' regrettably remains – alongside breathing, the body, 'friendship' and 'solidarity' – a mere cipher for what could have otherwise become a tool for forging a genuine politics of liberation.

In previous publications, as well as *Breathing*, Bifo tells his readers to 'not take [him] too seriously' (43), an invitation that has not been lost on other, equally unforgiving, reviewers.⁴ It is indeed easy to not take Bifo seriously, flawed as his reasoning so clearly is. What is worth taking seriously, however, is the affective impact that reading Bifo's work has on readers who may or may not share his political convictions. One need only bring to mind the citation that in 2018, through the writing of Mark Fisher, found its rightful place on a UCU strike banner adorning the walls of Goldsmiths in south London: 'Against the Slow Cancellation of the Future'. And so, since evaluating Bifo's intellectual relevance must include an evaluation of his ability to agitate, rouse and galvanise future generations, the extent to which one should take Bifo at his own word seems to remain an open question.

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2. See Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Andreas Petrossians, 'Social Distancing and the Global Reset to Follow', *Fall Semester*, 7 April 2020 <<https://fallsemester.org/2020-1/2020/4/8/franco-berardi-andreas-petrossians-social-distancing-and-the-global-reset-to-follow>> [Last accessed 25 July 2020].

3. See, for instance, the work of Leticia Sabsay on sexual citizenship or theorists working within the conceptual frameworks of queer kinship and queer of colour critiques, such as Jin Haritaworn.

4. Peter Osborne, 'Futures present: Lite, dark and missing', *Radical Philosophy*, 191, 2015, pp39-46, p44.