



Book Reviews

Palgrave Advances in Continental Political Thought

Terrell Carver and James Martin

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2006, 336pp.

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A sense of what is contained in this text and the way in which it is presented may be interpreted by the omission in the title of the words theory and philosophy. While this book seeks to cover both these disciplines in some detail, it does so in a way that defies labels. Thus the use of the word ‘thought’ within the title alludes to the manner in which this text has been conceived by the editors Terrell Carver and James Martin. This text seeks to furrow new ground through a novel use of short but detailed analysis of the key thinkers in the diverse category of continental political thought. As one would expect, the strength of this text does not lie in the individual chapters, rather in the way in which each of the authors have woven an intricate tapestry of thought that this text forms as a whole. Each theorist is not only covered in succinct detail in relation to his or her political thought; but themes from each chapter weave back and forth through the text, allowing the reader to gain new insight into these key thinkers.

Continental Political Thought is not an introductory text to continental philosophy, rather it is a successful attempt at bringing fresh light to the political theory of the key thinkers from this tradition. The 20 theorists are broadly split into three categories: the ‘classics’, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche; the ‘moderns’, Heidegger, Gadamer, Schmitt, Gramsci, Lukacs, Arendt, Althusser and Habermas; and the ‘postmoderns’ Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard and Zizek. This is a comprehensive who’s who of some of the most politically and philosophically influential women and men of Europe since the Reformation. Each chapter covers one of these theorists. Instead of covering familiar territory, each author has discussed the continuing relevance of their theorists to contemporary conversations in the political academic discipline. While a brief historical introduction is provided to each theorist in order to situate him or her within the continental tradition, the author quickly moves on to more critical subject matter. As such this is not suitable as an introductory text, and should be read by the more advanced student or teacher.

Rather than provide a blow-by-blow account of each chapter I will discuss some of the themes that resonated with while reading. Specifically that of a



phenomenological or empirical 'Real' battling against the spectre of ideology, and fantasmal accounts of reality that have been perpetuated by modern rational discourse. The thought patterns throughout the book, particularly the existential, phenomenological, hermeneutic and post-structural accounts, challenge the dominant analytic Anglo-American foundation of political thought. Beginning at the end, Glyn Daly engages with Slavoj Žižek's inspiring philosophy of the 'Real', 'the transcendental (and constitutive) dimension of resistance in every process of signification' (p. 312). Daly uses contemporary examples of films, such as 'The Matrix', 'Flatliners' and 'Pulp Fiction' to elaborate Žižek's thought. Most compelling however, is Žižek's metaphorical use of the 9/11 attacks to explain the manner in which it was 'not so much that (Real) reality intruded into the fantasy world of US harmony, but rather that a certain fantasmatic excess intruded into reality...a fundamental injunction that the nightmare fantasy should 'stay there!' [in our fantasy such as Hollywood block-busters] and not come after us' (pp. 314–315).

Daly continues the theme by examining Žižek's thesis that ideology 'advances a particular fantasy' (p. 317) and 'serves to support a reality as a concrete fully integrated totality...[that is] a full ontological totality' (p. 316). Ideology deals with its own immanent impossibility by projecting it into 'some contingent historicised Other (e.g., the figure of 'the Jew' in Nazi ideology)...the fantasy of holistic fulfilment through the (imagined or otherwise) elimination/suppression of the Other is thereby sustained' (p. 317). Ideology thus creates its own fantasy that absolves "'us" from ethico-political responsibility...[it] is the basic ideological alibi' (p. 320).

As Daly describes, Žižek implores us to 'confront this alibi head-on and oppose it with an ethics of the Real' (p. 320). The chapter, and indeed the book, concludes with an inspiring mantra. 'How we choose to act...will depend on political engagement. Žižek's perspective exhorts us to be passionate in this engagement' (p. 322).

It is perhaps no coincidence that this book ends in such a manner. Is it Baudrillard's mass of individuals that Žižek is imploring? Those Timothy W. Luke in his chapter on Baudrillard quotes as having 'sacrificed their lives to their functional existences' (p. 298). Ricoeur's confrontation with ideology is described at length by Dimitrios E. Akrivoulis. For Ricoeur ideologies goal has 'become less the mobilisation of society than the justification of what society has become'. There is some semblance of engagement with the 'Real' in Andrew Barry's chapter on Foucault, in what Barry describes as the importance of contingent events, that is, the accidental events or deviations that 'gave birth to those things that continue to exist' (p. 254). Barry describes Foucault's politics as a form of empiricism that seeks to 'alert us to the normalising effects of categorisation' (p. 256). Barry's emphasis on the materiality of politics inspires a new reading of Foucault's *Discipline and*



Punish and The History of Sexuality (Vol. 1); there is also reference to the importance of studying political events and a return to empiricism in political thought.

Hannah Arendt stands as the only woman in the text, and while Roy T. Tsao does justice to her work, it is unfortunate that once again her affair with Heidegger is mentioned. Once again the theme of ideology is covered by Tsao's analysis of Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; Arendt's thesis is that a Totalitarian 'movement' is one in which all government functions are subordinated 'to the momentary aims of the movement's all-embracing ideology...and the attraction of the movements lay in those masses' longing to escape from human reality into the sheer fiction of ideology' (p. 171). As Carver and Martin point out, 'Unlike the Anglo-American tradition of thought, with which they are commonly contrasted, Continental ideas are routinely derided for being too "poetic", needlessly convoluted and hence dangerously removed from "common sense"' (p. 3). Of course brilliant scholars such as Arendt in *Life of the Mind* describe poetry as a 'sign of genius' and she also makes the point that common sense is on the opposing side of a war between it and reason. Thus 'If we enter into their spirit and consider their enduring value or contemporary resonances, we may find ourselves transformed, or at very least *informed*, in a way we hadn't expected' (p. 3), the book certainly reaches this goal. This was not only a highly informative and engaging read that has provided me with fresh perspectives on old friends and introduced me to new ones, it was also an exciting page turning journey through thought. I would recommend that those with an interest in political theory or political philosophy consider *Palgrave Advances in Continental Political Thought*.

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Justice Beyond Borders

Simon Caney

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The book has two purposes: to present a cosmopolitan global political theory and to critique three rival theoretical approaches (realism, nationalism and the society-of-states tradition). Caney meets both purposes by examining six central