



## ‘But it hardly needs saying...’

Martin Parker

### review of

Amin, A and N. Thrift (2013) *Arts of the political. New openings for the left*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (PB, pp xiv + 239, \$22.95, ISBN 978-0-8223-5401-7)

The seating arrangements in the French Estates-General assumed two sides, left or right, for or against, this or that. Seats have to go somewhere, but the division of politics into two ‘sides’ has certainly encouraged glaring and shouting. It encourages us to believe that this is a practice which requires firm distinctions, and to express disappointment when all available options on a ballot paper converge on focus group centrism. For most people, to recognise something distinctive called Politics, we need to see assertion, struggle, and antagonism. Whether this is the politics of the assembly or of the kitchen sink, the point is that there must be disagreement, and a taking of sides. That is how we usually recognise something called Politics, and make it different from other forms of action.

When big cheeses like Amin and Thrift get hold of Politics, such agonistic certainties become difficult to cling to. This book is ostensibly aimed at the Left, capitalised throughout the book, but its style is characteristic of a certain sort of theory which is far too clever to actually take a position. There are some interesting linguistic devices at work here in order to achieve such an effect. One is the citation of authorities – ‘we need only think of the work of Tarde here’ – combined with airy dismissals of other authors or ideas with an ‘of course’ which assumes the sort of reader who is as well read as the authors and already

predisposed to agree. Rather than persuading, or exhorting, this creamy style *assumes* agreement. It piles the citations high, and surveys the field from the height therefore produced. ‘Think, for example, not only of some of the ...’, ‘But it hardly needs saying...’. This is combined with grand assertion, followed by partial negation. ‘Of course, we are not saying...’. Add to this neologism of the ‘what we call’ variety and you have a book which is not written for a reader who wants to decide whether to agree or disagree with a political position, but someone happy to murmur appreciatively at the moves in this episode of the glass bead game. So what are Amin and Thrift actually saying?

I think, because I have to admit some uncertainty here, that they are encouraging ‘the art of imagination as an integral part of political practice’ (x). In saying this, Amin and Thrift are suggesting that politics needs to have less reliance on the manifesto, and more on the open utopian horizon. In practical terms, theirs seems to be a politics which invents new possibilities, constructs forms of organization to support them, and understands that affect and reason are always tied together. They summarise this position as suggesting that the Left needs to create ‘structures of feeling’ (borrowing the term from Raymond Williams) which allow projects to be built. Throughout the book there is a consistent attempt to bring together speculative ‘world-making’ with grounded pragmatism, in order to ‘channel the conduct of idealism’ (15). Praising various historical left projects – the German SPD, Swedish social democrats, the British women’s movement, and the US Progressives – they suggest that we can learn from ‘the organization of hope around a clear diagram of future being’ (36).

So far, so good. But we then spin away from a relatively conventional account of politics to a chapter on enlarging what counts as an actor (including non-humans), as well as moving away from normative or contractarian political ontologies towards ideas of affect. At this point, things start to get tricky.

In common with Giorgio Agamben (and his account of bare life), Deleuze (and his account of a molecular economy of desire), Felix Guattari (and his account of territories of existence), and Nigel Thrift (and his account of the non-representational), Lazzarato, in considering this plane of existence, wants to make no distinction between the human and the non-human, the subject and the object, and the sentient and the intelligible. (49)

Indeed. But anyway, the message is now that this is a radically new form of politics being announced. It is a politics which doesn’t begin with the rational political actor, but with networks of people and things in which coffee and barbed wire play political roles. Politics is now inscribed in relations, in spaces, in non-humans, in the flows of affect which shape experience. It seems like politics, and the Left, might start looking pretty different after this. But no, with another lurch

we are now back in another version of politics, the contemporary Left which 'remains alive and kicking and has plenty to say' (77). This is puzzling, because at the beginning of the book the last thirty years of the Left appeared to have been written off and in need of the new openings announced in the title of the book. Nonetheless, this multiple left – anti-capitalist, post-capitalist, reformist, pluralist – and concerned with recognition, identity, ethics and so on, is surveyed. Various tendencies are accused of not being utopian enough, or of being too unrealistic, pragmatic, naïve, programmatic or whatever. Next, again with a lurch, we move from airy summaries and dismissals of different Lefts to considering politics as organization, though what organization appears to mean here is the state in its various forms, not the prefigurative organizing which post-capitalists would celebrate. Noting that bureaucracy is political too (did someone say that it wasn't?), they then consider the complex publics of Euro bureaucracy, or statecraft, concluding that the left has an ambivalent relationship to the state. Finally, back to affect again, and to a politics which uses social media, and sells Obama's 'yes, we can' message of optimism to populations who can be swayed by affect.

I have no idea what this all adds up to. The conclusion, that a Leftist 'structure of feeling' should be concerned with labour, fairness, heterogeneity, accomplishments and steadfastness, would be fine in some generally normative and inspirational sense if it hadn't been preceded by much of the rest. After lurches from social democracy to post-human politics, from the virtues of bureaucracy to flows of affect, how can normative statements about 'fairness, harm and injustice' (184) underlie this 'new' politics? How can they claim that 'the recurring evils of inequality, oppression and exploitation need to be fought' (xi) without a normative humanism which allows you to identify such things? Their concluding paragraph contains the following –

We can hold our hands out to the messy, perplexing future, and we can do it confidently. But we are also sure that a politics of imagination, by definition, has to be left open. We cannot, and we should not, prescribe every answer, legislate every action, lock down every idea. (200)

Such ringing words do remind me of Obama in his inspiring emptiness. But, pausing a moment, who (apart from Lenin or Hitler) would actually disagree with this statement? Where is the politics, let alone the Left politics, in such a truism? This book is really a series of essays, stitched together with grandiose rhetoric but not adding up to a consistent argument or position. The most insistent claim is that politics involves the 'disclosure of worlds yet to come into existence' (185), 'a machine for generating new dawns' (186). These are nice lines, and ones that plenty of other people on various Lefts have been pushing for a long time. The problem is that there are plenty on the Right who would see

capitalism in similar ways, and modernists in general have the future in their sights, so utopianism in itself doesn't help distinguish Left from Right. What this whole book reminded me of most was Anthony Giddens' 'utopian realism' (Giddens, 1995: 154), not a million miles from the 'pragmatic worlding' which seems to attract Amin and Thrift. Both are conjunctions which sound rather clever, but rely on assuming that each half of the coupling is insufficient on its own. Which, as anyone who has done politics would tell you, is actually pretty obvious. In other words, you have to have ends, and means. Duh.

To make their argument work, Amin and Thrift need to construct a Left which is obsessed with means – straw men in cheap suits playing with paper, or nostalgic Leninists demanding obedience to the party. 'It has long been attractive for the Left to think in terms of a program that can be burnished and kept pure' (4). But if this view of the contemporary Left is not accepted then it becomes really unclear just who this book is written for, and what problem it solves. Even the authors themselves don't seem to subscribe to this view in their chapter on Leftist thought, and their epilogue appears to suggest that much of what the contemporary Left is already doing – complementary currencies, social economy, regulation, localization – are part of their agenda already. In which one might ask just how the theoretical agenda of affect and post-representationalism are relevant, or needed, since many lefts (not capitalized) seem to be getting on with things very nicely indeed (Parker et al., 2014). But perhaps I should be more generous. I have complained about a lack of consistency in the arguments, about the smug writing, and about the detachment from actually existing left politics. Nonetheless, this book did make me think about politics rather a lot. When academics claim to care about the Left, I am pleased. That is, assuming that consistency is a virtue in this new politics, and in the lives of people who write books like this.

## references

- Giddens, A. (1995) *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.  
 Parker, M., G. Cheney, V. Fournier and C. Land (eds.) (2014) *The companion to alternative organization*. London: Routledge.

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