

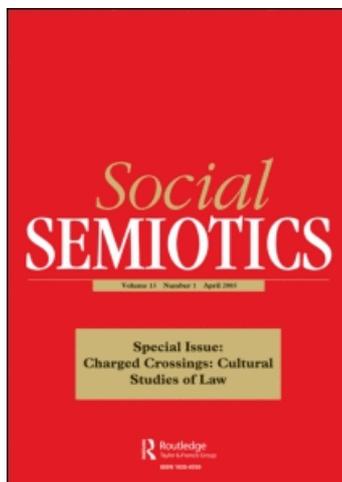
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## BOOK REVIEWS

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Ideology: explorations in contemporary social, political and cultural theory**, by Robert Porter, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2006, 162 pp., £17.99 (pbk), ISBN 0-70-831864-9

This book could well be regarded oddly from a distance. Exploring the concept of ideology through a comparative review of three quite disparate thinkers, Habermas, Žižek and Deleuze, may sound arbitrary. The idea perhaps should not work and, in the hands of a less thoughtful author, it may not work; the risk of eclectic lines of argument that do not amount to much of a whole is considerable. If such suspicions are projected on to Robert Porter's text, they should be quickly dispelled. The abiding impression here is of a robust piece of scholarship produced by someone who has thought long and carefully about his material.

The book justifies its circumscribed focus by organising its argument around what Porter sees as a "formal homology" in the work of the three theorists. The argument rests on two key points. First, Porter contends that, despite their many points of difference, Habermas, Žižek and Deleuze offer a critique of ideology that is "intuitively" reliant on a substantive distinction between the "ideological" and "the real". They may articulate the problematic distinction differently, but Porter argues that all three conceptualise the "real" as a "pre-ideological" or "non-ideological" space that enables us to critically illuminate the workings of ideology. Second, he suggests the homology is amplified by the fact that all three mount a critique of ideology on ethical grounds (the book collapses any categorical distinction between ethics and morality), although Porter is again attentive to the divergent articulations of the ethical. The argument is positioned, more generally, as a critical challenge to what the book suggests is the dominant conception of ideology in contemporary scholarship: namely the belief – principally ascribed to Paul Ricoeur and Michael Freeden – that all forms of thought are "always-already" ideological.

The work of Habermas, Žižek and Deleuze is given symmetrical consideration, with, in each case, one chapter on their respective demarcation of the ideological and the real and a second on their conception of ethical critique (or what is called moral critique in the case of Habermas). Porter reads like an excellent teacher. His style is continuously animated by the distillation of key points, recapped formulations and interjections that strongly identify with the neophyte reader. The extensive use of film illustrations will not surprise readers familiar with Žižek and Deleuze, both of whom are cited as maintaining that, because of their generative power, "cinematic texts can do theory in their own right" (p. 17).

The range of material covered in the relatively short chapters is ambitious. Porter prefaces each specific investigation with more general overviews, which function as useful skeletal introductions to the three theorists' work and their different conceptual genealogies. He is also reflexive about the limits of the book's synoptic approach, sometimes clearly flagging the (necessary) simplicity and colloquial nature of particular interpretations.

The discussion of Habermas is prefaced with a “groundwork” overview of his communicative account of reason and intersubjectivity. The theory of communicative action is described as conditioning Habermas’ conception of the real, while ideology—in what Porter recognises is a typical media studies emphasis—is conceptualised in terms of strategic communication practices that parasitically distort the idealised norm of intersubjective understanding. The discussion is explicated through summaries of Habermas’ critique of consumerism and scientism, and, more unexpectedly, a reading of the movie *Pleasantville*, whose principal characters’ struggles to assert their moral autonomy, is juxtaposed with the constraining effects of ideology.

The towering conceptual influence of Lacan’s distinction between the “Real” and the “Symbolic” is foregrounded in the assessment of Žižek. The analysis is contextualised with an exploration of Žižek’s view of rationality, who, although he ultimately follows Habermas in affirming the possibility of a universal reason, maintains that reason is typically contaminated by (profoundly political) logics of fantasy. Porter’s empathy and self-effacement as a teacher are vividly evident in the discussion of the Real, which, while positioned by Žižek as the ethical “space” that allows us to escape ideological fantasy, is paradoxically characterised as “simultaneously *impossible* to appropriate . . . adequately within the symbolic realm” (p. 74). It is to the author’s credit that “if all of this sounds terribly ambiguous, not to mention potentially confusing” (p. 74) on first scan, the careful reader will find it a lot clearer by the end of the lucid analysis of Žižek’s thought on anti-Semitism, totalitarianism and cynical reason.

The book is especially alert to the potentially fraught nature of its undertaking in the assessment of Deleuze, because of his categorical proclamation – with Guattari – that “there is no ideology and never has been” (p. 98). Porter rejects a surface reading of Deleuze’s position, insisting that one can extrapolate from his critique of psychoanalysis the “intuition” that “ideology functions through the repression of desire or, better still, through the desire for repression” (p. 103). The intuition’s ethical implications are superbly illuminated through a reading of the character “quiz kid Donnie Smith” from the movie *Magnolia*. Porter prefaces his Deleuzian interpretation with a Žižekian reading, which, it is surmised, would see Donnie’s “fetishistic” desire for bartender Brad as exemplifying “the lack” in his subjectivity. The distance between psychoanalysis’ repressive account of desire and Deleuze’s view of desire as inherently positive is imaginatively sketched, as Porter argues that, although Donnie’s love for Brad goes unrequited, the very recognition of his desire produces liberatory effects that enable him to transcend his fixation and make empathetic connections with other characters. The exposition of Deleuzian concepts is extended to other key moments in the film, including the “wise up” and the “shower of frogs” scenes, both of which are treated as emblematic of the impersonal and social nature of desire.

The book concludes by problematising the position of each theorist with respect to the other two. These dialogical exercises do not purport to resolve disputes. Porter’s principal concern is instead to ask: can the critical conception of ideology be defended despite the manifold differences between the three theorists? He argues it can, so long as we foreground the “formal” nature of the homology and fret less about the differences in theoretical content. It is one of the curious aspects of the book that this argument is developed without any engagement with the conceptual vocabulary of ontology, even though it seems to invite discussion of (in particular)

Ernesto Laclau's appropriation of Heidegger's distinction between ontological and ontical levels of analysis.

Reviewers without a formal background in political theory should perhaps desist from reproaching the book for omissions. However, since Laclau's theory of ideology is cited as a key reference, it would have been useful to see a brief discussion of its similarities and differences with Žižek's, particularly in terms of their mutual reliance on the categories of "antagonism" and "lack". Some engagement with Simon Critchley's critique of Laclau would also have been productive, since he explicates the argument – summarily cued at the end of the book – that Laclau and Mouffe's valorisation of "radical democracy" involves (despite their disavowals) an implicitly ethical commitment.

In sum, this book is an excellent contribution to often fossilised debates about ideology. It should be lauded for many reasons, perhaps, above all else, for the generosity of its readings. Porter does not shy away from critical comment. Yet the analysis always proceeds from "the inside" (p. 26), as he puts it; there is no sense of the three theorists being played off each other with the ultimate objective of casting one as the hero. For an impressive breadth of scholarship in a modest 162 pages, this thoughtful and suggestive book can only be highly recommended.

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**Sex and ethics. essays on sexuality, virtue, and the good life**, edited by Raja Halwani, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 296 pp., £50.00 (hbk), ISBN: 9-78-140398-984-0

Iris Murdoch lovers take heed: finally, a collection of philosophical papers that puts virtue ethics traditions – and, tangentially, other ethical schools of thought – in the context of sexual matters. Halwani has assembled a diverse, rather discordant symposium that attests to the variety of ways virtue ethics can be employed, with some sections that elucidate and some others that blur the questions addressed. But we should remind ourselves of the basics of virtue ethics: there is no wisdom without the process and trial-and-error, and the multidirectionality of the book is befitting.

As it is proper, the opening essay provides an overview of the ancients ("Sexual Desire and Virtue in Ancient Philosophy" by Juha Sihvola), and a great many of the pieces that follow engage the arguments of Plato, Aristotle or the Hellenistic philosophers. Kant too is very much present throughout the book, and Lara Denis dedicates her chapter to a careful drawing out of Kant's less visible theory of virtues underpinning the ethics of universal rational rules ("Sex and the Virtuous Kantian Agent"). Most often, however, the authors welcome Kant as a cooptable corrective to virtue ethics contextualism (very frequently via his Second Maxim on treating humans always as ends and not as means). As well, Kant's notion of sexualisation as always already de-subjection is often evoked, whether to be questioned or contemporised.

Martha Nussbaum's essay "Feminism, Virtue, and Objectification" shows how feminist theory can benefit from an alliance with virtue-ethics-cum-Kant. If we

genuinely strive for equality and justice, the argument goes, we will leave no sphere of our lives sheltered from such concerns. There is no special niche in human relations where despotism and war can reign while in all other areas we try to develop best dispositions of character and undertake right actions. Therefore, sexuality is not to be excluded from our overall ethical considerations. Our sexual imagination is in the grip of the societal from its inception and to exercise it in any other direction requires ethical and intellectual work.

So far so good. However, Nussbaum's argument then merges sexual objectification (the treatment of the members of the second sex as objects) and sexualisation. Her comprehensive and precise break-down of the process of objectifying of women (the denial of autonomy and subjectivity, the idea of property, instrumentality, fungibility, violability, etc.) gets wedded to the desiring processes.

What is fundamentally wrong with treating a woman as a sexual thing is the fact that one is treating a human being, who ought to be treated also as an end, as a mere means of one's own purposes. [...] We may differ with Kant about sex, however, while agreeing with him about the central ethical problem: people often use one another as mere tools of their own satisfaction during sexual relations, and this is always a bad thing to do. (pp. 50–51)

This leap is utterly unconvincing. That sexualisation and desiring of a person is akin to the comprehensive notion of objectification as explained by Nussbaum cannot be simply postulated. One could argue with equal strength that sexualising somebody means adding a dimension to his/her self, not reducing his/her personhood to an instrument. What of same-sex relations, what of age differences, other contexts?

Although Nussbaum does a great job of reminding us of the pertinence of "radical feminist" theory, what can we do with the tenuous "egalitarian sex" ideal that this school of thought proposed? If MacKinnon's old adage about the world being divided along the lines of (powerful) fuckers and (powerless) fuckees still stands, would tops and bottoms in sex mean tops and bottoms in society? Are the practitioners of sexual initiative the same group that owns social capital? Or is this not a particularly productive paradigm of inquiry into either one's social oppression or ways of desiring? These are the questions that anybody who assumes natural coincidence between desiring and objectification will have to address.

Part Two, somewhat misnamed as *The Good Life and Virtue*, is the book's conservative core. In David Carr's "On the Prospects of Chastity as Contemporary Virtue", by way of a roundabout elimination of what chastity is not – it is not asexuality, it is not sexual moderation independent of context, it is not successfully controlling one's unchaste urges as much as unlearning to have those urges – the ideal of the developed virtue of chastity comes to resemble the Victorian Angel in the House. For both sexes this time, it seems. There is total obliviousness to the gender aspect of the history and philosophy of chastity in Carr's and other articles in this section—no inkling of how 'chastity' became distinctly female business, no interest in how the demand of female monogamy had functioned as regulatory mechanism that ensures perpetuation of the family line and property. Roger Scruton, in his "Sexual Morality" excerpt, dismisses in passing the misguided doctrines of sexual "emancipation" or 'liberation'" (p. 82) but with no reference to any particularities of gender.

Carr writes: "... [O]ne might expect faithful marriage partners to give full reign to their sensuality on appropriate occasions. Such sexual indulgence – in the right

context – might be integral to chastity . . .” (p. 94). Right contexts and appropriate occasions, however, remain unspecified. And probably for good reason: spelling out when and how two chaste agents can give reign to their desires would add an inadvertent comic aspect to this solemn article. Carr also attributes to “sexual license” a whole spectrum of social problems: “escalating divorce and damage to the structure and stability of traditional two-parent family life, . . . increases in teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexually motivated violence . . .” (p. 98) – and, with most astonishing blindness to gender, the spread of AIDS in developing countries. Women’s disempowerment, including the imposed lack of sexual agency and ownership of their own bodies, is at the crux of the problem of AIDS containment in Africa, and to suggest that some sort of across-gender sexual licentiousness – and not men’s objectification of women, in Nussbaum’s comprehensive definition of the term – abets the AIDS epidemic is beyond reasonable argument.

Even within these traditionalist environs, the excerpt from Peter Geach’s 1977 *The Virtues* stands out for its peculiar dogmatism. Geach takes seriously the idea that “sexual appetite can be lawfully indulged only in ways conformable to the built-in teleology of the generative organs” (p. 103), but ultimately rejects it because there are “Scriptural precedents of holy married couples” who had non-procreative sex. We also learn that “Original Sin is a grim pervasive fact about the human condition” (p. 106) and, although the sexual act is not precisely the Original Sin, the two are inextricably connected because “it is normally by sex acts that Original Sin is transmitted to a new generation” (p. 106). Sex is also a “poison” (p. 107) and an expression of the corrupted human nature; therefore absolute asexuality is the true sexual virtue.

It would be useful to know whether Geach’s writing is representative of current Western Catholic mainstream, both in its seminaries and folk practices. Halwani does not say in his Introduction. How alive are these arguments in current official Catholic (or for that matter, other Christian denominations’) ethical thought? And how seriously are they being taken in the procedures of contemporary academic writing? Halwani as the editor seems to think considerably – why else include the excerpt?

Scriptural evidence (as in Geach) and analytic philosopher’s precision (as in N. J. H. Dent’s article) will make a less compelling case in favour of the traditional monogamous coupling than more literary, cross-disciplinary approaches. Scruton’s account of sexual intimacy-as-exclusivity is compelling for its narrative richness more than anything else. One must wonder what MacIntyre would have written on the topic of virtues in sexuality – the passages on constancy and Jane Austen’s idea of marriage in *After Virtue* leave one desiring for more.

The discipline-promiscuous or “thick” narrative writing makes for the best articles in the rest of the collection too (note pieces by Neera K. Badhwar, Heather D. Battaly and James S. Stramel). Rather than examining how one *can be* strongly sexual and ethical at the same time, the majority of the articles seem to have decided *a priori* that one cannot. Halwani’s “Casual Sex” and Alan Soble’s concluding chapter will serve as a reminder that the main question needed to be addressed before being answered.

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**On Jameson: from postmodernism to globalism**, by Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan, State University of New York Press, 2006, 290 pp., \$74.50 (hbk), ISBN13: 9-78-079146-591-2

During a period in which cultural criticism has become preoccupied with, on one hand, the history/memory debate and, on the other, new forms of social experience in cyberspace and global popular culture, Frederic Jameson's work has refused any dissociation of spatial and temporal (or synchronic and diachronic) orders. His project has been to map the contemporary from the perspective of a profound understanding of modern Marxist theory. As deconstruction, postcolonial criticism, and cultural studies have all, in their different ways, been drawn into debates about identity, Jameson's insistence on the global system as a totality demands that we consider the historical processes driving the transformation of contemporary culture according to Marx's original insights into the dynamic and destructive force of capitalism. In this, Jameson's principal counterparts have perhaps been Deleuze and Guattari's massive theorisation of capitalism and schizophrenia and Hardt and Negri's *Empire*.

As evidence of the ongoing interest in Jameson, Caren Irr's and Ian's Buchanan's volume joins Doug Kellner's and Sean Homer's collection *Frederic Jameson: A Critical Reader* (Palgrave, 2004). The editors propose in their introduction that Jameson's criticism addresses in a singular way the crisis of the humanities under the conditions of contemporary globalisation. The erosion of the canon and the proliferation of methodological "-isms" needs to be understood in the larger context of the decline of national tradition as the frame of reference for humanistic study. Theory has been drawn into this struggle to define a postnational culture. Jameson remains the theorist who has attempted to think the totality of the global system without reverting to more traditional understandings of the nation or humanities to ground his criticism.

Interestingly, as Evan Watkins notes in his essay for this volume, at the height of the poststructuralist influence it was Jameson who was often accused of "nostalgia" for dialectical method and for concepts such as History and totality. As Watkins explains, Jameson's writing does not offer the kind of model for criticism that so many have found in the writings of Derrida and Foucault, yet he remains the outstanding critic of his generation to formulate historical generalisations that continue to serve as a reference point for further criticism and debate. Roland Boer shows how Jameson's terms, *metacommentary* and *transcoding*, allow criticism to examine the plurality of interpretive methods, but also to understand their relation with reference to the cultural system conceived as a totality.

This book brings together commentary by a new generation of critics who have been influenced (and sometimes taught) by Jameson but who write in a period when the theoretical "explosion" of the 1970s and 1980s has subsided. What they continue is Jameson's commitment to a political critique of culture that seeks new ways to map cultural complexity. In Jameson's work, the key figures of Western Marxism – Lukacs, Brecht, Adorno – are always read in terms of a conceptual renewal and optical adjustment to the new conditions of multinational capitalism. While Brecht may not offer an aesthetic strategy in a postmodern media culture, Jameson rediscovers in a Brechtian pedagogy the possibility of alternative histories. In Lukacs

it is not the commitment to realism as much as the critique of reification that continues to be relevant.

In his essay Sean Homer considers Jameson's use of the Lacanian conception of the Real to define history as an absent cause that exceeds representation, only approachable through textualisation and narrativisation in the political unconscious. Homer also addresses Žižek's more recent advancement of this Lacanian model, showing how it has taken on a new pertinence after the debates about historical representation of the Holocaust. While trauma studies has become established as a site where history has apparently returned to the centre of debate after the analysis of postmodernism as the contemporary dominant, Homer reminds us that the question of the Real in Jameson and Žižek returns us a Marxist conception of history as a traumatic antagonism (class struggle) that has also been a central problem for earlier figures such as Benjamin and Adorno.

Jameson's most widely discussed work, his analysis of postmodernism, came to prominence in the 1980s before the collapse of the Soviet Union; and a significant part of the discussion in this volume explores the value of Jameson's theory after the Cold War and outside America, exploring the different perspectives on the fate of the nation in an era of multinational capitalism. Michael Rothberg uses the theory of cognitive mapping with respect to a cinematic representation of migrant labour. Vitaly Chernetsky gives a fascinating account of Jameson's reception in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR.

It is a credit to the editors that, as one proceeds from essay to essay, there is such a strong sense of continued engagement with certain problems and concepts. Each essay shifts perspective on these issues and presents new developments in their discussion. Both Ian Buchanan and Imre Szeman revisit Jameson's widely debated and denounced essay on Third World literatures, finding that Jameson's notion of a national allegory remains useful. Both Szeman's and Caren Irr's essays consider the problem of whether Jameson's totality must necessarily also be Euro-centric or Americo-centric. Given the space in this volume allocated to this particular problem, we sense how important it is to maintaining Jameson's status as a credible critic of global culture. These authors seek to reinvigorate Jameson's claim that national forms of cultural and social difference only make sense with respect to the historical forces that have defined them in a global system. For Jameson, postmodernism is a cultural dominant that does not eliminate residual or emergent cultural forms. However, as Phillip E. Wegner argues in his concluding discussion, this does not remove us from the problem of domination that Jameson inherits from earlier figures such as Adorno and Tafuri. The challenge that Jameson leaves us with is to attempt to maintain contact with sources of utopian vision and revolutionary change during a period (our own) of political stagnation and repression. This volume is testimony to the continuing vitality of Jameson's critical project.

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