

# Reviews

## Secret Cities

**Becky Alexis-Martin, *Disarming Doomsday: The Human Impact of Nuclear Weapons Since Hiroshima*, Pluto Press, 2019, 192 pages, paperback ISBN 9780745339207, £17.99**

If you were to look up coordinates 34.3853°N, 132.4553°E and 32.7503°N, 129.8779°E on maps available to the general public in August 1945, you would find the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If you were then to look up the coordinates 35.8800°N, 129.8779°W you would find nothing of note, apart from barren, uninhabited desert. On 6 August 1945, Hiroshima was reduced from a flourishing, vibrant, life-filled community into a barren, uninhabited wasteland. On 9 August of 1945, Nagasaki met the same fate.

Alexis-Martin's 'radical geography' of nuclear weapons claims the 'birth of nuclear warfare heralded the coming of the secret city'. One such city can be found at the third set of coordinates listed above. Although no longer secret, Los Alamos was one of the world's most closely guarded secrets in 1945. From its environs emerged a weapon of such fierce and deadly proportions that everything, from cartography to human relations, from military planning to the dreams of millions, was distorted. Not least among the things that changed as a result of the work done at Los Alamos was the instantaneous reduction in the populations of two Japanese cities. Perhaps 'instantaneous reduction' is far too banal a way of describing mass murder, but it fits with another theme of Alexis-Martin's work.

'Secret cities' of the nuclear variety aren't just a physical phenomenon; they are also linguistic. Compare and contrast the ongoing use of the term 'nuclear deterrence' as a euphemism for 'nuclear annihilation machine' with the hyper-masculine, gung-ho and, consequently, utterly pathetic term MOAB, or 'Mother Of All Bombs', a widely used designation for the most powerful 'conventional' weapon in the US arsenal. 'Nuclear warfare is somehow made respectable by omission,' whether this means removing locations from the map or obscuring weapons of omnicidal dimensions behind the language of safety and security.

Some startling consequences of such 'omission' were on full display during the 2019 UK General Election. The serious question of whether or not competing politicians would ever use nuclear weapons was disfigured into demands for a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question: 'would you

push the button?’ Can this outrageous pantomime be explained by psychological flaws of now forgotten politicians such as Theresa May, who determinedly assured the UK she was prepared to kill us all? Or was Mrs May lost in a secret city of her own, where she either languished in ignorance or was imprisoned by the knowledge that the terrible secrets contained within could never be shared?

Just like Los Alamos, where the ‘delinquent geniuses’ tasked with engineering a world-ending device were housed in cookie-cutter homesteads, surrounded by picket fences and greenery not otherwise available in the Arizona desert, for Mrs May – and those similarly tasked – the ‘necropolitics’ of the modern world, which dictates how some people will live and how others will die, must be presented as mundane and everyday. Most importantly the horrible realities must, at all times and at great cost, be hidden behind well-watered lawns and freshly painted fences.

The geographical and mental effects of secrecy are not confined to instantaneous moments of uncontrolled nuclear fusion or unrestrained political mendacity. The legacies of harm linger, combine and take on a life of their own. Whilst the ‘geniuses’ of Los Alamos marked their success, a different story unfolded in Japan:

‘Despite being wiped off the map, Hiroshima was a city of determined survivors. A huge civic effort was undertaken, aided by the arrival of large numbers of volunteers from across Japan. Yuki Tanaka, a retired historian of Hiroshima City University, said that “Hiroshima received a lot of help from people in neighbouring towns and cities such as Fuchu, Kure, and even Yamaguchi.” This collaborative effort went a substantial way towards changing the initially bleak fate of Hiroshima.’

An initially very bleak future was averted by the collective efforts of a terrorised population, but such actions could not contain the horrors, and consequences of the horrors, for all time:

‘The stigma surrounding radiation exposure created new challenges. Fears and misunderstanding of the health and genetic effects of ionising radiation meant that people who had survived the bombings became pariahs beyond their communities, facing bleak and friendless futures. If you had been involved in the bombings, it was difficult to find a partner or get married. This stigma continued for several years.’

So, while the *Hibakusha* endured intergenerational suffering, the residents of Los Alamos enjoyed a markedly different fate. As the scientists, mathematicians, engineers and technicians migrated to new laboratories, universities and workshops, their creation migrated and evolved. Plans for the atom bomb made secret journeys from continent to continent and the atom bomb itself evolved: firstly, into the more powerful hydrogen bomb, then into the silently murderous neutron bomb.

Each new development demanded new experiments and new tests. These had an impact in place, in time and on large numbers of people. Alexis-Martin pays close attention to the ‘atomic veterans’ and the material, biological and ecological impact of testing as the bomb spread from the US, through Europe, Eurasia and the East. In addition, and as important, she documents a ‘nuclear colonialism’:

‘Disregard for local residents was a universal feature of the planning process for nuclear weapons testing internationally, as “empty” spaces were sought out and dominated. *Nuclear colonialism* is the “taking and destruction of other people’s lands, natural resources, and wellbeing, for one’s own benefit, in the furtherance of nuclear development.”’

With ‘nuclear colonialism’ came a generation of ‘nuclear refugees’, displaced from their lands and excommunicated from their traditions, communities and history. Alexis-Martin mentions the fate of the Aboriginal Australians of Maralinga, who attempted to return home to find their historical lands fenced-off and unreachable. Conversely, the Kazakh nomads of Semipalatinsk were not dispossessed of their lands but were left in place to suffer consequences on the toxic landscapes of post-nuclear-testing grounds.

Alexis-Martin provides a fine analysis of nuclear planning, arms control, and arguments against nuclear weapons before returning to the question of ‘Spaces of Peace’, which traces pacifist and anti-war activism from every region with an important emphasis on some largely unheard of – or deliberately ignored – quarters. She concludes with sharp and urgent analysis of ‘Future War Zones’, which opens:

‘The world is heading towards a new era of nuclear risk, and perhaps a second Cold War. Unfortunately, existing international treaties seem powerless to prevent concerning changes in the current nuclear status quo. Unlike biological and chemical warfare, nuclear warfare is the only weapon of mass destruction (WMD) that has not yet been internationally banned. International arms control

and non-proliferation treaties are the only significant limiting policies in place to prevent nuclear war from breaking out. The paradox, of course, is that the number of nuclear weapons has decreased – from a peak of 70,300 during the Cold War to 14,200 in 2018 – but the number of nations that possess nuclear weapons, and the overall threat of nuclear warfare and terrorism has increased. After years of relatively stable relations between nuclear-armed states, there is a heightened and increasing state-level threat. However, our future risks and conflicts remain bounded and determined by geography and geopolitics.'

*Disarming Doomsday* makes an important and urgent contribution to the ongoing and ever-sharpening debates and activity around nuclear weapons. It does so from a unique perspective, one not confining itself to analysis of foreign policy, technological development or geopolitics. Rather, Alexis-Martin approaches the question from a variety of angles to provide a fresh and challenging account of the nuclear age and its manifold impacts.

Tom Unterrainer

## Who Killed the Cat Lover?

Klaus Gietinger, *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg*, Verso, 2019, 214 pages, hardback ISBN 9781788734462, 14.99

Loren Balhorn's translation of the 1993 German original was timed to coincide with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luxemburg's January 15, 1919, murder, commemorated world-wide: see YouTube clips, where Gietinger is also profiled. One might think her fellow martyr, Karl Liebknecht, should have been added to the title, as in the 1967 joint study by Elisabeth Hannover-Druck and Heinrich Hannover. Gietinger devotes ample space to his murder. But, this is Rosa's book, and Liebknecht's murder is no mystery.

First, to air one major complaint: there is no Index, no Bibliography, and no register of the plethora of illustrations (photographs of individuals and documents). This makes it very hard to check details and ascertain which secondary sources were and were not used.

On the other hand, the 17 niftily-titled (e.g. 'The Seventh Man', evoking both Graham Greene and the Cambridge Five), rapidly-moving chapters buttressed by 375 meticulously-documented footnotes comporting electronic pointers and enriching the narrative, rather give the feel of a Len Deighton novel. No great surprise, given Gietinger's career as actor-

director in cinema and television, especially his 2017 documentary exposing the death (June 2, 1967) of protesting West German student Benno Ohnesorg as murder by police. There is also his book *99 Crashes: Celebrity Accident Victims* (2004), exploding, for example, the myth of Jayne Mansfield's decapitation, also a reminder of the many suspicious 'road accidents' occurring under Idi Amin (closest associate Mustapha Adrisi) and Robert Mugabe (opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai; cf. Joost Fontein, 'Political Accidents in Zimbabwe,' *Kronos* 44 (2018, online)).

Gietinger did not intend a full biography. Any reader wanting one is spoiled for choice. There are at least a dozen in English or German, plus innumerable articles and ample material in biographies of Liebknecht and cognate books. Worth singling out are Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (1977, Verso e-book 2015), and the musings of Tony Cliff (see Ian Birchall's 2011 biography) who judged her a superior thinker to Lenin and Trotsky, both of whom paid notable posthumous tributes despite her criticisms of the pair.

Luxemburg and Liebknecht co-founded and led the Spartacus League (*Spartacusbund*), this name homage to the leader of the biggest (and last) slave rebellion against Rome, commemorated in the Soviet Union by Khatchaturian's Ballet (YouTube) and in America through the film written by 'Hollywood Ten' blacklisted Dalton Trumbo, based on the novel by gaoled communist Howard Fast.

In a letter (February 27, 1861) to Engels, Marx hailed Spartacus as 'the most capital fellow in the whole history of antiquity, a real representative of the proletariat of ancient times'.

Gietinger is far from the first enquirer into the Spartacist murders. He highlights a few (p. 5) and devotes an entire chapter to Dieter Ertel's 1968 commemorative TV documentary. But, he stole a march on competitors on acquiring by mysterious means — apparently (p. viii) being sent them by an unnamed functionary in the Federal Military Archives at Freiburg — the papers of Waldemar Pabst, going back to the 1919 trial documents. Gietinger appends six examples plus a sceptical letter to Pabst from lawyer Max Bürger.

Pabst publicly (*Der Spiegel*, April 18, 1962) boasted that he had orchestrated the deaths. He, as other such joint culprits as Wilhelm Canaris and Gustav Noske, described by Hitler as 'an oak amongst these Social Democrat plants', would, perhaps not too surprisingly, become a prominent Nazi; cf. Nigel Jones, *A Brief History of the Birth of the Nazis* (2012). Gietinger provides useful potted biographies of these and other

notably involved individuals, though oddly omitting Ernst Krull, fingered as Luxemburg's assassin by East German and Soviet historians; cf. Robert Stemmie, *Epresser Der Fall Ernst Krull und sechs weitere Internationale Kriminalfälle* (1966).

There is ample information about Pabst online, both his English and (especially) his German Wikipedia notices along with various other websites. When Gietinger says (p. 13) he has been undervalued, that is mere self-puffery. Inevitably, many have questioned the reliability of this preening exhibitionist. Indeed, one doubts the capacity or willingness of any of this gang to tell the unvarnished truth: self-serving was everything.

There are certainly some disquieting moments in the Pabst documents. Apart from separately fingering Liebknecht and Luxemburg as his 'most dangerous enemies', he wobbles between Herrman Souchon and Kurt Vogel as the actual killer.

Gietinger confidently plumps for Souchon, though sportingly appends a highly critical letter about this identification and his methods of enquiry, including misreadings of Pabst, sent to him by lawyer Otto Kranzbühler.

My own impression is that Gietinger's case for Souchon is plausible, but not beyond challenge. Vogel must stay in the dock. It seems unquestioned that it was he who threw Luxemburg's body into the Landwehr Canal, where it was not until May 31 that sluice-attendant Gottfried Knepel discovered it. Gietinger (p. 100) seems surprised Knepel was never paid the advertised reward of 10,000 Marks. I fancy this was because the guilty parties never expected the body found, especially as it was in so gruesome a state that Gietinger declined (p. 95, n.16) to publish its photo.

On this matter, in 2009 a body lying for 90 years in a basement of Berlin's Charité Hospital was claimed as Luxemburg's by the head of its forensic medical department, Michael Tsokos, who asserted the corpse bore 'astonishing similarities' to Luxemburg's. However, another head, Volmar Schneider, dismissed this as 'a desperate publicity stunt'. Gietinger himself at the time also rejected the idea. It was, though, accepted by Jörn Schütrumpf, who asserted that authorities in 1919 had falsified the autopsy report. Many relevant websites suggest the debate still rages. Apparently, a DNA test is not feasible, although carbon dating indicates an early 20<sup>th</sup> century body.

There also remains Krull, in whose possession were found Luxemburg's watch and other items, which he claimed to have stolen from her flat. Overall, I haver between Souchon and Vogel, slightly tilting to the latter, but hide behind a Scottish 'Not-Proven' verdict.

A few more of Gietinger's assertions may be questioned. Lawyer Paul

Levi's death *could* have been suicide (p. 63), but accidental or natural causes are equally possible, given that he was in a fever-induced delirium.

It is an exaggeration (p.24 n.13) that Anton Fischer's involvement 'remains virtually unresearched to this day.' Fischer had his due in 'The January Fights 1915 in Berlin' by Heinrich Rasmussen and Reinhold Schamm (2010, online), whilst there is now (January 5, 2019) an online piece, 'Prelude to the state massacre' by Jörn Schütrumpf, who has done much Luxemburg research. Fischer also features in Nigel Jones' aforementioned *Birth of the Nazis*.

Above all, Gietinger's claim (p. vii) that Rosa Luxemburg was 'decidedly out' in 1989 (Fall of The Wall), 'no one was interested in hearing about her', is preposterous, more trumpet-blowing. In that very year, Gustav Strubel had published (*ZeitOnline*, January 13) a 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary accusatory piece titled (in English) 'I let her be judged'. At least four books on her were published in this decade, and, in 1986, Margarethe von Trotta had brought out her much-acclaimed *Rosa Luxemburg* film with Barbara Sukova in the title role (YouTube has the trailer).

Two codas. Speaking as an ailurophile, I am delighted to mention Luxemburg's devotion to her cat, Mimi: full details in Edward Timms' review of Elzbieta Ettinger's 1987 biography in *London Review of Books*, June 4, 1987. Equally glad to recall I once had a friend who christened his cat Rosa Luxemburg.

Second, there's an old 1930s photograph purporting to show Rosa Luxemburg, Simone de Beauvoir, and Emma Goldman strolling on a beach smoking pipes. Despite being unmasked as the fake it is — see the ewamaria2013 website — it has apparently been seriously 'shared' 13,268 times on Facebook. In this age of Fake News, there is a lesson here for slaves of 'social media' — but will they ever learn it?

*Barry Baldwin*

## Peterloo Massacre?

**Robert Poole, *Peterloo: The English Uprising*, Oxford University Press, 2019, 480 pages, hardback ISBN 9780198783466, £25**

This is a brilliant, in-depth study of the famous massacre 200 years ago. Events leading up to the Peterloo massacre and the social/political context in which it took place are described in detail. The reader knows what is coming and a certain tension and suspense are built up leading to the dreadful climax, which is described as if you were there — you almost feel the TV cameras and smart phone videos are rolling. Although things now are obviously different, perhaps not all that much has changed over the last two centuries: appalling inequality, the rich getting richer and the poor poorer, authorities insensitive to the needs of those far worse off than themselves, ‘fake news’/lies, the cover-ups, whitewashes and the North-South divide with a rich elite running the show from London.

Naturally, there was opposition, the occasional riot, the ‘Hexham Affair’ in 1761 in which somewhere between 20 to 60 people died. There were the Luddites, too, and the slogan ‘better hanged than starved’ shows just how dire things were. The eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1816 darkened the skies, changed the climate, ruined harvests and, after Waterloo, England was flooded with out-of-work soldiers and there were the usual financial fiascos. What, however, comes over and over again in *Peterloo* is not so much the level of discontent as the passivity of those feeling it. One poor weaver wrote, ‘one would think that a single individual, dying of want, would be enough to set the whole nation ablaze’. But it was the old story, the clash between radicals and moderates: one side looking for better wages, the other wanting to change the system that produces such poor wages in the first place; one side that wants to keep within the limits of highly repressive laws to show the powers-that-be that they are not ignorant boors but ‘civilised’ like their ‘bettters’ and deserving of respect and the other saying to hell with all that, let’s demand that that should be ours by right. The Spenceans, followers of Thomas Spence from Newcastle, represented the latter group and it would be hard to find a more incompetent group of would-be revolutionaries who fell into a government trap that ended in, for them, the disastrous Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820.

What was being demanded was hardly revolutionary by our standards: full (male) suffrage (though women played an increasingly prominent and

radical role in the protests), no property qualification to stand as candidate to become an MP, vote by (secret) ballot, and the House of Commons should actually represent the population — No Taxation Without Representation! So there were endless petitions and remonstrations to the politicians and the Prince Regent — from very poor, hungry people, but also from people who had never gone without a good meal in their whole lives but were outraged by the idea that others might like to eat too. The powers-that-be faced the usual dilemmas: give way on (some of) their demands and head off trouble at mill, or would that just be seen as weakness and encourage the petitioners to push their luck and ask for more? Or outright heavy, violent repression to teach them a lesson they wouldn't forget, and hope it didn't inflame the situation further?

So, it was a bit of both — the odd hanging, transportation and imprisonment where conditions were sometimes appalling and at other times remarkably good, plus the odd meeting with a politician who was terribly ‘understanding’ (the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, was apparently charming at one such meeting.)

*Peterloo* is very much in the tradition of Edward Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* and Linda Colley’s *Britons*, both of which are quoted frequently though not always in agreement, but for this reviewer it all comes over as being terribly ‘British’. Things were all so relatively polite and civilised, in spite of the horrors involved. The Law may have been a cruel ass, but it was more or less respected by both sides. Evidence was always sought, as was legal advice by both sides, and prisoners were sometimes discharged, and when they weren’t the authorities were made to look fools. The Habeas Corpus Act was suspended for a while, but at least there was an Act to suspend. People were held in prison without trial, but usually not for long, and charges were often dropped. There were no Death Squads in action, no ‘Disappeared’, no torture, no kangaroo courts or show trials, no fear about meeting, parading or marching. Children were out with their mums and dads, dressed in their Sunday best, and there was a festive air on the day of Peterloo. A lesson we can perhaps learn today: never take your kids on a demonstration. You are asking/expecting the people you are protesting about, and to, to be nice. Are you serious or not? Is it not stupid to expect people whose interests you are threatening to be polite?

E P Thompson said of Peterloo ‘it really was a massacre’ (roughly 20 dead and 700 wounded), which begs the question, what makes a massacre? I once asked a Holocaust denier, who claimed that there were not six million Jews in Europe to be gassed, what makes a holocaust? Leaving

aside that tens of thousands who died in the Holocaust were not Jewish, I asked whether a million would suffice? So, what makes a massacre? Are we talking Rwanda here? Or Wounded Knee? Hardly, and horrific while it undoubtedly was at Peterloo, it strikes me as romanticising and over-dramatising what was undoubtedly a terrible event. Peterloo can't compare to the civil and political unrest of, say, the United States where strikebreaking and union bashing knew few bounds. It is almost as if the British have had so little violence on home soil since the civil wars of the 17th Century, with such loss of life not seen again until the First World War and that, as with most violence committed in Britain's name, was abroad, they make up for it with their own myths. Bristol was almost burnt to the ground in 1830 in a riot, and the military weighed in and killed hundreds but, like Culloden and the Gordon Riots, it was pretty rare, and who has ever heard of that outrage?

*Peterloo* claims that this time it was different as there was a *riot*, it wasn't *peaceful*, even though armed troops were used against civilians. It's a bit like the Blitz myth. Undeniably terrifying for those who experienced it, but the Japanese lost more civilians in one night's bombing of Tokyo than the British did in the whole Second World War, ditto the Germans in Hamburg and Dresden. You may argue that there is nothing wrong with a nation's myths, but I am not so sure. They may give rise to 'cosy indignation' or 'comfy, placid sense of outrage' that, in turn, can lead us to ignore or play down the injustices of today. Peterloo was essentially a minor event that took place 200 years ago that made up, at most, a few drops of the flood that led to the Great Reform of 1832, which was in fact so inadequate that one of the leading lights at the Peterloo protest, then an MP, refused to vote for it as he was disgusted by its measly changes (rotten and pocket boroughs abolished but suffrage actually less than a century before).

Read the book, see the film, and feel good about feeling bad, outraged by what happened in Manchester in 1819, and forget that today we have a truth-teller languishing in prison while the UK sells arms that cause massacres on a scale that makes Peterloo look puny. Future generations, if there are any, will look back as we look back at the slave trade, and ask how normal, respectable people could support a trade that killed and maimed so many people and support governments that backed dictators that they approved of and overthrew ones they didn't, or whose sell-by date had passed. Read the book all the same. It's a good one.

Nigel Potter  
Honduras

## Strange Childhood

**Banine, *Days in the Caucasus*, translated by Anne Thompson-Ahmadova, Pushkin Press, 284 pages, hardback ISBN 9781782274872, £16.99**

In the oil-rich lands of the Caucasus, a modest patch of soil could make the fortune of the humblest peasant but repeatedly and systematically unmake that of whole peoples. The grandfather of Umm El-Banu Assadullayeva, who would grow up to write under the pseudonym Banine, struck oil on his land. The family became rich, of course, but history would later make them and their society poor again.

Written in French and published in Paris, to which Banine had emigrated, in 1945, this memoir of her childhood would be followed in 1947 by a second volume, *Days in Paris*. By the time of writing, she had established an inevitable distance from her past self:

What a strange childhood! I know that every childhood feels far away. Mine, though, feels even more unreal because of this complete fracture, both geographic and social. Nothing connects me to it: neither religion, nor language, since today I think and write in French; neither my nationality, which has changed, nor the lost millions; nothing and no one. My past seems like a previous life. (pp.81-82)

That said, she is able to re-create her past with exemplary clarity and, notwithstanding the horrors of history, with plenty of warmth and good humour. As well as Banine herself, the narrative is full of characters. There is the formidable grandmother, still anchoring the family to their pre-oil-wealth Muslim heritage even as they seek to drift beyond its limiting influence. There is the irrepressible Uncle Suleyman:

Didn't he once pay tremendous fines to the Berlin police because he felt the urge to spit all day long in the streets of the German capital, though this was explicitly forbidden? Another time he commandeered a hotel lift, obliging the lift attendant to go up and down non-stop a hundred times. He sang our songs in the foyer of the Paris Opera, urinated from his hotel balcony and emitted his thunderous belches at Maxim's. (p.116)

There are Banine's two male cousins, Asad and Ali, who never appear

except locked together in mischief. At their worst they make a sinister pair—forcing one girl to play ‘rape the Armenian’ while everyone else is having an afternoon nap—but there are other times, too, when their boyishness is touchingly absurd (p.65). Knowing themselves to be beautiful, they exploit their attractiveness to gay men.

Much as, elsewhere, generations of children who had seen Hollywood movies would routinely play ‘Cowboys and Indians’, Banine and her friends had their regional equivalent: ‘On holidays we played at massacring Armenians, a game we loved above all others. Heady with racist passion, we would sacrifice [our Armenian friend] Tamara on the altar of our ancestral hatred’ (p.64). And yet when Tamara tells her that Asad and Ali have made her play the game of ‘rape the Armenian’, Banine is horrified: ‘I was an exclamation mark’ (p.65). It is not difficult to see how, for a child in such a society, morality becomes a pretty contingent affair.

For all its veneer of adherence to Muslim tradition, this is a society cheerfully operating many routine transgressions of the precepts of the Koran. Gambling? ‘The whole of Baku played cards, staking enormous sums into the bargain’. Wine? ‘Is wine forbidden by the Prophet? People made up for it by drinking spirits—vodka, brandy—on the false pretext that it wasn’t wine’. Reproduction of the human image? ‘[P]hotographers were overwhelmed with customers’ (p.81).

Banine’s homeland is a place over which history passes, back and forth, unceasingly. When the Russian empire breaks up in the aftermath of the October Revolution, independent republics are formed in those areas which do not share Russia’s cultural, religious history: in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia claim the right to self-determination. In Baku, various factions vie for control of the opposition to Russian communism, Armenian socialists eventually seizing the prize. Then the Ottoman Turks occupy Baku and re-establish order across the Caucasus. Then: ‘The Turks, who were allies of the Germans, were defeated in 1918 and forced to return home, while the victorious British, oil-lovers as ever, took their place in the oilfields’ (p.129). Then: ‘Soon it was the turn of the British to leave the Caucasus, and our good city with its minarets and oil barons became the capital of an independent Republic of Azerbaijan’ (p.129). This crudest of chronologies can only begin to express what must have been lived, especially by a child, as a bewilderingly unpredictable chaos of mutually incompatible events; and yet also, of course, as normality.

The treadmill of history can make Banine sound selectively emotional:

‘A while later, I saw my first death (I don’t include the anonymous bodies swinging from nooses in the public park)’. The death in question is that of her maternal grandfather (p.146). When she is thirteen her other grandfather dies and she is suddenly, at least in theory, a multi-millionaire—‘but only for a few days, for I was soon woken at dawn by “The Internationale” sung in the street ... It was the Russians’ (p.141). When the Red Army reconquers Azerbaijan, Banine and her family are sucked back into the Russian empire, which is now, of course, the Soviet empire. ‘Capitalism was dead; we possessed nothing now.’ This latter point turns out, later in the account, not to be true: gold has been buried, and jewels otherwise concealed (p.148).

There is, as Banine points, a powerful strain of Orientalism in Russian culture, which predetermines the attitudes the Red Army bring with them, and in particular their attitudes to women:

Russian poets had celebrated the Caucasus, its women, its mountains, its foreignness. It was imbued with a specific emotion that almost every sensitive Russian felt when he got there. To these visitors we were ‘gazelles with languorous eyes’, ‘girls from the harem’, scarcely liberated from servitude: the ‘little savages’ of exotic novels. (p.159)

This seems to have been felt with especial intensity by those who, like Banine’s family, have been modernised by their chance wealth. When they move into the old citadel of Baku, their home having been commandeered and divided up, the family are apparently surprised to find themselves in an old-fashioned Islamic city:

The narrow, winding streets where only donkeys or camels could pass, the vast majority of women wearing the veil, the scruffy urchins playing jacks and swearing in the small squares under the shade of a stunted acacia tree: all contributed to this sense of the orient that was missing in modern Baku, with its new houses in the worst possible taste, its motor cars and its cinemas. (p.196)

The irony is that oil wealth was used by families like hers to escape this very ‘orient’ in the first place, leaving it to the poor. Now its ‘ancestral atmosphere’ welcomed them back into ‘the cradle of our forebears’.

The author’s point of view often appears even more limited by her background in wealth than by her exclusion from public affairs as a woman. For instance, she claims that ‘The discovery of oil wells in Baku greatly accelerated the liberation of the Muslims of the Caucasus: fortune

suddenly put vast resources into their hands, allowing them to enjoy all the pleasures of civilization and taking away their taste for the strict, simple life of their forebears' (p.26). There is no sign of irony in this duality of civilization on one side and poverty on the other, and no apparent awareness that anything might have been lost in the liberatory process.

Mind you, the liberation to which she refers turns out to be pretty superficial, especially where woman are concerned. Although she does get a relatively stable job in the National Conservatoire for Muslim Women, more because she is an Azeri-speaking woman than for any particular skills beyond a general musicality, Banine herself is given in marriage to a thirty-five-year-old man at the age of fifteen.

Gregory Woods

## Cockroaches

**John Le Carré, *Agent Running in the Field*, Viking 2019, 282 pages, hardback ISBN 9780241401231, £20**

**Ian McEwan, *The Cockroach*, Jonathan Cape 2019, 100 pages, paperback ISBN 9781529112924, £7.99**

**Ali Smith, *Spring*, Hamish Hamilton 2019, 352 pages, hardback ISBN 9780241207048, £16.99**

John Le Carré has been working with the outwardly unremarkable since *Call for the Dead* first introduced George Smiley as ‘breathtakingly ordinary ... lost luggage, destined ... to remain unclaimed on the dusty shelf of yesterday’s news’, and *Agent Running in the Field*, true to form, begins with a stress on the innocuous that teeters on self-parody. Publishers, media pundits and reviewers have greeted the novel with a chorus of esteem for its incendiary contribution to *Brexlit*, but Le Carré’s narrator adopts a more studied, undemonstrative approach, suggesting the full force of the author’s wrath – ‘always, in my books, I’ve tried to live the passion of my time’ he told CBS recently – will have to come from a different quarter.

‘Our meeting was not contrived. Not by me, not by Ed, not by any of the hidden hands supposedly pulling at his strings. I was not targeted. Ed was not put up to it. We were neither covertly nor aggressively observed. He issued a sporting challenge. I accepted it. We played ...’

We're in familiar terrain, certainly, a veteran SIS officer returned from decades of Eastern European skulduggery now facing obsolescence and holed up in the chloroformed world of a Battersea clubhouse of which he's the Honorary Secretary, followed by an exhaustive tour of the sites of inherited privilege and a class monopoly of power which takes in City law firms, boarding schools, consulates, executive armchairs, ski-lifts, and for good measure a 'massive eighteenth-century hilltop villa overlooking Hampstead Heath'. Whether all this amounts, as Toby Manning eagerly asseverates in his recent *John Le Carré and the Cold War*, to a 'valorisation of the establishment over the classes beneath it', is an open question, more usefully approached perhaps in tandem with a similar uncertainty over Brexlit's claim to state-of-the-nation representativeness generally. The unprecedently slow narrative build towards the spycraft of Chapter 9, in fact, the novel behaving like a *sleeper* awaiting its moment to break out behind enemy lines, shows Le Carré at his most mercilessly satirical — a satire that extends, from the first sentence, to the author himself, putting in a cameo appearance similar to those on film. *Everything* here is a matter of *his* contrivance, the string of sinister disclaimers around a game of badminton an earnest of the way every banality of the Service's bureaucratic environment, with its hierarchies and resentments (dialogue, at points, straight out of the corporate straightjacket of Broadcasting House's 'W1A'), every excursion into bland, lawn-mowing middle class suburbia (*Diary of a Nobody* revisited, a couple of rungs up the social ladder) will serve as a further reinforcement of the wafer-thin proximity between the quotidian and its dark obverse – in this case, the Russian post-Communist threat to liberal democracy.

Meanwhile anachronism and decrepitude, those other Le Carré staples, have become well and truly ghosts of the past, Cold Warriors hovering one last time on the edge of vision as Nat, Smiley's limber, forty-something surrogate, takes ignominious possession of the defunct Camden substation likely as not to be his own final dumping ground: 'I mount the three cracked steps. The peeling front door opens before I have a chance to insert my aged Yale key'. The idealisms, tarnished but resilient, of that earlier Manichean epoch have all gone the way of Mollie McCraig, her 'motionless shadow [no longer] looking down on me from the window' [*A Legacy of Spies*] – and as Le Carré already sensed in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the Trump-Putin era of *Agent* now confirms, with its rampant, transnational gangster capitalism stretching from offshore wealth management and Ukrainian dirty money in the City of London to the *nomenklatura* protectorate of Karlovy Vary, scene of the

novel's most thrillingly visceral encounter. 'Who in this whole fucked up universe is rich today and not a thief?' the Georgian double- or triple-agent turned *mafioso* and oligarch shoots back at any lingering adherence to a morality. Tracked to his floodlit lair, and ringed around with bodyguards in a scene reminiscent of De Niro's last-ditch bid to rescue Christopher Walken from the old game of spin-the-cartridges in *The Deer Hunter*, he delivers a denunciation of the *Zeitgeist* and its threadbare ideological smokescreens so comprehensive Nat can barely articulate a response.

'So what are you?'

'A patriot, I suppose'.

'What of? Facebook? Dot-coms? Global warming? Corporations so big they can gobble up your broken little country in one bite? Who's paying you?

... Nobody dreams any more, hear me?'

Left to their own devices, these superannuated adversaries could very easily, one feels, disappear into the 'eternal darkness' Nat finds on the top floor of his backstreet fiefdom – indeed, their parting embrace seems to suggest so. But if there's a certain tokenism about the way Le Carré populates that floor with a 'ragtag ... of bicultural backgrounds', and flirts spasmodically with ethnicities (a Caribbean receptionist; an Indian barrister 'vanquished' at the net with whom Nat swaps colonial backgrounds; the 'bright colours' of an Indian family kite-flying amid 'arid leaves' on Primrose Hill; a memorably heartfelt tribute to the intermingling of London's citizenry seen through surveillance cameras in a public park – and heavily inundated with spooks), in one signal respect the novel is hard-wired to the contemporary – to Brexit-land – by virtue of its openness to and, in a brilliantly plotted coda, championing of the *dreams* and nascent activisms of the *young*.

Le Carré, it seems, has been listening to the voices on the street. They may be, like Ed, Nat's incongruous club sparring partner, the callow victims of an omnipresent oppressor, 'played by both sides like a fucking marionette', or like his daughter Steff or the assiduously ethical Service probationer Florence, prone to emotional overdrive, but they represent a generation on the march, and their animus against all-and-sundry ignites a fuse that proves unstoppable. The novel resounds with tirades from which its protagonist is at pains to distance himself: Ed's indictment of a transatlantic stitch-up aimed at derailing the European project has an incontrovertible facticity but his opinions, alas, 'on any given topic were predictable before he opened his mouth', formulaic and satirisable like any

of the mantras of popular debate. Le Carré's wary courtship of this indigestible fare bears an uncanny resemblance, at a more exalted level, to the elderly Bach at the court of Frederick the Great weaving the king's provocative flim-flam into his own meticulous counterpoint to produce 'The Musical Offering'. McEwan's *Cockroach*, on the other hand, betrays no such generic nervousness in its wholesale plunge into the ephemeral, replete with side-swipes at every available target on the dysfunctional political scene: the brevity, light-footedness and spontaneity of this Kafkaesque parable aligns itself, surely, with a whole history of pamphleteering aimed at shifting public opinion through hyperbole and no-holds-barred partisanship. Indeed, the Boris lookalike's missionary nationalism and economic phantasm of 'Reversalism' look directly back to the Swift of sunbeams-out-of-cucumbers or of the 'Young healthy child [that will] ... equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout', although without the Dean's monstrous rhetorical appetite – above all, *The Cockroach* has been designed for quick consumption. Here, as in *Agent*, if there's a single unequivocal mark of sanity able to cut through the ideological morass it comes from Smiley's, and his creator's, beloved Germany – the Chancellor's dumbfounding question to her British counterpart 'Why are you doing this? Why, to what end, are you tearing your nation apart?'

Otherwise, and for all his unaccustomed exuberance, McEwan's insect's-eye view of the mindless carnage of Whitehall offers little in the way of a deeper engagement with the national tragedy. Le Carré, too, has at best a precarious hold on the tensions and preoccupations of the common life, although perhaps, as his novel implies, never more aware than now of the need for one generation to ally its concerns to those of the next: 'I had wanted to tell him I was a decent man, but it was too late'. If either text approximates a *Brexit*, it's one where the intractable but unavoidable issues of race and poverty, immigration and provincial disempowerment have little or no purchase. In stark contrast, Ali Smith's new *Spring* – the third in her quartet of Brexit fictional dispatches – comes imbued with an optimism that derives precisely from abandoning the metropolitan safe house (the modernisms of a Rilke or Katherine Mansfield, the commercialised, dumbed down populism of the centralised media) or rather finding in it a leverage capable of confronting head-on the far-flung injustices perpetrated in its name. Once again a hardened state employee, administrator of a punitive system like, for all his moral nervousness, Nat, comes face to face with youth's well-nigh miraculous indifference to entrenched power. By coincidence another Florence, 'A kid, a girl wearing a school uniform, apparently just walked into the

[Immigrant Removal] centre ...like the fucking Virgin Mary', and to the bewilderment of the Detainee Custody Officer whose perspective we share, effects a series of transformations, institutional and personal, that reverberate through the lives of everyone she encounters. Smith invokes the model of St Brigid of Kildare, patron saint of the rural poor in the Scottish Highlands: 'flowers sprang up out of the nothing there'. Brit puts it more sententiously – 'Someone doing something right here. About fucking time' – but their voices are as one.

Stephen Winfield

### Class is not the only theme

**Kit de Waal (ed.), *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers*, Unbound, 2019, 320 pages, paperback ISBN 9781783527458, £9.99**

'Anthologies are sickly things'

Sir Francis Palgrave

(of Golden Treasury fame)

Having done a couple, I disagree.

'If you write about the working-class you have left it,' Didier Erebon (French philosopher/sociologist, working-class origin).

Some other instructive reviews of *Common People* include Juno Baker (LITRO website); Andrew Hadfield (*Irish Times*, May 4, 2019); Kate Hunter (*Socialist Review*, April 2019) — all online.

This crowd-funded volume follows a similar essay collection, *Know Your Place* (ed. Nathan Connolly, 2017). There are detailed online reviews by Lisa McKenzie and Zeba Talkhani.

One of the latter's twenty-two contributors is Kit De Waal, editor of the anthology under review. An Irish-Caribbean 'Brummie', De Waal worked at many jobs before publishing her much-acclaimed novel *My Name is Leon* (2016) about the tribulations of a nine-year-old Birmingham boy of mixed race. She can be seen on YouTube and heard on Podcasts.

The shadow of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) hangs over both these anthologies. This once seminal work is here and elsewhere criticized (rightly) for its sentimentality, in particular by Shelagh Delaney (*A Taste of Honey*), who also detested the label 'Working-Class Writer'. The subject, in fact, transcends social origins (a point for later). Albeit at a

lighter level, one may instance the acutely observed *Class* by Jilly Cooper (1979), whose novels are suffused with it.

De Waal assembles thirty-three contributors (including herself). Twenty-three are women, albeit there is no feminist imbalance in tone; indeed, at times, the opposite. Many of the writers have overcome serious illnesses and other acute problems.

There is a wide geographical range. One, Jodie Russian-Red, is based in Nottingham, attached to the University, though her Funeral/Wedding doublet is set in Hull. For complement, Louise Doughty speaks of her ‘chippy East Midlands way’, apropos dismissing a Man Booker Prize entry as ‘bollocks’.

Cue here to acknowledge this is not the place for detailed literary criticism. Suffice it to say that the overall style (most of the writers are published novelists) runs the gamut from literary-flecked to in-your-face aggression, with some (not too much) swearing, admixed with a variety of dialect idioms.

Focus is largely urban, though three pieces give welcome rural perspective. Adelle Stripe, speaking of her father’s gruesome accident, remarks (p. 137) ‘he always knew that farming was the most dangerous profession’. Here I wryly recall, in my Socialist Labour League days, urging more attention be paid to farm labourers’ problems, only to be told by a Central Committee member ‘we’re not interested in peasants’. Perhaps this is an echo of the traditional mistranslation of Marx ‘the idiocy of rural life,’ but so much for the Trotskyite notion of Brotherhood.

Urban-rural distinctions are blotted out in ‘Tough’, Tony Walsh’s belligerent poem that opens the collection. Obvious comparisons with, for example, The Clash (London Calling) and Sex Pistols (Anarchy in the UK). The one other poem, Malorie Blackman’s ‘Snakes & Ladders’, is provocative (‘ We are factory fodder’) whilst Eva Verde’s epigraphic ‘ No Future’ is reminiscent of the Pistols’ God Save The Queen. Verde’s especially touching memoir ends with her favourite public library closed, replaced by a restaurant; sad sign of our times.

Juno Baker’s review complains there is too much repetition of working-class pride and too many childhood memories. Some truth in this, but such repetition is inevitable in such collections, and the older we get the more we remember our formative young days, good or bad.

There is an overall sense of despondency about working-class prospects literary and general, perhaps summed up in the Portuguese proverb (favourite of Henry Miller): ‘If Shit becomes valuable, the poor will be born without arseholes’.

This pessimism (especially in Dave O'Brien's wrap-up) is somewhat exaggerated, as in several other memoirs. There have long been literary success stories, from such eighteenth-century poets as cobbler James Woodhouse and milk-maid Ann Yearsley, via socialist militant Margaret Harkness, whom Engels helped with her fiction, to such glittering modern examples as Benjamin Zephaniah.

Class is not the only theme. The three women devoted to darts, pool, and dog racing faced fierce male chauvinism. Racism takes contrasting forms. There is one case of mild rural colour prejudice. Contrariwise, the woman whose first 'black man' experience with her gynaecologist made her wish he had touched both her breasts.

Lisa McInerney wonders why there's 'no such thing as a working-class feminist'. Lisa Blower's grannie has this answer (p. 171): 'we were too busy working to go in for all that women's stuff'.

Happily absent is the new pernicious nonsense about 'cultural appropriation'. Although warning against condescending stereotypes, Kit De Waal in a talk on the subject (reported online by Jane Sullivan) asserted: 'without authors who cross the boundary from what they know to what they imagine, we would have a poor library'. Also glad to find no trace of 'gender issues', no worries over which lavatory to use.

As a die-hard supporter of grammar schools as upward lifelines for working-class children (the passionate philosophy of 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson in Attlee's government), I was pleased to find some contributors 'yearning to attend' them, whilst feeling sorry for Louise Doughty's brother who couldn't go because his mother said the blazer was too expensive — such cases were not unknown in the 1940s.

It is equally encouraging that there is no 'party line'. Some contributors have bad memories of growing up in what are dubbed 'sink estates'; others look back with nostalgia to a sense of community and mutual philanthropies. One blasts American communist singer Pete Seeger for his sneering song 'Little Boxes'.

Although most here would rather die than vote Tory, several enthuse over Mrs Thatcher's Right-To-Buy their council houses. One or two endorse her notion of 'Self-Help'. In Katy Massey's often hilarious account of growing up in her mother's brothel (its name, 'Aristotle's, deplored by the trial judge), Thatcher is likened to madam Cynthia Payne for 'sexiness' (remember Mitterrand's comment on her mouth). Massey provides the book's funniest moment, when an undercover policeman complains his expenses only covered 'blow-jobs'.

Contrast Lynne Voyce's hatred of Thatcher 'the spindly-fingered bogey-

woman' in her account of the long strike at Vauxhall Motors in Ellesmere Port, emphasizing women's activism as opposed to widespread political apathy. This looks more anomalous than it was, remembering the 1968 Ford Dagenham struggle (see the 2010 film version), the 1888 Bryant & May 'Matchgirls' Strike' led by firebrand Annie Besant, not forgetting the miners' wives in 1984-85.

Kate Hunter bemoans the anthology's lack of 'a Marxist perspective'. These writers in general have a visceral hatred of Tories and unspecified Labour leanings. None talk about reading *Das Kapital* or yearning for Trotskyite-led revolution. Ruth Behan's remembrance of father Brian's industrial and Socialist Labour League activism with Gerry Healey is fond but does not translate into her musings in an online interview where the importance of 'working-class' labelling is played down. Her memoir, incidentally, is very funny on the average SLL jargon and posturings.

Overall, this collection shows that a monolithic British industrial proletariat is a figment of Trotskyite imagination that, faced with its usual electoral less than one per cent of the vote, takes refuge in the slogan 'we have won the argument even if we have not won the election'. See John Kelly's online dissection of this.

Class fluidity is an important element. For Chris McCrudden (p. 29), buying his council house on an industrial estate created 'a muddled position between the working and middle classes'. Orwell in an (online) interview with BBC's Desmond Hawkins long ago felt that old class lines were blurring into meaningless. And, of course, the classic Marxist view was that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat was destined to give way to a classless society. Because of this, Trotsky proclaimed in *Literature and Revolution* (his best book) that it was 'fundamentally incorrect' to contrast bourgeois and proletarian literature ('mainly a literature of revolt' — Orwell).

This anthology evokes some big questions. *What is Working-Class Literature?* Just something written by one of that class? Or, does subject matter transcend authorial status?

Lisa McInerney quotes someone as saying of his partner 'he wasn't working-class any more because he'd become a broadcaster. Farewell to all that built your character, bucko; you're a bourgeois boy now.'

I suppose that sums me up as well: working-class lad turned academic. Add, though I regret the juxtaposition, Orwell's point about D. H. Lawrence: working-class boys with a university degree.

In his concluding struggle to explain, Dave O'Brien quotes Raymond Williams' dictum that 'class' is one of the two or three most complicated

words in the English language. In Andy Blunden's (online) translation of B. Krylov's *Marx Engels On Literature and Art* (Moscow, 1976), the pair assert that, whatever their social class, great writers give a true and vivid picture of real life, qualifying this with the belief that 'realism' is the supreme achievement of world art. Later on, of course, this was perverted by Stalin into the literary wasteland of 'Socialist Realism', albeit we should not forget his 'Writers are the Engineers of the Soul'.

Not the Full Marx, but full marks.

Barry Baldwin

## Sojourn in Mortality

**Rainer Maria Rilke & Maurice Betz, *Rilke in Paris*, edited and translated by Will Stone, Pushkin Press, 144 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781782274742, £9.99**

The book under review consists of Maurice Betz's *Rilke in Paris* (1941) and Rilke's 'Notes on the Melody of Things' (1898), edited and in translation from the French and German by Will Stone. The Betz book addresses Rilke's twenty-three periods of residence in Paris between 1902 and 1925, but actually concentrates more on the composition of his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* than on the city and the people Rilke knew there. Indeed, of what one could justifiably think of as the crucial connection Rilke established there, Betz merely says, 'The relationship between Rilke and Rodin deserves a separate study' (p.28). (There are, though, other published accounts of this extraordinary relationship, including Rilke's own 1902 and 1907 essays on the sculptor.) Moreover, the novel's composition happened only in the first half of the period covered by the Parisian sojourns. So this is a volume not just for the specialist in Rilke, but for the specialist in the Rilke novel. True, the little-known 'Notes on the Melody of Things', an enigmatically Nietzschean prose-poem about the essence of culture, is a very welcome addition.

Between the presences, there were very many significant absences from Paris: 1902 in Viareggio; 1902-03 in Rome; 1904-05 in Sweden, Denmark and Germany, including two months in a sanatorium near Dresden; 1905, a lecture tour to Dresden and Prague; 1906, a lecture tour to Berlin and Hamburg, as well as trips to Flanders and Capri; 1907, Prague, Breslau, Vienna, Venice; 1908, Germany and Italy, culminating in six weeks on Capri; 1909, Provence; 1910, Germany, Italy, Bohemia, North Africa; 1911, three months in Egypt; 1911-12, a long stay at Castle Duino, near

Trieste; 1912, Venice, a month in Duino, a month in Spain; 1913, five months in Germany; 1914-15, almost a year in Munich; 1916, military service in Vienna; 1917, various locations in Germany; 1918, Munich; 1919-20, winter in Locarno, followed by two months in Basel; 1921, Geneva and the Château de Muzot, near Sierre; 1922, Muzot; 1923, the spa in Bad Ragaz, a sanatorium on Lake Lucerne, and a clinic in Val-Mont near Montreux; 1924, Muzot and Val-Mont. (I take this itinerary from a detailed chronology in the Oxford World's Classics *Selected Poems*.) Rilke would die in 1926, in the Valmont Sanatorium above Montreux, Switzerland.

The twenty-three stays in Paris represent a significant constant amid all this cosmopolitan restlessness. As translator Will Stone says here, 'Paris was the proverbial magnet that always drew Rilke back from his restless wanderings'. I don't know which proverb this magnet belongs to, but he is not wrong. Stone adds: 'Paris both fundamentally oppressed Rilke, compelling him to depart elsewhere, and summoned him back with a kind of nostalgic urgency, which he was unable to resist' (p.xiv). Maurice Betz argues that 'In Paris this German poet discovered not only a temporary home and more or less enduring friendships, but also an inner inspiration, which guided him towards the secret configuration of his entire being'. More specifically, Paris 'lent him the framework and themes' of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 'a work through which he felt able to express himself to the very limits of the inexpressible, to the threshold of reflecting on and accepting death with a calm heart' (p.3). It was written in 1904 and 1908-09, and published in 1910. Brigge is a young Danish aristocrat, a poet, down on his uppers in Paris, observing all the horrors of the darker side of the city.

Betz argues that if, indeed, it was Rilke's destiny to live 'without family, homeland or profession', to an extent he had only himself to blame. For a start, he often fled relationships with women as soon as he had established them. And the fact that, late in life, he started writing in French rather than German 'is further testimony to that need for constant change and renewal'. He developed a habit, or lifestyle, of fleeing 'social and human realities' in preference for 'that abstraction which is solitude' (p.47). Paris itself, although much-visited, never really became a home. You might also say the same for Rilke's sojourn in mortality.

*Gregory Woods*

## From the cradle to the cave

**Christos Ikonomou, *Good Will Come From the Sea*, Archipelago Books 2019, 252 pages, paperback ISBN 9781939810212, £14.99, translated from Greek by Karen Emmerich**

*From my window, I send off / one, two, three and four kisses / that reach the harbour / like one, two, three, four birds:* Piraeus, in Christos Ikonomou's previously translated collection *Something Will Happen, You'll See*, is a long way from the romanticised, politely decadent playground of Melina Mercouri's 'Never on Sunday'. Nor has it yet succumbed to the lure of Xi Jinping's Belt-and-Road Initiative, sold off by the failing Tsipras administration in 2016 to majority ownership by China Cosco Shipping, the brainchild of Mao Zedong. Instead, abject and immiserated, the port city's working class inhabitants – just like the warring tribes of displaced Athenians, belligerent and criminalised locals on the imaginary island of *Good Will Come From the Sea* – are beset on all sides by the implacable forces of the decade-long Greek Eurozone crisis, the bailouts, the twelve rounds of tax increases and spending cuts, the £110 billion loan escalating to £318 billion by 2017. The titles of the two collections point, illusorily, like the *trompe-l'oeil* of baroque paintings gesturing beyond their frames, to an empowering future: nowhere in these stories is the pandemic hopelessness of the period more cogently expressed than by the observation of the luckless, unnamed and unskilled bag-filler, dog and house minder of 'The Union of Bodies' that 'the meaning of life is that it ends'. For the meaning of the stories themselves is that they *cannot* end, except in an abyss, or an image of personal futility, stifled and incoherent protest.

There's a startling abundance of such images in *Something Will Happen*. A woman eats a 'semolina man' made from halva in place of the departed lover who has robbed her of her meagre savings. A serial activist repeatedly arrested and beaten for 'shouting slogans and spray-painting' around the Perama shipyards stands motionless in the rain with one leg raised, like Hans Christian Andersen's tin soldier forever denied his ballerina. A laid-off factory worker struggles to replace the crown of thorns on Jesus's head – symbolically averted – in hopes of a few coins from the women decorating a church at Easter, while his hungry son waits, and waits, for the Kinder Egg he's been promised for breakfast. Old men, 'retirees, former office workers or manual labourers, unshaven and down

at the heels' build an overnight fire outside the Social Security offices in Nikaia (it's January) in order to head the morning queue and are last seen 'with faces white from cold and exhaustion, watching silently as the fire died in the freezing light of day'. A supermarket grocery stocker, whose friend has been electrocuted doing enforced overtime on a building site and dies 'dancing' the *tsifeteli* on his bed in intensive care, stands for hours with a placard on a broomstick across from the contractor's apartment block – but can think of nothing to write on it expressive of his anguish. This 'most pathetic, most ineffective protest since the birth of the workers' movement', as he perceives it, serves only to lock him further into his own inchoate subjectivity, the whole range of impulses of a mind at the end of its tether – the equivalent, in story after story, of an extended monologue – rendered so idiomatically by Ikonomou and his American translator.

The instances multiply and reverberate through these stories of isolated acts of defiance, the *bellum omnium contra omnes* of, effectively, colonial expropriation (or as Beckett would say, 'the crush and bustle of a bargain sale') greets with indifference, callousness, aggression – windows stay firmly shut, cars slow but then accelerate, relationships disintegrate. That other great loner of the 'mercantile gehenna', Beckett's Mahood in his jar in the Rue Brancion opposite the slaughterhouse suffers a similar ostracism and indignity: 'It seems to me that even a human head, recently washed and with a few hairs on top, should be quite a popular curiosity in the position occupied by mine ... [but] I can live and utter me, for no ears but my own'. Only the bill of fare for the restaurant he's advertising causes passers-by to break their stride.

Similarly, in 'Piece By Piece They're Taking My World Away' a man's value is measured entirely materialistically, as in the concept of *eminent domain* – public recompense for the requisitioning of private property, codified by Aristotle in the Athenian Constitution – which the main character keeps uselessly invoking. Rendered homeless by a road development on Salamina, he has neither financial entitlement (the house is another man's, operating from abroad), nor – unlike the local villagers, carting off bricks and mortar – any means of alleviating his own privation. His Odyssean fantasy of setting sail at the head of a troop of warriors is greeted with derision: 'you don't have a boat, she said. You don't even have an oar. You don't have anything'. The story's opening sentence quells any prospect of a returning hero, Ikonomou's whole cast of the economically disenfranchised gathered in one image: 'The waves fell on the shore like shipwrecked men, broken-spirited, disheartened and weak,

one after another, with clipped moans, small sighs, one after another'. As Yanis Varoufakis explains to his daughter in *A Brief History of Capitalism*, it's a long way back to the Homeric ideal of personal honour and a 'world removed from the logic of markets'.

*By day he sat / out on the rocky beach, in tears and grief, / staring in heartbreak at the fruitless sea* [Odyssey trans. Wilson, 5. 151-58] – whereas this incarceration in a *supra* human realm of sensuous particulars (Calypso's cave) is only the prelude to an epic journey of personal rebirth. *Good Will Come From the Sea*'s four longer narratives begin and end on a singularly inhospitable addition to the archipelago which in fact consists of two islands, with a narrow causeway between, resembling 'Uneven handcuffs – one bigger than the other, as if made for someone with one atrophied arm'. Little evidence here, if any, of the redemptive, pristine beauty of the homeland one finds in Elytis, Kazantzakis, Seferis, those continuities of ancestry and language forever enshrined in the 'same country ... same mountains ending in the sea' extolled in the latter's Nobel speech. The light wounds, the wind hurls words away or bends trees into petrified, crucified replicas of the inhabitants, an impenetrable system of caves beckons 'a little drop of a man before all that black' to perdition. Even less is there any sense of an enabling legacy from the cradle of Western civilisation – those caves symbolise both a last retreat from the destitution caused by economic meltdown and a reversion to prehistory. Ikonomou pits Greek against Greek – refugee Athenians against all-powerful local mafias and the 'rats' of the indigenous population – in episodes of unprecedented brutality, like a grown-ups' *Lord of the Flies*. No one can opt out – refusants are ruthlessly crushed, whole, makeshift communities are cowed, no opportunity is lost to strip the Homeric, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, of its heroic pretensions: 'Our hearts flopped in our chests like a fish being unhooked and tossed back into the sea'.

Stephen Winfield

## Work

**Verity Burgmann, *Globalization and Labour in the Twenty-first Century*, Routledge 2016, 270 pages, Open Access Kindle, hardback ISBN 9780415528535 £110**

Verity Burgmann has produced an excellent, broad coverage of different instances of resistance by labour movements from around the world. Her book includes accounts of occupied factories in Argentina, opposition to privatisation of oil facilities in Iraq, as well as anti-austerity struggles in Greece amongst many others. It covers private industries as well as public sectors and explores the potential of new social media for resistance. I will provide some critical reflections on this major account of labour movements' potential role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Burgmann's positive assessment of labour movements' resistance to capitalist exploitation around the world is driven by an autonomist Marxist perspective, privileging the agency of workers over capital as well as structural constraints. 'Autonomism reverses the relationship between capital and labour that emerges in economic determinist Marxism, explicitly refusing to emphasize the dominance of capital and its accumulative logic as the unilateral force shaping the world' (page 18). Instead of capital's innovative dynamic, it is labour's refusal to work which forces capital to establish new production relations. In short, it is the power of labour, which underpins capitalist development with capital being constantly on the defensive.

Transnational production depends on the smooth flow of goods across borders in order to fulfil the tight schedule of just-in-time production systems. Hence, German employers in the 1990s 'were more dependent than ever on stable relations with labour at the plant level and more vulnerable to overt industrial strife' (page 36). Transnational organisation of production, rather than being a source of structural power for capital, becomes a weakness. Another example is the situation of precarious workers. Burgmann points out how this group of workers, often perceived to be the weakest of the weak, have found a new voice in collective struggle. They 'are often fighting against their circumstances by establishing new unions, sometimes of an anarcho-syndicalist bent' (page 165).

This is an important message, providing hope where there is often

resignation. And yet, there are a number of questions I would like to raise.

First, I am sceptical about the key assumptions of autonomist Marxism, emphasising the power of labour. Of course, the power of capital is often unduly asserted, making resistance appear meaningless and thus undermining working class efforts. Yet, to argue that workers are really driving capitalist development overlooks a number of key structuring conditions, which often limit labour's agency. As capitalists have to reproduce themselves through the market in the fight for market share with other capitalists, they are forced to innovate constantly, which makes capitalism such a dynamic system. Nevertheless, capitalism is also crisis prone as more goods are produced than workers are actually able to consume. Hence, this constant pressure of outward expansion in the search for new markets and cheaper labour. Of course, workers' agency does play a role in shaping the form this outward expansion takes, but they never struggle 'in conditions of their own choosing'.

Perhaps autonomist Marxism's optimism is misleading? Celebrating resistance is important, but successful struggles need a clear assessment of the overall balance of forces. Acknowledging the structuring conditions of capitalism does not have to imply falling into a structuralist trap with action perceived to be futile.

Second, there is an undue focus on production in my view, overlooking the sphere of social reproduction. At times Burgmann acknowledges how struggles go across both spheres, such as in Chapter 8 where she discusses the protection of the public or in Chapter 9 in her assessment of anti-austerity struggles in Europe. Here she does argue that 'assessments of labour movement resistance to austerity in Europe broadly agree that the labour movement needs now to be understood as including more informal groups as well as trade unions' (page 230). At the very end of the book, she however retreats again into a productivist analysis. 'The red-green sustainability project on which the future of the planet rests might ultimately depend on working-class power at the point of production, on the withdrawal of labour from continuing complicity in capitalism's environmental irresponsibility' (page 242). An engagement with feminist Social Reproduction Theory would tell us here that the withdrawal of labour not only in production, but also equally in struggles in the sphere of social reproduction such as health care or the care of the elderly is important in the resistance against capitalist exploitation.

Third, the emphasis on production also implies that the labour movement is often too narrowly defined as the agency of trade unions. Burgmann does criticise the role of established trade unions such as in

Greece, but then reverts to the role played by new, more radical trade unions as the main progressive actors. Other social movements hardly feature in her assessment. Broader alliances are identified as important when it comes to the Fight for \$15 at McDonald's in the US (page 45) and the BlackLivesMatter movement is mentioned in this context (page 49). Nevertheless, these other groups are not further explored and they are not regarded as potential leaders of struggles against exploitation. As a result, experiences of resistance by other types of movement, especially also from the Global South such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, are not taken into account.

These critical points for reflection should not, however, make us overlook the significant contributions of Burgmann's volume. The detailed overview of working class strategies of resistance across different countries and sectors provides a wealth of empirical information. I may be sceptical about the autonomist Marxist, production based, workers and trade union focused perspective, but this does not devalue the overall significance of the book. A must read for anyone reflecting on labour's potential to shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I highly recommend this book.

*Andreas Bieler*