

BOOK REVIEWS

Three Skinny Books for Our Times

“The real joy of writing lies in the opportunity of being able to sacrifice a whole chapter for a single sentence, a complete sentence for a single word...”

Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*

Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, New York: Tim Duggan Books (2017)

Jan-Werner Mueller, *What is Populism?* Penguin Random House UK, (with new Afterword, 2017)

Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, transl. Erik Butler, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, (English transl. 2015)

A number of slender but important books addressing contemporary political, social, and environmental issues have been published recently. I will consider three of them here.

Accomplished Yale University historian and central and eastern Europe specialist Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* is an highly readable and thought-provoking volume that leads readily into his larger book of the following year, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (2018).

There is much in this little book that sounds a warning to those in the United States of Donald Trump, Romania with the Alliance for a United Romania (AUR), Victor Orban's Hungary, Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil... Following Eugene Ionesco's absurdist political play, *Rhinoceros*, Snyder suggests we be on guard for those moments when “the truth becomes oracular rather than factual.”

And Snyder offers a cautionary tale to Americans in particular whose feeling of exceptionalism and being “as a City Upon a Hill” may blind them to features of authoritarianism that are familiar to much of the rest of the world from their recent histories.

The book has deceptively simple little chapters, like “Defend institutions,” “Beware of the one-party state,” “Be kind to our language,” “Establish a private life,” “Learn from peers in other countries”. This makes *On Tyranny* eminently available for group discussions because it leaves mental space for people to “fill in the blanks” or elaborate on points from their own thoughts and experiences.

Snyder concludes by making the distinction between what he calls the twin dangers of a “politics of inevitability” and the “politics of eternity.” The politics of inevitability is a “self-induced intellectual coma” in which one unthinkingly assumes the present – and near futures, for that matter – are a “done deal,” that neo-liberalism, democracy, social democracy, progress, will always be the commanding horizon. The politics of eternity, on the other hand, is the temptation always to expect a return to old, “in-bred” identities and conflicts from the past, as *fait accompli*. Both are fundamentally anti-historical and

is important for a ship of state and its civic passengers to negotiate the passage between Charybdis inevitable progress and Scylla that condemns us to repeat the past. Snyder concludes, “To understand [one’s historical] moment is to see the possibility of being the co-creator of another.”

Princeton University political theorist Jan-Werner Mueller’s *What is Populism?* is a timely contribution to discussions employing this oftentimes fuzzy concept, “populism” – a word that circulates among those on the right and left of the ideological spectrum. The basic question Mueller proposes to answer is: Is populism a threat or a corrective for democracy? Mueller covers a lot of historical and political theoretical ground answering this question, and despite respectful nods to those who disagree, generally speaking, he concludes that populism poses a threat to a healthy pluralism which is necessary to a vital and sustainable democracy.

Populists, he argues, tend to believe in a *corpus mysticum* that stands against the actual results of the democratic political process. There is, behind so much of their thought, the abiding, obsessive (and corrosive) question of who *really* belongs to “the people”? The question was answered without much ado at a 2021 meeting of European populist leaders from Hungary, Poland and Italy in Budapest – European ethnic nationalism and Christian family values. Donald Trump was known to continually pose this question in its various guises mobilizing his base of white xenophobes. Mueller makes the interesting point, though, that populism is entirely compatible without political participation, that populist leaders and followers often abide with the notion of the authenticity of a “silent majority.”

Populism is constituted around these three propositions: 1) “occupying the state” (e.g., Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Hungary’s Victor Orban); 2) mass clientelism (helping your political buddies, your “family”); and 3) discriminatory legalism (one is reminded of Donald Trump’s attempts to purge – openly, in fact (that is part of the populist allure) – the U.S. Justice Department. Basically, all of this amounts to so many “shifts to authoritarianism under the guise of democratic-sounding language” – with the usual swipes at technocrats and cosmopolitan intellectuals.

Mueller makes a persuasive case for the necessity of strong, organized political parties as an antidote to mass *ennui* and populist (often racist) outbursts against established liberal democratic institutions. Populism is strong when political parties are weak. “Put simply, democracy is a system where you know you can lose, but you also know that you will not always lose. Parties [form] governments and legitimate oppositions; their very existence as legitimate ‘parts’ (as opposed to ‘the whole’) [have] an anti-populist meaning.”

On the very last page of *What is Populism?* In the Acknowledgments section of this slender, smart volume, Mueller quotes Walt Whitman’s dedication of his book of comparative politics and letters, *Democratic Vistas*: “To him or her within whose thought rages the battle, advancing, retreating, between Democracy’s convictions, aspirations, and the People’s crudeness, vice, caprices.”

Perhaps Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han’s *The Burnout Society* is the odd duck in this trio of important small books addressing our times, because the other two – which concern the “extreme political weather” of tyranny and authoritarian populism – would seem to have little to do with Han’s warnings of the “late modern achievement subject” losing the capacity for rage. “Rage is the capacity to interrupt a given state and *make a new state begin*. Today it is yielding more and more to [mere] offense or annoyance... ‘having a beef,’ which proves incapable of effecting decisive change.” (Echoes of a conversation with German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s *Rage and Time*?) Han focuses on a different kind of political and social pathology – hyper-activity and self-exploitation that can lead abruptly to hyper-passivity in our “contemporary achievement society.”

“Trusting tiredness,” writes Han, “‘opens’ the I and ‘makes room’ for the world” – what Friedrich Nietzsche called “serene not doing.” But increasingly (post)modern societies are replete with “solitary tiredness” – becoming doping societies of “neuro-enhancement.” This latter tiredness is not what writer, dramatist, filmmaker and Nobel Laureate Peter Handke is thinking about when he suggests that (in Han’s words) “deep tiredness rises to become a form of salvation, a form of rejuvenation” – a “not tired *of* you, but a tired *with* you.” Whereas solitary tiredness is “worldless, world-destroying tiredness, an absence of the relation to the Other.” (This would seem compatible with what Henrieta Serban has written in this journal concerning “our togetherness,” with the distinction made between solitude and loneliness – where the “conscience speaks louder in solitude.” (*Pol. Sci. Int. Rel.*, XVII, 1, pp. 17-30, Bucharest, 2020)

In a manner somewhat similar to the late French theorist Jean Baudrillard, Han is concerned about the “state of general promiscuity” with the new media and communications technologies diluting “being-for-otherness” and leading to “the depressive achievement subject” and... the *burnout society*. This “voluntary self-exploitation” of the “achievement subject” incapable of intensive inter-subjective bonding is, pathetically, wretchedly, incapable of even suffering from melancholy (which at least has some metaphysical depth) or of mourning (which is hardly affectless). According to Han, the industrial disciplinary society” relied on an unchanging identity (with strong affects) and figures of negativity (in the Hegelian sense of critical forces in a dialectic of change) whereas the “post-industrial society” (post-ideological?) with its “positivity of consensus” fosters narcissism, depression and auto-aggression. One might sum up Han’s principal thesis in *The Burnout Society* thus, “Today violence issues more readily from the conformism of consensus than from the antagonism of dissent.”

So Byung-Chul Han’s provocative skinny book paints a world of “clouds in trousers” (V. Mayakovsky) and “(wo)men without qualities” (Robert Musil) – in distinct juxtaposition to the stark, uncompromising ideological hues presented to us by Timothy Snyder and Jan-Werner Mueller. Perhaps they are all right, each in his own way, simultaneously...?

N.B.: The three slim volumes reviewed here were part of a 2020 summer reading group, *Backyard Theory*, held in Missoula, Montana, which I hosted and moderated with Lisa Parks of the University of California-Santa Barbara Film and Media Studies Department. Participants came from diverse backgrounds and we read and discussed nine “skinny books” in all, related to current political conditions, problems and solutions. *Backyard Theory* was supported by the Global Media Technologies and Cultures Lab at MIT and the MacArthur Foundation.

WILLIAM P. STEARNS

Finn Laursen, *The Development of the EU as a Sea-Policy Actor*, Cheltenham, Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020. ISBN 978 1 83910 124 3 (cased) ISBN 978 1 83910 125 0 (eBook) 225 pp.

The Development of the EU as a Sea-Policy Actor represents an important work within the body of contemporary studies dedicated to EU as a fully developed player in international relations. The metaphor of Blue Europe is beneficial in pragmatic terms, too, for the mapping and the investigation of the treaties sustaining the marine and maritime policies of the European Union (EU). This many layered analysis is complex and

especially important in understanding the achievements and the potential of the EU as an actor of the seas.

Not only the history of Europe after the EEC, but also different theories are revisited to argue that the understanding of the European maritime policies, the so-called Blue Europe can be understood only with a competent theoretical background illuminating the structure induced, the agency, the process and the hypothesis orienting the policies sustained. The exceptional synthetic table (p. 22-23) dedicated to such analytical and theoretical considerations regarding policy development in the EU might be useful for the analysis of other policy achievements in other domains, too. A clear view upon contemporary theories regarding policy making and collaborative bargaining over diverse interests – international relations theories (realism and liberalism), classical integration theories (liberal intergovernmentalism and neo-functionalism), neo-institutionalist theories (historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism), and the models based on domestic policies granting a great influence of the sub-national interests is allowing for a complex and nuanced perspective on policy-making.

Finn Laursen emphasizes: “Developing the treaty basis of Blue Europe has been an incremental process including several small steps when the member states concluded that it was necessary to take another step. Often the process was pushed by developments in international politics and political economy, including especially the Law of the Sea” (p. 42). There is a “constitutional” basis of Blue Europe. This investigation approaches both treaties and sea-policies concerning fisheries, maritime transport, maritime environment and maritime safety policies, describing a complete picture of the EU as a sea-policy actor and its particularities, internally and externally. These particularities are defined „from *mare liberum* to UNCLOS”, via the extension of the coastal state sovereignty stated by the Third UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III, 1982) and the UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNLOSC) regarding the off-shore marine resources. At the same time, an important role is granted to the special interest to assess the initiation and development of sea policies in the EU, the existing conceptual frameworks and their relevance and the potential reforms in terms of EU’s sea policies.

The EU’s sea policies developed initially as common environmental policies and the book analyzes the Single European Act (SEA), the efforts of EEC to be recognized as part of UNCLOS III with an equivalent standing as the member states, in order to clarify the scope and the functionality of Blue Europe. However, “The EU now coordinates LOS activities through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) Working Party on the Law of the Sea known by its French acronym COMAR, composed of experts from member states, the Commission and the Council Secretariat. It has also become more of an international leader in the LOS areas, for instance by supporting the development of legislation for the promotion of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, by showing the way in an EU regulation in 2008.” (p.62)

Discussing the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), the book presents the equal access principle in the 1970s and its changes until the establishing of the specific (200-nautical mile) fishery zone in the North Sea and North Atlantic Ocean in 1977. International interdependence, “complex interdependence” (Keohane and Nye) as well as the policy consequences of Custom Union, Common Agricultural Policy, the Commission, domestic policies and the demands of the fishermen, all played a role in CFP. The conservation and management policy was adopted in 1983 and several reforms were adopted until more recent reforms (2013), provided that new wider international changes and development imposed renewed attention to environmental agreements, or to new needs and interests or even new actors, such as NGOs and the European Parliament (entitled by the Lisbon Treaty, pp. 104-105).

Common Maritime Transport Policy (CMTP) along with other Blue Europe achievements are ultimately a proof of European and international cooperation and of common concerns (standards, equity, environment safety, pollution etc.) in front of diverse interests. Based on the international conventions, but going further than those the EU developed a body of law regulating fishery maritime transport, the protection of the quality of the environment, the prudent and rational use of resources, the protection of human health. The book captures the legislative developments the explanation of changes, the impact of the recent pro-environment discourse on the attitudes of the laggard member states.

The architecture of internal and external competences of the EU is also explained. EU has exclusive competence for the conclusion of international agreements enabling the Union to act as a whole and to enforce upon these internal common rules, as well as in “conservation of marine biological resources under CFP” (p. 165). The EU has become an important international actor, it has “normative power” and “market power”, but also “environment power”, however, remaining solely a potential agent, just a part in the “coalitions of the willing”, not a military actor, in the full meaning of the term. Eventually, as the author indicates in different occasions, the nature of the European policy, its enforcement, sustainability and future depend on the political will and administrative capacity of the member states, and especially on the forms undertaken by the European collective action and its force.

HENRIETA ȘERBAN

Viorella Manolache, Ian Browne, *Orwell – un bestiar socialist al capitalismului*, Bucharest, Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale “Ion I. C. Brătianu”, 2020, 356 pp.

This fascinating work about George Orwell, as readers already know, “the anti-intellectual intellectual”, one of the greatest British writers and an “existentialist socialist” (preoccupied with the salvation of the self through truthful thought and reason sustaining righteousness with simplicity in a corrupt and twisted world), represents as well a narrative built around George Orwell’s deeply philosophical fascination with animals and their meaningful and symbolical nature. In this book, the topic of the “so-called animal” is nothing less than the topic of truth captured in several of its myriad of facets, balancing the “intellectual pessimism and the optimism of will” (p. 68).

Discussing 1984, *Animal Farm* and *The Journal*, Viorella Manolache emphasizes several “zoomorphic registers”: George Orwell was preoccupied with a theorizing approach where the animals are at the same time carriers of wit and moral lessons. The reader encounters in this approach a potential “zoontology” investigated via the process of mapping the taming, philosophizing about the transgressing categories such as “humanimal”, meditating about the manifesto of the species and postmodern animals, or relating processes such as metamorphosis, transfer and displacement in a fluid and novel interpretative vision.

Animals are listened to as if they are talking and they are “talking” by grace of the power of Orwellian thought; as in the fables, they are metaphors concerning the meaningful sides of the interpretation of the human being and they are vehicles for a daring and original socio-political thought. The toad, the elephant and the fish (p. 136 *sqq.*), as well

as the hound, are in the book oneiric and Freudian-Lacanian manners to think sociality and socio-political ontology. In what it concerns the animals this “zoontology” is nothing but critical socio-political thought with the potential of becoming revolutionary. If animal ontology is described as “deficient capacity to structuring the circumstances and the situations” (p. 91) vs. the “symbolical dwelling” (p. 91), characteristic for the human being, this is not by far the whole story as the investigation uncovers the “story” of the human being in animal trouble with existence and the other way around in a deeply meaningful kaleidoscope with attention for geopoetics and for revolutionary aspects, too.

In a truly remarkable metaphorical and political journey among the zoo-symbolical forms, Viorella Manolache slides from the metaphor of fish to the avalanche of metaphorical dimensions of fishing, capturing also the underlining humour of George Orwell’s insights. The fish is not at all silent (that is, among the animals of Mr Orwell, not even the fish is silent!) and expresses nothing less than “the matrix life-death-time”. Fishing is an expression of civilization and serenity before the irruption of WWI, but is also a mythical view of civilization via socialism, fascism and dystopian projections. For the power to document political realities in depth, foreseeing the future perspectives is only natural and pretty accurate, too, since it does not rely on class judgements and prejudices, even though it may have in attention a political objective.

Ian Browne accepts Orwell’s socialism as a datum, as an orientation against totalitarianism and for *democratic socialism*, as he sees it (p. 178), while he underlines the particular admiration of the conservative thinkers for *Animal Farm* (the anti-Soviet orientation and the subtle criticism of capitalism as a feudalist political reflex/symptom masked under the veil of the fable). However, “the generic representations in *Animal Farm* differ from the traditional fable. Even if they might be part of the illustration process of a general truth, rather than for individual human qualities. This concerns a complex social tendency, found in all epochs and unlimited to Soviet Russia; it is a social phenomenon rather than a psychological phenomenon. It is the tendency toward conformity and the deference in front of the opinion received from ‘above’, even though the intellectual foundation of that opinion is not understood and (even) if there are a multitude of proofs that go against it. This social condition is not identical to the human trait of stupidity, though it may be one of the preconditions for conformity and deference”. (p. 200)

Following a history of socio-political thought and its interference with a history of political regimes via the actual and symbolical roles played by animals, Ian Browne approaches a multitude of interpretative dimensions pertaining to *Animal Farm*: the conservatory benign compassionate hierarchy; the redefinition of the humane; the lack of reason correlated with the lack of power and equality, the junction between power and the force of labour, the theme of capitalism and constraint and other important ideas, interpretative directions and themes. Thinking about and with animals is a fruitful manner to think politically. As emphasized in the chapter “How to think with pigs”: “The ideas and the associations are part of the language of our thought and they are already incorporated into the collective intellect. Values and attitudes do not form separate entities of thought that we could add to images to create new meanings. We cannot have these thoughts without employing somehow the meaning that we already have in the image.” (p. 293) This idea is emphasized by the awareness that Orwell was sensitive to the manner in which ideology becomes instilled into language images and expressions, as he was fully convinced that any expression is at some level a carrier of ideology: “if thought may corrupt language, then language may corrupt thought”, which is in our view, in essence, the totalitarian-awareness lesson from *1984*, too.

In an interpretative comparison Orwell-Burke which presents disjunctive perspectives on politics and leadership, Ian Browne notices: "Symbols and myths have a durable presence in history, but their meaning is not (always) immutable. They may be and really are, interpreted so that they fit the needs of the times. They maintain continuity and they are (reinterpreted) at the same time to offer new meanings for old symbols. For Burke, the lion is the symbol of authority as in Henry II and Richard Lion Heart. Lion and unicorn are heraldic signs, symbols of pedigree and illustrious ancestors, kings and noblemen. Common people [...] are 'big cattle, napping, ruminating and silent'. Orwell changes the meaning of these heraldic signs and [...] natural authority overshadows us in the shape of a lion". (p. 311) For Orwell, everybody is equal in dignity involving moral and economic aspects and determining the perspective of the moral truth of equality in dignity, which is that capitalism is in its operating mode incompatible with this superlative equality into dignity. Orwell is not just an anti-Bolshevik writer; he is eminently the socialist of moral argument and, from this perspective, we should not situate Orwell very far from the Rawlsian "justice as fairness".

The book constitutes a landmark for subtle contemporary political philosophy and it is as well a treasure chest of ideas and bibliographical resources with primary and secondary implications for Orwellian socio-political thought, always intellectually pleasurable and worth revisiting.

HENRIETA ȘERBAN

Gorun Manolescu, *Fragmentarium: Cum tace un pește. Proză scurtă*, Bucharest, Editura Paideia, 2021, 133 pp.

In a brief interpretation of the socio-political relevance of fragmentarism, irony and hybridization we mention briefly the book of Gorun Manolescu, titled *Fragmentarium: How does a fish shut up*, a work inscribed in the tradition of Borges, Saramago, Baudrillard and maybe Kafka, continuing the volume *Fragmentarium* published in 2017 in Bucharest, at Fractalia Press.

The author of *Beyond irony and ironism* (Bucharest, Paideia, 2010) reserves this time for irony a subtle and rather stylistic unifying role. Interpreting the book in cultural and political anthropology perspective, the three main ingredients already mentioned, fragmentarism, irony and hybridization are the interpretative perspectives allowing for the resignification of the dialectics meaninglessness – meaningfulness and of the topic of solipsism under the pressure of completeness, otherness and sociality. Even the metaphor "live" (Ricoeur) or "revealing" (Blaga) is rather local and fragmented, it irradiates meanings but it does not embrace meanings as a comprehensive and unitary horizon. Fragmented meaning is reflected in style, pace of thought, interpretative rhythm of the world.

In the story that gives the title of the book (*How does a fish shut up*), the story of our solipsism(s) by utterance impairment, we are left with the image of "a black mud fish more wide than long with a solid forked tail on which it leaned vertically and gracefully from side to side and which whispered gutturally 'alas, how you startled me [...]' (p. 64). This "fish-Friday" born out of our imperfect solipsism, as imperfect beings represents an ironic vision of our sociality with no other solidarity than a common hope for the lost impossible completeness of meaning – a dreamy project, the ultimate utopia, a ghost.

Eventually, precisely as Robert M. Pirsing wrote: “Laws of nature are human inventions, like ghosts. Laws of logic, of mathematics are also human inventions, like ghosts. The whole blessed things are human inventions, including the idea that isn’t a human invention. The world has no existence whatsoever outside the human imagination. It’s all a ghost, and in Antiquity was so recognized as ghost, the whole blessed world we live in” (p. 87). Society is pretty much a ghost. This is true, except for suffering and injustice, Richard Rorty would point out, from an entirely different perspective than Shakespeare (“If you prick us, do we not bleed?” – *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 3). In the spirit of the Romanian hopeful and revolutionary University Square (June 13, 14, 15 1990), evasive, failing and, paradoxically persistent (pp. 105-107), resistance to paradox and sense of irony is what keep our ghosts hovering our horizons and blue skies.

HENRIETA ȘERBAN