

BOOK REVIEWS /COMPTES RENDUS

Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; xxiv + 159 pages. ISBN: 978-0230237629.

Review by Nikolay Karkov, Lebanon Valley College, PA.

The last decade or so has seen an efflorescence of anti-capitalist critiques. After the relative lull of the 1990s, provoked by the collapse of real socialism and the declared “end of history,” the new millennium has offered a plethora of critical analyses of capitalism, from post-operaist to post-Althusserian Marxism, and from radical psychoanalysis to a resurgence of interest in Marx’s *Capital*. *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* is another welcome contribution to these debates. Originally written in 2004, it is the product of the collaboration of Philippe Pignarre, a French publisher, writer and activist in the pharmaceutical industry, and Isabelle Stengers, a Belgian philosopher and historian of science. Of the two, Stengers will be more familiar to an English-speaking audience, mostly with her contributions to the “science” wars of the last few decades (having published texts on physics, chemistry and psychoanalysis, among others), as well as with her analyses of authors such as Whitehead and William James. Along with her multi-volume *Cosmopolitics*, parts of which have been translated into English, this is her most explicitly political book.

Neither “an explanatory nor a theoretical text,” in the words of its translator (ix), *Capitalist Sorcery* is much more a speculative and conceptual, rather than an empirically oriented text. Written at a time of a relative low for the (Western) left, it seeks to make a political intervention, rather than just offer another “theory” (a term Pignarre and Stengers are quite suspicious of to begin with). Yet unlike more familiar discussions of capitalism, usually opposing a precapitalist modernity steeped in belief and superstition to a (post)modern capitalist rationality founded on science and technology, Pignarre and Stengers take an almost opposite route. They seek to show that neither capitalism nor any anti-capitalist politics are as rational as all that; and this lack of rationality is both a problem and a promise.

The critical side of the argument offers an interesting and rather unusual re-definition of capitalism. For Pignarre and Stengers, at its most basic, capitalism is a social system which depoliticises decision-making practices or, as they state eloquently, “a politics that kills

politics.” (15) Such depoliticisation, frequently disguised as a set of technocratic processes, tends to proceed through the production of “infernal alternatives,” or, “that set of situations that seem to leave no other choice than resignation or a slightly hollow sounding denunciation.” (24) The alternatives are infernal as they are the product of no centralised apparatus or coordinated logic, but rather of the convergence of the work of “many thousands of minions.” While incapable of and unwilling to question the system of capitalism itself (“being dumbstruck by a prohibition on thinking”), those minions (agents, institutions) are at the same time infernally creative, ever set on expanding the powers of capital.

Another way of saying this is that rather than being the realm of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic Reason, capitalism is in fact a “system of sorcery without sorcerers (thinking of themselves as such), a system operating in a world in which judges that sorcery is only a simple 'belief', a superstition that therefore doesn't necessitate any adequate means of protection.” (40) The argument, which presumably draws on Deleuze and especially Guattari's work on “machinic enslavement” and “apparatuses of capture,” claims that capitalism does not reproduce itself thanks to the powers of ideology/illusion or alienation. Ideology/illusion separates a theater of appearances from an objective and truthful reality, as if by a screen (43), while alienation implies the existence of non-alienated intellectuals who are going to allow the masses to “become conscious” of the forces oppressing them. (106) By contrast, capitalist sorcery operates by “capture,” through a culture of “spells” that immobilise thinking and paralyse collective action. What anti-capitalist politics needs then is not so much demystification or dis-alienation, but a counter-magic capable of protecting its practitioners and breaking the spell.

The resistant side of Pignarre and Stengers' argument is about how to develop such practices of protective counter-magic. This is where they part company with Marx, whose resolution to the problem, in their view, is still too invested in the scientific rationality of his time (“facing the world with somber senses”). For the authors, it was only natural that Marx would ask science for protection, as “he belongs to a world in which all the resources for thinking had already been destroyed or were in the process of being destroyed.” (53) For their part, Pignarre and Stengers choose a very different set of references. At the height of the global “war of terror” (2004–05), they declare themselves inheritors to the “event of Seattle” (1999), which gave word to the cry “another world is possible.” (3) What is attractive about Seattle is that it was a cry, and not a program; an opening toward a possible world rather than an articulation of explicit demands. The challenge that

Seattle poses then is to become “the child of the event: not being born again into innocence, but daring to inhabit the possible as such, without the adult precautions that makes threats of the type ‘what will people say?’, ‘who will they take us for?’ or ‘and you think that is enough?’ prevail.” (4)

The strategically non-linear development of their argument allows Pignarre and Stengers to draw a rather “heteroclitic crowd” in support of their thesis. Various parts of the text thus discuss the relevance of Afro-American spirituality (the concept/affect of “yearning”), the pragmatic inventiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous (aware “of the impossibility of getting free alone”), organisations such as the Association Française contre les Myopathies (involving the parents of sick children in its budget allocation process) or the role of the mutual societies for working class communities in 19th-century France. The last chapter of the book is dedicated to an extensive discussion of the neo-pagan witch movement, whose attractiveness for Pignarre and Stengers (in line with Stengers’ own radical constructivism) lies in the fabricated yet *real* nature of its rituals. The red thread that connects these otherwise highly heterogeneous collectivities is that they all develop techniques of empowerment, a veritable “culture of recipes” to counter capitalism’s universal designs and the “psychosocial techniques of adherence” subtending them. The pragmatic “successes” of these collective interventions lies in the fact that they are always local, interstitial, “defined neither against nor in relation to the bloc to which [they] nonetheless belong.” (110)

The book demonstrates a considerable number of strengths. To begin with, it is refreshing to identify capitalism as a system of sorcery operating by capture, rather than as an enormous hyper-rational machinery operating by the production of false ideas. Similar to their mentors Deleuze and Guattari, Pignarre and Stengers are aware that capitalism is not just about the “economy” or “society,” but also about the control of immense affective and energetic flows—hence the stress on practices and techniques of empowerment capable of “breaking the spell” of capitalism’s infernal alternatives and its army of hard-working minions. What is more, the effort at thinking and acting interstitially, by the middle, would certainly appeal to readers suspicious of grand theoretical designs and utopian blueprints, of the disposition to “pose questions from the outside.” In a world composed of multiple worlds and inhabited by a “heteroclitic crowd” of participants, Pignarre and Stengers’ political pragmatics avoids the pitfalls of not only simplistic structure/agency binaries, but also of the “capitalocentrism” (Gibson-Graham) that many well-intentioned leftists unwittingly subscribe to.

Still, it is precisely the text's openness and effort at connection that pose significant problems. One is the problem of *organisation*, of the transformation and coordination of local struggles within a wider movement. Given the immense powers of the enemy, interstitial politics often runs the risk of remaining isolated, a local and thereby recuperable practice; and Pignarre and Stengers (purposefully) offer us few clues as to how such politics can move beyond the local level. Another and more pressing problem is that despite the authors' efforts to the contrary, the text does not escape its Eurocentric bias. This is visible not only in its preference for Seattle (1999) rather than say Chiapas (1994), for many the opening that made Seattle possible; or in the extensive discussion of neo-pagan witch movement, which overlooks the significantly homogeneous racial composition of the witch circles. At its most concrete, the problem resurfaces in the uncritical pairing of lesbian feminist of colour Audre Lorde and Gilles Deleuze in the same paragraph. (108) To claim that "thought, for Deleuze, poses the same problem" as Lorde's explicitly decolonial "the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house" should raise more than a single eyebrow, in light of analyses such as Spivak's, Karen Caplan's and Christopher Miller's on the persistence of colonial tropes in Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology.

Paola Marrati, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy*, (tr.) Alisa Hartz. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008; xix + 138 pages. ISBN: 978-0801888021.

Review by Rachel Loewen Walker, University of Alberta.

Paola Marrati has written and researched extensively on Derrida, Bergson, Deleuze and Cavell, and this foundation shows, as she is able to situate the text at hand within a rich field of Continental scholarship. It is for this reason that, although it only just breaches one hundred pages, *Gilles Deleuze: Cinema and Philosophy* sacrifices nothing in terms of its breadth and depth, nor in terms of its value as an introductory text to Deleuze's philosophy of film. Relying most on *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*, but also drawing from *Difference and Repetition*, *Bergsonism* and *The Logic of Sense*, Marrati provides a discerning account of Deleuze's contributions to both the study of film and to the function of cinema in a Western political context.

Marrati's central argument is that it is within the *Cinema* books that we find the most developed politics of Deleuze's work, a politics which refuses modernity's obsession with agency as the freedom and action