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John Molyneux

The Dialectics of Art

reviewed by Ciarán O'Rourke

■'[We] are forced to note how often it has been the fate of great radical art [to] be taken up by our rulers', writes John Molyneux of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings (ca. 1947–1950): 'The solution is not to renounce the art but to expropriate our rulers.' As here, the essays collected in *The Dialectics of Art* as a whole are immediately recognizable for their incisive eloquence and radical fire. Formally attentive and politically astute, Molyneux's criticism is singular in the fierce clarity of its response to a number of leading visual artists and their works, and indeed to the looming question, 'What Is Art?' (a subject meticulously examined in the opening chapter). Such a combination of elements is both winning and rare. 'Without obvious patterning', Molyneux further suggests of Pollock's work, which was promoted for its supposed Americanism by the CIA in later years, these paintings 'achieve a total symphonic composition', a quality that 'speaks of the struggle against alienation, fragmentation and disintegration.' When 'Holbein paints the portrait of Henry VIII', a later segment

likewise observes, 'he is painting not just the man, Henry Tudor, but the institution of kingship at that moment in English history', thus joining technical mastery to a vision of the 'social relations' of his epoch, in a work that therefore will be found valuable by any aspiring aficionados (whether of art or revolution) with their wits about them.

Molyneux cites John Berger's recognition of art's role as a possible 'model of freedom' as a kind of guiding principle to the approach adopted in these articles, even if his own interpretations of specific artists and paintings diverge from Berger's in important respects. Whereas the latter views the 'dislocations' in evidence in Picasso's 'revolutionary' *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) as 'the result of aggression, not aesthetics', a protest against civilization as such, Molyneux qualifies this perception by foregrounding the fact, largely downplayed by critics, that the painting in question 'is a picture of prostitutes and is about prostitution.' Picasso's masterpiece, Molyneux contends, 'is a uniquely intense and dramatic depiction of the mutual antagonism, estrangement, and alienation involved in the institution of prostitution', itself indicative of the dehumanizing relations generated and sustained by capitalist social systems as a matter of course. It's a compelling reading of a visceral and potentially disturbing image, and serves as an illuminating counterpoint to Molyneux's commentary on Rembrandt, whose painting *The Jewish Bride (*ca. 1665) he presents memorably as a work,

> …in which forty years of accumulated craft and experience in the laying of paint on canvas are brought to bear, not for a display of virtuosity [on Rembrandt's part] but in order to make a visual statement about the potential for love between two human beings.

It is to Molyneux's credit that the complexities of such questions, the technical literacy required to appreciate 'accumulated craft' in the visual arts in general, and the Marxist grounding of his analysis are integrated so fluently. His commentaries are never less than cogent, and often shine with the insight and enthusiasm of a true believer in human emancipation and the part that the creation and appreciation of art can play in such a history.

In some ways, Molyneux's book stands

as a useful field guide for students of the Marxist tradition, artistic or otherwise. He makes frequent use of economic and cultural writings by Marx, Engels, and Trotsky to clarify his own interpretive stance. Trotsky's adage, for example, that 'a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work' is deployed to elucidating effect; indeed, it's an insight that may be taken as propelling Molyneux's critical approach.

In its honed receptivity to individual artworks, its subtle yet accessible interrogation of single images for a new understanding of human conditions (whether interior or relational, individual or superstructural), *The Dialectics of Art* may also bear comparison to the work of Walter Benjamin. It was Benjamin, after all, who wrote of history 'as a picture, which flashes its final farewell in the moment of its recognizability', and yet who insisted that '[the] truth will not run away from us':

> For it is an irretrievable picture of the past, which threatens to disappear with every present, which does not recognize itself as meant in it.

Molyneux's urge to draw the masterpieces of the visual arts back into the light of proletarian (i.e. human and humane) progress arguably holds something of a family resemblance to Benjamin's philosophy, as both writers unlock revolutionary perspectives from inside the forms (and objects) of their attention, to be reclaimed in future work and understanding.

This is not to say that Molyneux has offered the final word (or radical perspective) on the arts, and nor does he claim to have achieved or desired this. *Dialectics* is best approached as an eclectic and original blueprint for further explorations in the field (and perhaps farther afield). Critical scrutiny will be a key element in that process. On the face of it, few would object (and why would we?) to Molyneux's proposition that art be understood as an expression of 'free creative labour in a world dominated by the opposite', which therefore should be 'supported and nourished' by socialists. Likewise, the powerful recognition that even 'under extreme fascist and authoritarian regimes, art survives in numerous nooks and crannies', including in concentration camps, is instructive and historically accurate, but holds an uneasy continuity with the somewhat under-stated admission, one page earlier, that not all creative works are 'beneficial to humanity', with Leni Riefenstahl's fascist *Triumph of the Will* (1935) cited as a case in point. For all their care and apparent lucidity, Molyneux's definitions of art (as elaborated in the opening two sections of the book in particular) do not fully address some of the problematic overlaps that they allow: in this instance, between the 'free creative labour' that produced a work and its authoritarian content and/or funding.

Another tension emerges, albeit obliquely, in the otherwise stirring overview of Yasser Alwan's proletarian photographs, which Molyneux praises for showing 'that working people, despite poverty and toil, remain complex and dignified human beings [with] their own take on life and the world.' In the essay, Molyneux makes a point of cutting through the myths and spotlighting the 'profound ignorance' of the contemporary art establishment in the West (Europe and North America):

> Ask a British university class (I have tried this often) to name three non-Western artists [and] you are setting a test which the large majority are destined to fail…. Results would not be much better among the faculty.

There is of course an irony here, in that Molyneux's own critical focus (at least as represented by the selection of essays in this book) rarely strays from the work of canonical male artists, albeit of varying backgrounds, political sensibilities, and styles. Tracey Emin and Rachel Whiteread receive due tribute, Emin with a chapter of her own; Käthe Kollwitz and Dorothea Lange are mentioned elsewhere in passing, but not discussed; Mexican photographer and revolutionary Tina Modotti is glimpsed in parenthesis; Frida Kahlo's work is briefly referenced alongside that of her husband Diego Rivera in a suggestive, if under-developed, comparison included in the opening chapter, titled 'What is Art?'. Given Molyneux's seemingly instinctive blend of sensitivity to technical and emotional nuance with a clear-eyed (Marxist) appreciation for human creativity and proletarian agency as such, the absence of a fuller engagement with these artists, and others, seems a diminishment of the book's scope and import. 'Whatever about Renaissance Europe', Molyneux writes regarding the best means of tracking the historical development of art as an overall tendency in class societies through time, 'what happens when we throw Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Central and South American and African art into the mix?' As above, we never quite find out.

This caveat, of course, does not change the fact that Molyneux's conclusions, as they stand, are both refreshing and persuasive. Perhaps the point is to avoid fixating on tradition and fetishizing the form of the artworks per se, and instead focus, as the essays in *Dialectics* resoundingly do, on the fact that non-alienated work, a non-alienated world, is possible: our task is to learn its language, to develop our creative skills and powers of attention (our capacity both to appreciate and to produce), thus coming into our own potential, individually and as a collective. Molyneux's model of art criticism provides a valuable and inspiring starting point for such a project, made all the more vital by the pending ecological and civilizational crises to which our own era of capitalist hegemony (and resistance) seems to be driving.

John Bellamy Foster

The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology

reviewed by Owen McCormack

■ John Bellamy Foster is a U.S.-based writer and lecturer whose works are essential reading for all revolution-aries and environmentalists. Over two decades, Foster has produced an immensely important body of work, and alongside a small number of others (like Ian Angus), has clarified and rescued

Marxist thinking on key environmental issues in the age of climate catastrophe. Much of Foster's earlier works are readily available and easy to read. Their importance for those concerned with the current climate crisis and related issues lies in their clear demonstration that the early generation of socialist revolutionaries (including Marx himself) did not hold a promethean view of nature, a charge often made by environmentalists who dismiss Marxist analyses of environmental destruction. Instead, the basic analysis of Marx and Engels—the view that capitalism rests on the theft of human labour and of nature itself, and that capitalism creates a 'metabolic rift' between humanity and nature—lay the ground for the clearest understanding of the sources and remedies of the environmental crisis we now face on a global scale.

The Return of Nature touches on similar themes, but seems to have even larger ambitions for an overarching narrative. It is chiefly concerned with staking out the claim that in the years following Marx's death, many leading figures in science and society, influenced by his passing, made huge contributions to the understanding of and fight against social injustice, as well as to the fight for environmental sustainability. Foster's claim is that the understanding of Marx's dialectical materialism proved time and again to yield profound insights in many areas and influenced a generation of socialist and revolutionaries. In a way, *The Return of Nature* is three separate books rolled into one, any one of which would be a huge intellectual undertaking in its own right, containing fascinating insights and engaging thoroughly with the ideas of the separate eras.

The book starts in the years following the deaths of both Marx and Darwin, and looks at the careers and works of E. R. Lankester and William Morris. Later sections look at the work of Arthur Tansley, J. D. Bernal, Joseph Needham, Barry Commoner, Rachel Carson, and others, although in briefer form than the earlier, extraordinarily detailed treatment of Lankester and Morris. In between these sections are three chapters that engage with the works of Engels.

Foster is not simply giving an account of each of these figures, he engages exhaustively not only in their ideas and works but with the currents and writings of other figures of their day, who they were often responding to. It makes for an astonishingly detailed and monumental work of research. If you are looking for an accessible introduction to Foster's works this is not it; *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism* or *Marx Theory of Metabolic Rift* would be better starting places. However, this is a fascinating and minutely detailed exploration of many figures who will be unknown to a larger audience and whose works and ideas deserve to be well known. It is also an opportunity for the reader to engage with those works and to understand the importance of their ideas for today's struggle.

E. R. Lankester has often been presented as an odd historical character—famous for attending Marx's funeral, he was also a leading British scientist and establishment figure with standard reactionary Victorian views on many issues. In later life he sat at the top of British society. Thanks to Foster's research we get a much more detailed and complex picture of Lankester. His attendance at Marx's funeral was no youthful indiscretion later atoned for. Lankester was, for his time, a radical whose work in the field of evolutionary biology was explicitly anti-capitalist.

He saw environmental destruction as rooted in the drive for commercial accumulation, and his writings, warning of depleted fish stocks at a time when most others believed humanity incapable of affecting such systems or natural stocks, are astonishingly prescient.

For Foster, Lankester—although not a revolutionary—is the first link in a chain that runs from Marx to today's left ecologists.

William Morris will be more familiar to many readers, although perhaps not for the pioneering ideas and works that Foster unearths. Morris was a lifelong revolutionary, utterly devoted to the cause of the working class, and an articulate propagandist for a radical alternative society based on equality. His writings on art and artists seem incredibly vital for today. Art, he claimed, is an essential characteristic of human beings; it represents what he described as 'mans pleasure in his daily necessary work'. Capitalism and modern production methods not only alienate human labour, but in so doing, result in a corruption of what art is and could be. Art is not the lonely endeavour of a brilliant individual, it is essentially a social and cooperative effort. Each artist, Morris claimed, has 'dead men guide his hands, even when he forgets they ever existed'.

Morris saw waste and despoliation as a by-product of how capitalism produces and how it alienates humanity. His vision of an alternative society based on equality and an end to capitalist relations was one that married a wider meaning of socialist struggle and human freedom with artistic creativity. Similarly to Marx, he also saw that environmental problems stemmed from the division under capitalism of town and country. Morris, in his fiction writing, also created an elaborate version of what a socialist utopia might look like.

The central chapters of *The Return of Nature* engage with the work of Engels. It is these that are an important continuation of Foster's central idea that the Marxist understanding of capitalism and ecological destruction holds vital lessons for today's ecological movement. Foster argues that, far from believing in the stock idea that Marxism held the natural world to be of no value, Engels recognised its intrinsic value. He viewed capitalism as alienating both 'the soil and the worker whose life ultimately depends on the soil'.

Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* is described as a 'foundational environmental work'. Engels documented the growth of industrial towns, especially Manchester, and the conditions imposed on workers driven to labour in the new factories. It's a testimonial of premature deaths, degrading conditions, and the constant

threat of diseases and viruses like cholera, typhus, and whooping cough. Based on Engels' first-hand investigations, it documents capitalism's 'social murder' of workers in pursuit of profit.
This chapter deals with the debates around how diseases spread and how the establishment dealt with the need to take measures to combat epidemics and diseases. Then as now, disease and death were embedded in the class system. Poverty, poor housing, and lack of access to public health services determined your chances of surviving.
In a passage that could be written today, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, Engels charged the ruling class with social murder saying that when society 'knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual…murder it remains.'
Engels' writings on Ireland are also analysed, and yield an important lesson for today. Engels rejects the idea, widely aired in England, that the cause of the Great Famine was just a natural disaster of poor soil and crop failure. The poor productivity of the soil was a direct by-product of the economic and social relations between the peasants and landowners and between Ireland and England. The greed of the landowners and a capitalist-induced ecological rift with nature lay at the base of the crisis, not the fecklessness of the country's inhabitants or the geography of the land.
Many may find the chapter on the *Dialectics of Nature* challenging. Foster engages deeply and minutely with Engels' work and the philosophers, writers, and political currents of the time. While difficult, it's also rewarding. For Foster, Engels' triumph is that he recognised that while humanity may 'seem to triumph over nature, it was capable of producing its own antithesis in capitalist society by undermining its fundamental relation to nature, of which it was merely a part'.
Foster argues that Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* prefigures modern Earth Systems Analysis and its idea of the connectedness of the Earth's vast chemical, biological, and physical systems. Engels was a fierce defender of Darwin and of evolution, but also a fierce opponent of the abuses of Darwin by social Darwinians who tried to twist his work to justify social class, inequality, racism, and imperialism in the Victorian age.
The third section of the book takes up the story of the growth of ecological thinking among radical socialists in the twentieth century.
The 1917 revolution was to have huge impacts on the study of and understanding of the natural world in science. Many debates around ecology, and how we view nature, have origins dating back to this. Arthur Tansley was the father of what today is known as ecosystem analysis—moving away from the dry, descriptive categorisation of plants to a holistic view of each organism in its environment and their interactions with other living organisms.
Many of the current debates between mainstream environmentalists and socialists date back to the start of ecological studies. Importantly, the mainstream Green view that only they have an understanding of the intrinsic value of nature while the left maintains a promethean view, is challenged here. The earliest advocates for a view of nature as having intrinsic value were radical socialists and revolutionaries, often at the cutting edge of scientific discoveries, who shared a deep commitment to challenging the destruction capitalism wreaked on humanity and nature.
Foster charts the growth and impact of movements like Science for the People, composed of leading left-wing scientists; in the years after World War II, they had a huge influence in many fields of science. They advocated for increased funding of science, independent of corporate and business interests, and the use of science in fighting inequality. They challenged and countered ideas of racism and imperialism often endemic in scientific circles.
New studies in ecology were challenging crude ideas of the struggle for existence in favour of a more complex view of nature and life, looking toward the evolved cooperation of different organisms in an environment. J. D. Bernal identified large-scale ecological crisis as being due to 'the predatory nature of capitalism'. Crucially, Bernal saw that capitalism was the ultimate driver of this crisis even if the immediate agent was a poor sharecropper or peasant driven from better land by colonial expansion.
Unfortunately, many of the leading proponents were uncritical of the USSR and unable to see the limits and damage done by Soviet planning or that unfettered intervention in natural systems in the name of rational planning might result in unplanned-for devastation. While inevitably leading to promethean and eco-modernist nonsense in their view of nature, Foster argues these failings shouldn't occlude the genuine insights that came from those scientists, even if today their plans for large-scale domination and intervention in earth systems seems hopelessly naive at best, dangerous at worst.
The post-WWII era of nuclear weapons testing gave birth to mass movements that linked the fight against potential global destruction with a deep understanding of the consequences of humanity's interventions in the natural world. Its leading activists and writers were often from the radical Marxist and scientific community, and could trace their lineage back to the generation of thinkers that followed Marx and Engels.
These later chapters are a breathless, whirlwind tour of those thinkers and writers. It's hard to escape the feeling that people like Carson and Gould deserve more thorough treatment, although in fairness, Foster and others have written about them elsewhere.
Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, written about the dangers inherent in the accumulation of synthetic chemicals and radiation in organisms, is often heralded as the birth of the modern environmental movement. Hers was an analysis based on an ecological understanding of earth and nature. She saw that capitalist agriculture, with its emphasis on monoculture, was creating dangerous environments and literally 'raining death' on nature on an historic scale, often with unknown long-term consequences. The book launched a new level of environmental struggle.
While mainstream environmentalist often claim Carson as the founder of the modern green movement, Foster

reiterates that she was far more radical in her analysis than any Green today. She located the environmental damage and threat not in individual consumer choices but in the nature of industry under capitalism. It was 'the Gods of profit and production' and 'an era dominated by industry in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged' and which 'worships the Gods of speed and quantity, of the quick and easy profit'. Carson's view of what ecology meant—that totality of life and its interactions—gave her profound insights into the damage that modern industry was doing and into the obligation we had to challenge that system of destruction.

The Return of Nature is an immense work and represents a colossal intellectual undertaking that deserves to be read by all those interested in continuing the struggle against environmental destruction.

Gavin Titley

Is Free Speech Racist?

reviewed by Aislinn Shanahan Daly

■ Western society has fostered the illusion that we live in a "postracial" circumstance: one in which we have overcome the illogical and inhumane occurrence of racism. The material reality for racialized persons is far from that circumstance. One only has to look to the U.S., where a racially motivated and murderous police regime runs rampant without sanction, yet where many claim that racist societal structures have been formally eradicated. The problem of race is thus reduced to a cultural phenomenon, as if it is only produced by individual aggressions. This hegemonic doctrine of neoliberal "anti-racism" has fed into the construction of the so-called persecuted right to free speech.

Gavan Titley's new book *Is Free Speech Racist?*addresses the discursive nature and material consequences of the concept of free speech, heavily embedding this investigation in critical race theory. Despite its being an academic text, the book is fairly direct and readable, and Titley tackles the subject with a systematic approach.

Titley first outlines the conflict between hegemonic understandings of race and how this affects the understanding of free speech. The official "anti-racist" cloak of neoliberalism freezes our ability to analyse race as a continuously reconstructed and shifting entity. It also denies the material experience of racialized groups. When the majority of neoliberals' approach to dealing with race is to correct the appearance of the machine rather than change the cogs, conflicts arise. A conflicted societal definition of race has allowed the far right to use the proxy of free speech to reignite a debate around race on an unequal playing field, ultimately leading to the contemporary normalization of racist discourses.

Titley goes on to analyse who the concept of free speech matters to, focusing

on islamophobia in particular. This form of racism, in some regards, transcends the traditional fixation on genetic attributes as key racial signifiers, and focuses more on attacking a supposed intolerance of Western values (free speech being a key proxy here). He discusses how public figures associated with Islam have to perform in a completely self-censoring manner in the media in order to prevent harassment. This is juxtaposed with the far right's obsession with ritually mutilating the Qur'an and celebrating pictures of Mohammed as an example of free expression. The reality of free speech in such a situation is that individuals who abide by state interests are free to exercise their right to speech, whereas Muslims and those tagged as associated with Islam—through nationality for example—must face the everyday consequences of this free speech, which often culminates in horrific harassment and violence.

In the final chapter, Titley investigates the weaponization of free speech by the far right on a deeper level. He discusses how the attempt by the far right to rehabilitate their views through the proxy argument of free speech's restriction is not a new phenomenon. He uses the example of Oswald Mosley's having justified the paramilitary mobilization of fascists in the 1930s as a necessary action to prevent a supposed attack on free speech by communists. The free speech proxy argument tries to frame itself as a universal celebration of liberty, but ignores the reality of how power conditions those rights outside of the law.

The far right frequently claim that their freedom of speech is under assault when their espousing of racist views is critically questioned. Sometimes they blame the "triggered liberal thought police", and sometimes the blame is on the "politically correct" establishment. It is true that there exists a moralistic liberal attitude towards language policing, mainly manifesting in social media wars, but this is not what primarily accelerates the free speech argument among the far right. The reduction of race to a frozen, intangible concept by neoliberal hegemony, constantly defined and constructed by those in positions of power, allows for these kinds of proxy arguments to gain a foothold despite their logical invalidity. It enables racist speech to be presented under a new guise, wearing the cloak of liberal freedom of expression.

Overall, *Is Free Speech Racist?* is an excellent inquiry into how racist expression has found a home through the alleged "free speech crisis". The book also contains an accessible introduction to certain key arguments within critical race theory. This interrogation comes at a necessary time, as violent political ideologies are attempting to rehabilitate themselves; something we must be organizationally and intellectually vigilant against.