Reviews

Carl Morris (2023), *Muslims Making British Media: Popular Culture, Performance and Public Religion*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 234 pp., £76.50, ISBN 9-781-3502-6536-3 (e-book).

Reviewed by Nisan Karaca Odabasi (Dresden)

In 2018, Boris Johnson said "it was absolutely ridiculous that [Muslim] women should go around resembling letterboxes and bank robbers" (Proctor 2019). Johnson's direct target of Muslimness and this Islamophobic comment is just one example that reflects the pathological discourse regarding Muslim identity in Britain. Muslims have been stigmatised, or to use Edward Said's terminology, *orientalised* through political, social, and cultural discourses. Popular culture's complicity in this othering process is incontrovertible, and it has been one of the central concerns of cultural studies scholars. Perceiving popular culture as a space in which meaning is created and (re)configured, Carl Morris shifts the scholarly focus from misrepresentation of 'Muslimness' to the subversion of dogmatised discourses through popular culture with the intervention of Muslim creatives. The Muslim intervention in popular culture, as Morris contends, provides an energetic and innovative space in which Muslim agency is (re)narrated, questioned, and (re)claimed. Morris's analytical focus is particularly on the "performance-based entertainment industry" (3) and he examines how cultural producers within this industry – including Muslim artists, institutions, and networks – generate counter-narratives against Western stereotypes and orthodox religious authorities.

Chapter one, "A Cultural History of Muslims in Britain", starts with the identification of the representation of Muslim agency in broader historical conjunctures; it is shown how Muslim identity

has been stigmatised via various media since the early 20th century. Morris claims that "this historical narrative is necessary to understand the context from within which Muslim creatives are still required to work" (33). Thus, this chapter not solely focuses on the accumulation of stereotypical 'knowledge' but also illustrates Muslim cultural production within this cultural industry. For instance, Morris observes that "beneath the dominating façade of mass media [after post-war migration,] there were vibrant forms of grassroots Muslim cultural production" (41). This chapter, therefore, reflects the initial sparks of Muslim intervention in popular culture, although they "were [at the time] ultimately outmatched against an elite broadcasting culture and widespread cultural antipathy" (51).

In chapter two, "Sound and Vision", Morris argues that Muslim creatives have been expressing and articulating Muslim subjectivities which powerfully subvert the insistent stereotypes. His empirical overview in this chapter "look[s] not just [at] individual cultural producers […] but also at the organizations that provide an institutional framework to support cultural production" (52). The focus here is primarily on the subjectivities concerning the articulation of Muslim identity through expression of faith. To locate and analyse the subversive reinterpretation as well as the augmenting conspicuousness of Muslim intervention in popular culture, Morris looks at music (i.e. contemporary nasheeds, syncretic music, and hip hop), theatre, television (not just creative representations but also involvement of Muslims in the creative production), Muslim comedy, films, and Muslim streaming services (i.e. Alchemiya, Muslim Kids TV). Each analytic spatiality and even each creative production is unique regarding its subversive function.

Chapter three, "Understanding Muslim Popular Culture", elaborates on the function(s) of Muslim cultural production. Morris conceptualises popular culture as a space "where traditional religious phenomena are either being challenged, synthesized or reformulated" (79). Defining popular culture "as a dynamic cultural force that shapes, reconfigures and reinforces fundamental social values and politics within society at large" (81), Morris foregrounds the articulation of a religious heteroglossia through popular culture. Relocating religion from its compartmentalised

locations, he looks at Muslim imaginaries that occur "within the everyday spaces of culture" (83). In doing so, he identifies a three-fold functionality of Muslim popular culture: "Islamic", "Islamically conscious" and "secular civic" (*ibid.*). This classification pertains to the motives of Muslim creatives. Apart from the categorised creative subjectivities, Morris examines religious meaning-making processes at an institutional level. Following mediatisation theory, Muslim cultural production's potent effect on rearranging and decentralising the power dynamics of Islam is foregrounded in this chapter; religious authority and institutions are partly replaced by "new interpreters" (90), namely Muslim creatives.

Chapter four, "Voices of Authority", grasps how partially relativised religious authority responds to the reinterpretation of faith, and how Muslim creators position themselves while "religious authorities [...] generate new forms of knowledge about religion" (104) through gaining seats in popular culture. Accordingly, Morris considers Muslim creatives as "*mediators* of religious authority and knowledge" (109). Moreover, religious authorities also profit from this interlocutory position of Muslim creators. Morris observes a symbiotic relationship in which "creatives benefit from the seal of orthodox religious authority, while Islamic scholars are able to tap into the extensive media reach that creatives have" (110). Religious authority, however, does not always necessarily 'need' the help of creatives to ensure its cogency. Morris beckons Teledawah in the UK as a space that reinforces this power. Therefore, Muslim creatives continually flex the "borders of religious knowledge and permissibility" (127).

Chapter five, "Ordinary Muslimness", focuses on how Muslim creatives reflect the lived, everyday experience of Muslimness, and how the representation of "everyday Islam" (130) subverts racialised and politicised significations of Muslimness. Focusing on "shared humanity" (131) in their creative works, Muslim creatives engage with a "fuller range of human experience and emotion" (133). By doing so, creatives reject "hard and essentialized Muslim identities" and point out "the complexity of Muslimness" (136). This chapter, moreover, determines two major analytical spatialities of everyday Muslimness: commodified culture and spirituality.

Chapter six, "Escaping the 'Muslim Trap'", follows a Du Boisian framework to reflect the challenges that Muslim creatives

face in creative industries. Muslim 'authentic' expression is articulated by the notion of double consciousness; as Morris's interviews show, Muslim creatives grapple with expressing their authentic self in their work while responding to deep-rooted Islamophobia. However, it is also shown that this notion of – so to speak – in-betweenness encourages Muslim creatives to play an intermediary role; they occupy the space between 'Muslimness' and 'Whiteness' and "inhabit the space, [...] contorting the boundaries" (178).

In the ultimate chapter, "Transnational Nomads", the transnational network of Muslim expression is scrutinised; the 'Muslim Atlantic', asserts Morris, represents a crucial domain where Muslim creatives articulate their cultural and religious inclinations. The chapter, being cautious not to generalise 'Muslimness' in transatlantic contexts, focuses on the shared discourses of Muslim creatives. In that sense, Morris acknowledges the power of *umma* (the Muslim community) not as a mere "utopian idea" (182). Muslim creatives, "[b]y evoking ideas of global Muslim unity and community, [...] help[...] to sustain and shape ideas of *ummatic* consciousness" (*ibid.*). The *ummatic* consciousness, here, encompasses surpassing national and local cultural boundaries through expression, and thereby allows Muslim creatives' involvement in the transatlantic meaning-making processes. In their creative work, furthermore, they "not only claim popular styles of culture as their own, but also advocate for change by utilizing these styles of culture to counter discourse" (192). More importantly, this advocation of change does not target solely pathologic 'Western' discourses; the transatlantic ties of the creatives permit trespassing orthodox Islamic traditions through the idea of *umma*.

This insightful and meticulously researched monograph presents a compelling exploration of Muslim agency within the realm of popular culture in Britain. It is thought-provoking in that it invites its readers to reimagine the complexities of Muslim identity in Britain, pinpointing the transformative power of Muslim cultural production. Masterfully locating and analysing the strategic and nuanced cultural work of Muslim creatives within a landscape fraught with stereotypes, this monograph, in my opinion, is a must-read for scholars who are interested in further exploring the

intertwinement of popular culture and (re)configuration of identity.

Bibliography

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Maria Flood & Michael C. Frank, eds. (2023), *The Figure of the Terrorist in Literature and Visual Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 256 pp., £95.00, ISBN 978-1-4744-9758-9 (hardback).

Reviewed by Maria Mothes (Koblenz)

An exceptional anthology, *The Figure of the Terrorist in Literature and Visual Culture*, edited by Maria Flood and Michael C. Frank, presents a critical and overdue intervention in the landscape of terrorism discourse, testing and dismantling the prevalent terrorism mythography. Despite the omnipresence of terrorism in the Western public discourse and the constantly reinforced binary of 'us' versus 'them', the voices of terrorists are strikingly absent. Emphasising the need for such accounts, the anthology looks at literary texts, film, television, and the media. It systematically investigates and deconstructs the prevailing, dehumanising narratives, stereotypes, and harmful cliches, all the while shedding light on the consequences of an externally ascribed terrorism category. At the core of the collection lies an examination of how the terminology 'terrorism'/'terrorist' is used to construct a hierarchy in which the West is generally situated on a moral high-ground and in

which the terrorists are always non-white and often Muslim. The collection seeks to link the analysis of cultural texts to state-led discourses by dissecting how the term 'terrorism' is utilised to other and dehumanise individuals, but also to reinforce prejudiced notions, particularly through racial and religious dimensions that perpetuate damaging stereotypes.

Three equal sections group the scholarly research around the (re)historicisation of the figure of the terrorist across media, aspects of gender and identity, and lastly, questions of empathy. The first part investigates various forms of political violence, from the IRA to post-9/11 counter-terrorism strategies. By shedding particular light on the role of the female terrorist, the second section contributes to the discussion of a largely overlooked group that, for instance, regained relevance in the context of ISIS recruitment strategies. The chapters in this section engage with the reduction of the female terrorist to either caregiver and/or their romantic relations with the male perpetrator. Here, the public/private realm binary as well as the sexualised gaze gain particular significance in the discussion about female agency. The third section of the collection engages with the larger philosophical and perhaps even metaphysical questions of humanity: if we do not want to simply resort to an outright rejection of the terrorist and their actions, how can we listen to their motives and interact with the person behind the actions? This is, after all, a continuous negotiation of the self/other boundary. In what is potentially its strongest point, the collection speaks out against the spectacularising, fearmongering, and voyeurism caused by (Western) discourses. Through the three intersectional contexts, the collection persuasively argues that the act of labelling individuals as terrorists not only precludes a genuine understanding of their motivations but also renders their actions everything but political – an oversimplification and dehumanisation with harmful consequences.

Drawing on Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* and "The Essential Terrorist", as well as Ghassan Hage's "condemnation imperative" (9) and his work on Palestinian suicide bombers, the collection posits empathy as the antidote to the dehumanising effects of the terrorist label. The volume distinguishes between mere sympathy and the nuanced understanding embodied in empathy,

offering a framework for countering biases and the overall fostering of a more compassionate perspective. Moreover, a distinctive feature of the book is its emphasis on the role of art in acknowledging and recognising the existence and grievances of the other, particularly in the context of US foreign policy in what is generally referred to as the Middle East. This recognition, it is argued, serves as a potent tool in subverting racist and Islamophobic representations and challenging the dangerous dominant discourse on terrorism. In following Judith Butler's understanding of "grievable lives" (6), the introduction astutely calls for a re-evaluation (and appreciation) of one's safety, which can only exist in the same space as the suffering of the other. This strong plea for empathy that does not dwindle into pity or patronising benevolence resonates throughout the anthology, challenging readers to confront their own biases and engage in self-reflexivity.

Three contributions shall be explicitly highlighted here. In "Sympathy for the Devil? The Changing Face of the IRA in American Superhero Comics", Shane Walshe makes use of the comic medium to explain how sympathy of the general public and support by the American government shifted over time. Zaynab Seedat's "'I Was a Big Girl. I Could Pack My Bags and Leave': ISIS and Female Emancipation in Tabish Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane*" aptly breaks down how young women joining ISIS were infantilised and their motivations (religious or otherwise) downplayed by the media discourse through labels such as "terror/jihadi brides" (183-184). Through her reading of Khair's novel, Seedat emphasises the emancipatory endeavours and agency of female ISIS recruits. In doing so, she highlights the double standards in both extremism as an ideology as well as its harmful representation in the media. Starting from the incredulity and incapability to relate to the (oppressed) terrorist's motives, Tim Gauthier explores "critical empathy" (206) required to circumvent condemnation of the perpetrator and their actions from the start. Exemplified by the analysis of a movie and a fictional text, Gauthier investigates narrative strategies like the creation of ambivalence in order to question engrained stereotypes and biases of the readership/audience. As his chapter convincingly postulates, such nuanced and

critical examination of the complex realities surrounding terror-
ism is not only much needed but can be achieved through cultural
texts.

In conclusion, *The Figure of the Terrorist in Literature and
Visual Culture* is an outstanding contribution not only to the schol-
arly field of terrorism studies. More so, it adds to those voices in
the humanities dismantling the oppressive usage of language and
discourse. The chapters actively question prevailing representa-
tions and offer ways to subvert stereotyping, dehistoricisation, and
dehumanisation. By invoking rehistoricisation, self-reflexivity,
and empathy, the collection not only serves as a linking point for
future scholarship in the humanities and social sciences but is a
call to action for a more compassionate and nuanced public dis-
course on the figure of the terrorist. Although the book includes
different forms and motivations of terrorism for good reason, we
cannot assume the same parameters to equally apply to the study
of white and, on the other hand, brown or black terrorists. Aware
of this distinction and at no point claiming to cover this spectrum,
the writers in this engaging work passionately raise awareness for
the ubiquitous presence of institutionalised racism and Islamopho-
bia in the Western world.

Mark Schmitt (2023), *Spectres of Pessimism: A Cul-
tural Logic of the Worst*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan,
138 pp., €42.79, ISBN 978-3-0312-5350-8 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Dilâra Yilmaz (Kiel)

Contemporary culture, marked by the chronic multiple crises of
late neoliberal and late capitalist society, is profoundly traversed
by various manifestations of pessimist thought. In this mono-
graph, Mark Schmitt takes up the task to ascertain the many forms

and meanings of these increasingly prevalent manifestations of pessimist thinking. The book's main aim is to study the emergence of so-called "new pessimisms", to situate their hegemonic position in the contemporary cultural practice, and to account for this dominant position in cultural studies by taking up the task to theorise and evaluate these, as he calls them, "spectres of pessimism" (20).

While he asserts that pessimism is ubiquitous and woven into the very fabric of everyday life in late capitalist modernity, Schmitt discerns a number of these spectres of pessimism, most notably queer pessimism, afropessimism, reproductive pessimism, and ecological pessimism, among other pessimistic constellations. These pessimisms, he argues, respond and relate to the ongoing multiple political, social, cultural, and ecological crises (121). They are present, as he continues to show, in contemporary thought, affect, and cultural representation. Eventually, Schmitt seeks to counter pessimism's associations with the unproductive, the futile, and the fundamentally negative in order to prove its diagnostic potential. Schmitt offers an enthralling and convincing exploration of the invaluable resources of philosophical pessimism for contemporary cultural studies.

Comprising five chapters and a conclusion, the book starts with a comprehensive introductory overview of the study of pessimism and related philosophical concepts with a focus on the debates on and derivatives of the concept of pessimism of the past 20 years. Schmitt walks the reader through various accounts of older and emerging forms of pessimism, of the conjuncture of pessimism and temporality, and of pessimist (onto-)epistemologies. He concentrates on mapping out the interrelations of philosophical pessimism and hauntology while including a re-evaluation of utopianism. Drawing most of all on the work of Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher, these philosophical accounts and reassessments are conjoined into a theoretical amalgamation that is used as a reference and framework for the following study. This first chapter also offers a primary glimpse of Schmitt's conjunctural analyses of multiple literary texts and films which are fundamentally informed by Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, and Antonio Gramsci. In a model analysis, Schmitt investigates the manifestations of pessimism in

Hari Kunzru's novel *Red Pill* (2020), and shows how the text explores pessimist futurity through its intellectually as well as affectively pessimistic narrator.

The second chapter comprises a historical contextualisation and compares the conceptions of pessimism in Marxism and critical and cultural theory. To be more concrete, Schmitt is concerned with the different notions of pessimism in the political and theoretical positions of Antonio Gramsci, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Stuart Hall. Considering that all of the aforementioned share a variation of the phrase "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" (30)[1], Schmitt traces the dialectic of analytical pessimism and utopian optimism historically. He recognises this dialectic as a key component for the conjunctural analysis of the cultural, political, and affective facets of, as he calls it, "the contemporary cultural logic of the worst" (27). This dialectic, indeed, helps explain the somewhat counterintuitive presence of hopefulness and unity in the face of bleakness and futility, or other manifestations of utopian thinking.

The third chapter juxtaposes E.M. Cioran's anti-utopianism with John Storey's idea of radical utopianism in the context of cultural studies. Schmitt applies their opposing positions to investigate current representations of these contrasting arguments, i.e. afropessimism and afrofuturism / Black utopia. More specifically, the dialectic nature of afropessimism and Black utopia is portrayed through the analytic discussion of John Akomfrah's afrofuturist documentary essay film *The Last Angel of History* (1996) and Steve McQueen's short film "Education" from his film series *Small Axe* (2020). Notably, Black utopia is necessarily tied to dystopian realities of Black life, hence further illustrating pessimism's diagnostic and creative power, and its dialectic quality.

In the fourth chapter, Schmitt discusses the philosophy of antinatalism and carves out its connection to queer pessimism. According to him, both concurrently partake in the contemplation and expression of reproductive pessimism, collectively navigating

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[1] This line is first used in Gramsci's "An Address to the Anarchists" from 1920 (1977: 188) and further recurs throughout his *Prison Notebooks* (1921).

the intricate facets of their shared outlook on procreation (79). By questioning the ethics of human reproduction, they contest prevailing notions of time, temporality, and future (im)possibilities. Supporting his theoretical deliberations chiefly informed by the thoughts of Lee Edelman, Sara Ahmed, and Eva Horn, Schmitt includes case studies of Ted Chians's novella "Story of Your Life" (1998/2002), its film adaptation *Arrival* (2016), and Gaspar Noé's film *Irréversible* (2002).

Finally, the fifth chapter is concerned with notions of the apocalypse. Here, Schmitt explores the pessimist-speculative ideas behind both Thomas Ligotti's cosmic pessimism and Patricia MacCormack's ahuman theory, which both envision the future and possible end of the Anthropocene, and share the paradigms of extinctionism and apocalyptic thought. The subsequent case studies provide an investigation of the more radical apocalyptic fictional worlds of the films *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars von Trier and *Silent Night* (2021) by Camille Griffin, both of which offer anticipatory futures beyond the confines of human temporality and involvement.

To sum up, the book keeps its promise to outline diverse strands of pessimism and goes on to show how these strands are irrevocably interwoven not only in cultural theory but in cultural production, such as literary texts and films. Each chapter provides convincing and nuanced readings of these cultural texts and enriches each analysis with substantial theoretical, philosophical, and historical contexts. The book delivers a solid argumentative trajectory throughout. Writing concisely and clearly, Schmitt succeeds in proving the great extent to which pessimism is an integral part of contemporary society and its fundamentally negative affective attitude towards the future.

Unlike other scholars engaging in the study of pessimism, Schmitt refrains from artificially separating pessimism as, on the one hand, a philosophical and political concept, and as emotional or mental disposition on the other. Illustrating pessimism as both an intellectual and affective configuration which is today's dominant affective state but not necessarily politically or ideologically endorsed or proclaimed, is one of this book's many strengths.

Schmitt easily persuades readers to recognise the importance of concerning themselves with the pervasiveness of pessimism in

contemporary culture. Assuming that, in late neoliberal modernity of the so-called 'West', the culture of forced optimism, of entrepreneurial self-actualisation, compulsory positivity, and hyper-individualisation will only be continuously promoted by the hegemonic ideologies of late capitalist society, this book proves to be of great importance to any potential reader. As long as overly optimistic hopes for possible futures in the face of pervasive economic precarisation and the prospect of extinction prevail, so will pessimism – and so will its continuous permeation of contemporary culture.

Any reader who might be taken aback by this conceivably doomy, gloomy, arguably unproductive, or even unhelpful concept will eventually reconsider their position. They will likely find themselves acknowledging pessimism's diagnostic power and recognise new pessimisms as modes of (self-)reflection. As Schmitt repeatedly points out in this book, reimagining the future often starts with a pessimistic account of the current state, which indeed proves necessary to preconfigure a changed future.

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Reviewed by Christoph Singer (Innsbruck)

The feeling of living in an 'Age of Crisis', whether crisis refers to the economy, the climate, (mental) health, or rising and anti-democratic populism, appears to be reflected in socio-political divisions and invites statements such as the following: "[w]hen everything is a crisis, then nothing is" (Bures 2020). This, however, rings cynical to the ears of those afflicted by the compounded and intersectional impact of these crises. Their emotional responses have in turn been read as antithetical to political action. Devorah Baum and Josh Appignanesi, for instance, argue in the introduction to *Granta*'s issue on the *Politics of Feeling* that

> it's easy to see why some wish feelings evacuated from civil discourse. Too much attention to subjective states can destroy common sense, leaving us in a world so fiercely divided that people on opposing sides are not unable to agree on a solution to a given problem, they're unable to agree on what our problems even are (2019).

Jana Gohrisch and Gesa Stedman's collection *Affective Polarisation: Social Inequality in the UK after Austerity, Brexit, and COVID-19* explores this very polarisation in the context of recent developments in the UK.

Any study discussing multiple crises at once faces a twofold challenge. One is methodological: where to place the analytical cutoff point for ongoing developments? Secondly, how to give each crisis and those afflicted thereby the attention they deserve? *Affective Polarisation* confronts these challenges by, firstly, highlighting the intersectional nature of the respective crises. Secondly, the theoretical framework of "affective polarisation" allows for a

very productive perspective. This concept, based on the work of Sara Hobolt, Thomas J. Leeper, and James Tilley, distinguishes between "opinion-based polarisation" and "political affiliation" (2). Gohrisch and Stedman expand this concept to include "race/ethnicity and gender, as well as class divisions, in order to explain how increased social inequality in the UK in the wake of austerity, Brexit, and COVID-19 has had an impact on polarisation" (*ibid.*). Thirdly, the 11 chapters use this framework to connect the local and the national as well as the individual and communities, to test and demystify assumptions about the political affiliations of social groups.

Due to its convincing structure, the book's articles deserve to be read in order, as the editors found a sequence in which the successive chapters effectively build on one another. In the first contribution, Paolo Chiocchetti explains the current state of the "Divided Left in the UK" after Brexit and details how, counterintuitively, Conservative and increasingly far-right policies prevail in the face of multiple crises where the social policies of the left could appear appealing. However, as the article shows, increasing polarisation in terms of ideology and affect leads to a fragmentation of the political left, which does not support parliamentary representation.

Kirsten Forkert and Marius Guderjan continue this discussion by exploring "Populism and the People", focusing on "Elitism, Authoritarianism, and Libertarianism". This paper is well-positioned at the beginning of the collection as the authors, firstly, take the time to define populism and, secondly, probe the contradictions in conservative populist politics, especially regarding immigration. The authors argue that the current Conservative government may be "the most diverse in British history, but also the cruellest in recent memory" (45). Rainer Schulze complements this argument on the construction and rhetoric of political ideologies by providing a micro-linguistic analysis of populist discourse, particularly focusing on the semantic constructions of loaded yet ambiguous terms such as 'country' and 'the people' in speeches by Theresa May and Boris Johnson.

This linguistic analysis is followed by another "micro focus" (79), this time on four economically contrasting towns: Margate, Oldham, Oxford, and Tunbridge Wells. This highly localised study

by Insa Koch, Mark Fransham, Sarah Cant, Jill Ebrey, Luna Glucksberg, and Mike Savage analyses the reciprocal relationship of affective polarisation and space, framed by a diachronic inquiry: how did the UK, the authors ask, transform from one of the "least unequal nations in the world" (78) into one that is highly divided? As a result of this polarisation along economic, affective, political, and social lines, the article shows that one can actually identify a "missing or shrinking 'middle'" (98), a disappearance that translates and is inscribed into further spatial realities.

Anisia Petcu describes a further disappearance, namely the "Precarisation of Romanian Essential Workers". Petcu tackles a seeming paradox and asks how Romanian immigrants are "simultaneously discursively rejected and vital to running the economy" (111). Here the analysis, considering questions of whiteness and ethnicity, convincingly shows how Romanian workers are framed as only "nominally white" (118) and increasingly exoticised and integrated into the machinery of 'racial capitalism' (120).

This theme of racial politics is taken up by Jana Gohrisch who discusses the "Racialised Affective Polarisation in the UK", particular in recent activist discourse and the deconstruction of white supremacy, in non-fictional and fictional texts by Reni Eddo-Lodge, Afua Hirsch, Akala and Johny Pitts, film (essays) by Steve McQueen and Raoul Peck. The article probes racialised affective polarisation and argues for translating "individual anger into organising combined political resistance against capitalism and racism, exploitation and austerity policies" (140).

Harvey Butterfield introduces the concept of "left-behind communities" and provides a historical panorama highlighting political changes that may explain "why the so-called 'red wall' fell during the 2019 general election" (158). By focusing on two time-periods, namely 1997-2010 and 2010-2016, Butterfield is particularly concerned with local politics and their reciprocal relationship with national-level politics.

Whereas Butterfield's contribution stops its enquiry before the Brexit vote, Ellen Grünkemeier approaches post-2016 "Britain in a State of Emergency" in two case studies of Ken Loach's films, *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), which are representative of the changed welfare policies and the emerging gig-economy. Grünkemeier discusses the interplay of structural

policies and personal affect through Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" to convincingly argue that such an affective lens "triggers difficult questions about good-life fantasies and false hopes" (181).

Lisa McKenzie's article is equally concerned with wealth inequality and a socio-political ideology that blames individuals for their economic fate. To redress "symbolic violence" in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, she focuses on the "micro-politics of how class in Britain is lived and experienced" (188). This ethnographic study draws from research projects located in a Nottingham council estate and the East End of London and includes interviews and lockdown diaries to illustrate how the "cultural industries in the UK are the gatekeepers of class" (193).

The final two chapters take readers respectively to the North and West of England to explore the affective identities of Scotland and Wales. Carlo Morelli and Gerry Mooney combine and translate the themes of class and inequality to Scotland and probe the applicability of the concept of affective polarisation to Scottish identity during and after the independence referendum.

Ifor ap Glyn, former national poet of Wales, expands on these questions of national and cultural identity. He uses the concept of affective polarisation to consider some of the "conflicting interpretations of the modern history of Wales" (212). After the anthology's discussion of the contemporary triple-crisis – austerity, Brexit, and COVID-19 – Ifor ap Glyn looks at Wales's century-long history of plural identities. While being aware of the challenges facing Wales and the UK, he does not see them as resulting in "irreconcilable differences" (228), and as a poet, he is convinced that a common language has and always can be found.

This cautiously optimistic statement on the affordances of finding a common language relates back to the introduction where Gohrisch and Stedman motivate their inclusion of cultural, linguistic, and literary perspectives as an approach to critically read the very discourses that construct what "one is allowed to feel, and how one expresses such feelings is socially and historically conditioned" (3).

In this interdisciplinary approach, this important collection is a timely and highly important contribution to explore the inter-

sections of power, politics, and affect. And by offering an interdisciplinary variety of articles embedded in diachronic and historical analysis, the book proves not only to be an important document for understanding the current multiplicity of crises and their affective nature in the UK and beyond, but ultimately alerts readers that, no matter how numbed one may feel by the seemingly incessant stream of bad news, a crisis is a crisis is a crisis.

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Luke Martell (2023), *Alternative Societies: For a Pluralist Socialism*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 222 pp., £27.99, ISBN 978-1-5292-2967-7 (paperback).

Reviewed by Sebastian Berg (Bochum)

Luke Martell's book is many things at the same time: a register of alternative ways of living and working in different places both in the past but primarily in the present, a call not to give up on the possibility of better futures, a map for ways to move to, and a manual for developing these futures in the present, a defence of utopian thinking, a critique of illiberal strands of socialism, and an argument for a synthesising pluralist variety of it. Taking to heart Marx's demand that philosophers (and sociologists like Martell) should not only criticise the existing order but try to make contributions to its change, the author aims at providing the readers with

inspiration for a liberal-pluralist but simultaneously democratic-socialist society. He insists that all the different small and large alternative societies which exist within present-day capitalism point beyond it and to a "socialism with pluralism" rather than a "pluralism with socialism" (181) – unlike pluralism, socialism requires an organisation of the economy in which private property is no longer the dominant form.

The main goal of the study is to familiarise the readers with the many alternatives that exist (and often have done for surprisingly long times) but are known to small numbers of insiders only. It avoids meticulous case-to-case evaluation, which explains the unusual structure of the book. Its six chapters, I would suggest, make three parts: the first offers a tour de force around the colourful world of alternative economies and societies. The second discusses in how far these live up to, or could be made compatible with, normative frameworks developed in several social and political theories – especially Marxism, but also a democratic (as different from a purely economic) liberalism, feminism, environmentalism, and decolonial theory. The third part provides cautious theoretical reflections on how post- or non-capitalist islands in a sea of capitalism might be useful for transforming the existing presents into alternative futures.

The book starts with what Marxists consider to be the base: the economy. Reflecting on the problems of central planning in what was once known as the Eastern Bloc, Martell suggests smaller-scale planning in existing "empirical utopias" (11) instead. The smaller scale makes it easier to learn from, and to correct, mistakes, to change course, and to avoid the alienation that marred the post-capitalist states of the 20th century – an alienation that required authoritarianism to be kept under control. The readers learn about cooperatives like Mondragon in Spain, Cooperation Jackson in the USA, or in the Emilia Romagna region in Italy. They are taken to Barcelona (democratic decision making in the local economy), neighbourhood committees in Fatsa (Turkey), a village-wide agricultural cooperative in Marinaleda (Spain), and economic and political grassroots democracy plus rotation in political office in Chiapas (Mexico). Later in the chapter, issues such as less paid work and universal basic income experiments are introduced, as well as slow-society practices, eco-localist production (for example

in Rojava), a democratised IT economy and the contribution it could make to both economic planning and a less-work society.

The second chapter deals with social alternatives, starting with experiments in education, communes, and intentional communities (collective living projects for specific purposes, e.g. collective child rearing or transgenerational support), moving on to food countercultures (e.g. freeganism), volunteer-run social centres that do outreach work in marginalised communities, and finishing with a discussion of alternatives to prisons and conventional disciplinary institutions. As in the previous chapter on economic experiments, the author combines examples from the global North and South, as well as more politically interventionist and more escapist, purely practical and theory-guided alternatives.

Left perhaps a bit dizzy after processing all the information given in these empathetic sketches, readers who like theory will enjoy the next two chapters that are more conceptual and systematic. The third chapter discusses the functions of left-wing utopianism. The author is convinced that it has several: practical utopias like those presented in the first chapters are experiments, demonstrations, and sources of motivation at the same time. Referring to Ruth Levitas, the book perceives utopias as methods rather than goals: processes of thinking about and trying out alternatives and, if they work, expanding and transferring them (109). Such processes create new subjectivities (revolutionary or transformative) that might aim not at smashing capitalism but (as Eric Olin Wright suggested) at taming, eroding, or helping to escape from it (98). Practical utopias combine social experiment and political struggle and rely on strategies that usually have been seen as incompatible by the left (which still has not kicked the habit of spending much time and energy fighting with itself): reform and revolution, anarchy and council democracy, party politics and social movement action repertoires.

The last three chapters move the focus from the discussion of alternative societies as concrete utopias to the question of their potential to create a new democratic economy and society. Chapter four, the second on theory, discusses in what ways the pluralist socialism of alternative societies can avoid several shortcomings and problems of previous versions of socialism, including those di-

agnosed by critical socialists themselves. Martell argues that markets can have their clearly defined role in socialism – it is production for private profit that clashes with economic planning, not markets as such. However, the creative potential of markets has often been exaggerated, in many cases planning rather than markets led to innovation. The study claims that an egalitarian socialism that accepts humans' rights to individuality (within limits) is probably more able to achieve and support (positive) freedom for all than an inegalitarian liberalism. The pluralist socialism advocated here is also capable of including feminism and environmentalism because it potentially embraces an intersectional understanding of equality and because its collective ownership and planning contribute to environmental justice, empowering those most affected by pollution and moving beyond 'green growth'.

The following chapter on a democratic economy raises the question of how to combine the plurality of experiments, initiatives, movements, and practices presented in the first two chapters into a coherent but pluralist socialist project. Two aspects seem central: the economy needs to be circulatory and mainly socially owned. Martell points to the community wealth building experiments where communities and local politics try to create local economic networks that become increasingly less dependent on the global economy and transnational companies (TNCs). Preston in Lancashire has become a model for such experiments. A broad trend towards remunicipalisation of services and the foundational economy means a new *pre*distribution of wealth which, unlike *re*distribution, goes hand in hand with power shifts and testifies to a change in many people's consciousness. Local economy building could kick off a scaling-up dynamic, especially if supported by an interventionist state that supports blocking capital flight and domesticating TNCs. In the global South, where cooperative ownership and community wealth building are widespread, these would gain from debt cancellation, reparations for colonial exploitation, and open borders.

The last chapter deals with these global dimensions. Martell's call for plurality emphasises the need to act on many different levels, from the local to the transnational. Nevertheless, he warns against the belief that today's interlocking crises can be tackled, let alone a pluralist socialism created, via global governance. Top-

down initiatives to limit climate change or eradicate poverty are obviously doomed to fail while state-led initiatives are more promising (demonstrated to some extent by reacting to COVID-19). However, to make these reactions less protectionist and egoistical, states must feel pressured by transnational left solidarity. Building this is cumbersome, but bottom-up solidaristic internationalism (the opposite of globalism's system of competitive states) might create what John Holloway called cracks in the capitalist system that can eventually break it (162). This solidarity could thrive, as the late dependency theorist Samir Amin argued, in a fifth international of left parties, social movements, and concrete utopian experiments (163). If this sounds utopian, the chapter ends with what, in Germany at the time of writing this review, does even more so: a proposal to get rid of borders and allow free migration. The call is founded on both philosophical and pragmatic arguments and the author admits that it requires an "enormous hill to climb" (172), but he seems convinced that only a cosmopolitan socialism is one worth its name. The argument sits a bit uneasily with the call for letting a thousand socialist flowers bloom, but maybe it comes as a reminder that global utopian imagining is part of the project too.

The great value of Martell's book lies in its call for cautious optimism. It encourages the readers to look around and realise that alternative societies exist all over the world and in their own neighbourhoods. However, it would help to learn a bit more about the resistance and opposition they had to deal with and overcome. Sometimes, the argument seems a bit circular, for example, when the author suggests that alternative societies work best where they receive support from a sympathising state. To emerge, this state needs alternative societies, building it from the bottom up. These require a changed public consciousness which again might flourish from experiencing the workings of alternative societies, whose experiments get the backing of the state. However, evidence exists that such processes of mutual reinforcement have worked in places such as Preston. Occasionally, it remains a bit unclear why one alternative society pops up exactly where it does: why is the Preston case presented in chapter five on the democratic economy but the similar case of Barcelona in chapter one on economic alternatives?

However, what occasionally looks like a slightly convoluted struc-
ture is categorised neatly in extended and informative tables at the
end of each chapter. They prove useful, as do the commented fur-
ther-reading lists that follow.

Avoiding academic jargon, summarising theoretical perspec-
tives in a nutshell (there is e.g. a brilliant miniature sketch of
Marxist communism; 115-116), this study is easy to read. It can be
extremely useful for scholars interested in utopianism, social and
political theory, social movements, or alternative economics. It is
also helpful for political activists and practitioners looking for in-
spiration. The best way of working with it, I think, is employing it
as a quarry for information and reflection on experiments – skim-
ming through it, thinking about and comparing the many cases
presented, turning pages back and forward, using the detailed in-
dex as additional tool. At a time when the end of the world appears
to be much more plausible than the end of capitalism (an insight
which, paradoxically, makes us keep calm and carry on), Martell's
concrete utopian reminder is urgently needed: another world is not
only possible but its seeds are already sown.

Roland Sturm (2023), *'Erdrutschsiege': Wahlen und
Parteien in Großbritannien von Thatcher bis Johnson*,
Baden-Baden: Nomos, 156 pp., €39.00, ISBN 978-3-
7560-0461-4 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-7489-3955-9
(e-book).

Reviewed by Richard Stinshoff (Oldenburg)

As this slender volume reveals, Britain remains unique among all
other parliamentary democracies in Europe. With the exception of
2010, it has experienced single-party majority government and a
relatively stable competition between two parties, notwithstanding

considerable long-term demographic changes since the 1950s, which have resulted in an increasing growth of electoral volatility. This is not least a consequence of the distortive effects of the country's first-past-the-post voting system, as Roland Sturm explains in the introduction. A retired senior professor of comparative government at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, he has maintained a keen academic interest in the British Isles throughout his academic career. Here, he pursues the question why party competition in elections to parliament may sometimes result in 'landslide' victories, which he defines as a majority of 50 or more seats above the seats of all other parties combined.

The context for the single-party government pattern, Sturm suggests, is the essentially 'conservative' character of Britain's social fabric: although historically always driven by the most progressive manifestations of a capitalist economy, the country continues to be hobbled by hierarchical divisions of class, by endemic nationalism, and by scepticism towards supranational associations like the European Union.

Before this backdrop, the first section (chapters one and two) examines important electoral trends, most conspicuously long-term sociostructural change leading to the political dealignment of voters, the fragmentation of the party system with smaller parties gaining in influence, and the increasing impact of a media sector growing more intrusive than ever before.

There were, in fact, landslide election victories before 1979 (1945, 1955, 1959, 1966), but the focus of the book is on the elections since 1979, which are discussed in the second section (chapters three to 13): three landslides (1983, 1987, 2019) of altogether six Tory victories, one 'hung' parliament (2010) leading to a coalition government, and three Labour victories in a row, all of them landslides (1997, 2001, 2005). Individual analyses – between three and 12 pages in length – highlight important political continuities and changes evidenced by these 11 elections. The findings are supported by a wealth of data: for instance, comparative election results, voting behaviour by occupational class, party identification, salience and polarisation of political issues, key policy concepts, party image, support for prime ministers, and many more relevant aspects are visualised in a welter of tables and charts. These apposite so-

ciopolitical abstracts not only demonstrate the author's close familiarity with Britain's political system, but they also make the book a valuable resource for anyone seriously interested in contemporary British politics and political culture.

Chapters three to six convey a comprehensive round-up of the electoral rise and decline of Margaret Thatcher and her central objectives: deregulation, privatisation of nationalised industries, and breaking the power of trade unions. Initially only moderately popular, her military success in the conflict about the Falkland Islands snowballed her electoral support into a landslide in 1983: 'Thatcherism' as a distinctively individualist political model had displaced more than three decades of Keynesian post-war consensus politics. It even outlasted her forced resignation from office, when John Major managed to win the 1992 election, combining elements of Thatcherism with a measure of more social responsibility. After all, Sturm suggests that Thatcherite values had not been able to change the consensual groundswell of Britain's political culture entirely (51).

Chapters seven to nine aptly summarise the three landslide election victories of the Labour Party, which had morphed into New Labour: Tony Blair, leader of the Labour Party since 1994, had managed a complete organisational and ideological overhaul: the party was no longer the political arm of the trade unions mainly financed by them, and government policy no longer geared to providing more social equality, but rather equality of opportunity. Buzzwords like social justice, fairness, and personal responsibility were at the core of the Labour Party's programmatic rejuvenation. This and a distinctly pro-European attitude fuelled three landslides in a row, while the Conservative Party was struggling with Euroscepticism.

In a cogent synopsis chapters ten to 13 cover the elections of 2010, 2015, 2017, and the Tory landslide of 2019. Programmatic vagueness and the indecision of Gordon Brown, Blair's unpopular successor since 2007, led to a 'hung' parliament in 2010 and a coalition of the Conservatives with the Liberal Democrats. Unexpected by professional pollsters, the 2015 election resulted in a Tory majority of 12 seats and the strengthening of 'third' parties, Plaid Cymru in Wales, the SNP in Scotland, and UKIP in England. The Liberal Democrats were drastically reduced from 57 to eight

seats, after the referendum on introducing the alternative-vote system was lost and tuition fees were raised contrary to their promised abolition. Unable to resolve the controversy about Britain's membership in the European Union dividing his party, prime minister David Cameron resorted to a referendum, which resulted in a narrow majority for Brexit.

Both the 2017 and 2019 elections were dominated by the Brexit issue: Theresa May, who had taken over from Cameron, failed to secure a majority, but remained in office as prime minister due to the support of the Northern Irish unionist DUP. But May failed to get a majority in parliament to ratify the exit agreement she had negotiated with the EU. In comes Boris Johnson, again only with a mandate from the Conservative Party caucus. After unsuccessfully trying to bully parliament into accepting a modified exit agreement that he had cinched from the EU, Johnson managed to wiggle around the 2011 Fixed-Term Parliament Act and win a majority for an early election in December of 2019. With his slogan "get Brexit done" he garnered a landslide Tory victory.

The third section (chapter 14) persuasively evaluates the findings: on the basis of the first-past-the-post majority voting system in single member constituencies, a system that an overwhelming majority of the electorate refuses to change, the Tory/Labour duopoly has continuously alternated in government. But landslide election victories are not a necessary consequence. Given an environment of growing dealignment and realignment, they are possible, though, whenever a government in office fails to achieve its objectives falling short of voters' expectations *and* the opposition offers credible alternatives. Thus, contested economic and sociopolitical issues have increasingly come to intensify party competition and dominate electoral behaviour. This growing tendency towards issue voting is underpinned by a fraying party system at the constituency level. Since the 1970s, smaller parties have challenged the traditional duopoly: the SNP in Scotland, Plaid Cymru in Wales, in England the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, and temporarily UKIP (1993-2016) or the Brexit Party (in 2019). Moreover, landslides are fostered by personal strengths and weaknesses of politicians relentlessly exposed by an ever-more aggressive media sector, both traditional (newspapers, TV) and, more recently, social

media. Thus, landslides have tended to occur more often since 1997.

Altogether these developments reflect profound changes among the electorate towards a more fluid plurality of competing interests depending on education and occupational position, which has led to much less predictable voting behaviour and an eventual increase of hitherto grossly underrepresented female, BAME, and LGBTQ members of parliament.

All in all, this book stands out as a brief, but compelling introduction into the political history of Britain since 1979 through the lens of psephology and its results. As such, it makes excellent reading for students of British society and culture.