

**Book Review: Harrison, Peter, *The Freedom of Things: An Ethnology of Control*. New Jersey: TSI Press. 2017. ISBN: 978-0-9832982-1-2 (Paperback). 306 Pages. \$24.99.**

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I took up Peter Harrison's *The Freedom of Things* with great interest and appetite. Although, I should confess from the start that I did so for reasons having more to do with its author than its subject. Harrison was one of the co-authors of the pseudonymously written underground firebrand *Nihilist Communism: A Critique of Optimism in the Far Left*.<sup>2</sup> That book, which had circulated throughout radical circles for years before its 2009 republication, offered a critique of the radical left from a much farther left and anarchist point of view, albeit an anarchism that distinguished itself from other anarchism in at least two defining ways: First *Nihilist Communism* was written by authors who clearly read and understood Marx and Marxism with impressive depth and appreciation. This was already unlike most of what could be found in the anarchist milieu of its time, which was content to reject Marxism without understanding it. Second, *Nihilist Communism* did not propose anything like an anarchist alternative—or any viable alternative for that matter—

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<sup>2</sup> Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism: A Critique of Optimism in the Far Left* (San Francisco: Ardent Press, 2009).

to the left that it condemned. *Nihilist Communism* was a rich critical, theoretical, and poetic demolition derby on the limits of anti-capitalist radicalism as seen from the inside of that radicalism. Having thus engaged Harrison's ideas with attention before, I was eager to read his new major work, now being offered under his own name.

Let me begin with the conclusion that *The Freedom of Things* is worth every effort and is a richly rewarding text. Readers who are interested in the further development of a radical critique of Marxism's limitations, as could be found in Guy Debord or Pierre Clastres in a preceding generation, will find much here to enrich them. Moreover, readers interested in theory and philosophy more broadly will find in Harrison an astute reader who offers several unique insights along the way. These merits alone warrant attention.

The premise of Harrison's book, outlined in the preface, is that Marxism has taken our social and political imaginations hostage, so that even those of us who haven't studied Marx are nonetheless unable to think beyond his "widely accepted articulation of who we are and what we do in a capitalist society."<sup>3</sup> Harrison wants us to "engage with our own unconscious or subconscious Marxist worldview" because to fail to do this is "to fail to begin an abandonment of Marxism."<sup>4</sup> Clearly then, Harrison holds that we should abandon Marxism in order to begin to think anew about concepts of community, historical change, and social life, which Marxism does not allow us to take seriously within the purview of its institutionalized thought.

Ultimately, Harrison's major source for non-Marxian concepts of life and human community is found in the experience and example of indigenous ways of living, where very different concepts of community can be found in both idea and practice, for one example, in the indigenous lifeways of Australia. With the help of Willie Brim (Harrison's co-author in Chapters 9 and 10), Harrison revises their previously published investigations into indigenous ways of life that are radically different than Western ways of living, and which enact rival visions of human relationality.<sup>5</sup> In the example of indigenous lifeways, Harrison finds different perspectives, formats for living, concepts of civilization, and practices of knowledge. Essentially, if Marxists would look away from (first) industrial and (later) postindustrial capitalist

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Freedom of Things: An Ethnology of Control: How the Structure of Dependence in Modern Society Has Misinformed the Western Mind* (New Jersey: TSI Press, 2017), XIII.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

societies, they might find better ideas than those that are ontologically and epistemologically worked out within the limited frameworks of Western Marxism.

A fascinating and important thesis. However, Harrison does not appear sufficiently aware of the fact that he works all of his own arguments out almost entirely within the limits of the Western Marxism he condemns. One almost wants to restate Bakunin's famous quips against Marx, that while Marx condemned philosophy (i.e., in *The German Ideology* and *Theses on Feuerbach*), he appeared to Bakunin as the consummate philosopher! Likewise, while Harrison's targets are all those (mostly unnamed) who are subconsciously smitten with Marx, he is himself—from start to finish—fully embarked upon a book-length deployment of the theories of Georges Bataille and other Western post-Marxist philosophers. Indeed, Harrison's analysis in *The Freedom of Things* is reliant upon and always-tethered to a largely-French cast of bourgeois intellectuals, and not for the purposes of surpassing their insights, but with the aim of working them out within a milieu that would be entirely welcome at most any professional academic conference of heterodox Marxists. Harrison's constant engagement with Foucault, Baudrillard, Bataille, Bourdieu, critical theory, and contemporary continental philosophy ties his work and thinking to these trajectories. This point is not intended as a criticism. It's more of a curiosity about why Harrison insists that he is operating in a different universe than other critical academic, unorthodox Marxist, and variously creative radical theorists. His work belongs wholly to that universe, and his arguments would be all the more sharpened if he would both recognize and own this fact, rather than set himself down on the false premise of abandoning Marxism, which he proceeds to undermine on every subsequent page.

But more worthwhile than this striking curiosity is the impressive substance of Harrison's book. Nowhere is this more clearly encountered than in his writing on the subject of community.

Harrison highlights how the concept of community, so often taken for granted, has always been problematic. He does a good job of thinking through different communal forms of life, past and present, including tribal and indigenous forms. One of the most common methods of self-defense utilized by tribal communities attempting to preserve their form of life from a surrounding capitalist lifeworld is to stay *disconnected* from that world of chaotic connection. Indigenous and tribal forms of life often understand the survival of their communal forms as contingent

upon staying outside of and autonomous from the surrounding world.<sup>6</sup> This would be something like *disconnection as a strategy of community*.

But when we think of community, we tend to think of one of two things: First is the idea of a “primitive” or natural community, something from the past that would have been like an original community of some kind. Second is the idea of a future community in a changed society that is like a kind of ideal destination, a form of being-together somewhere on the horizon. But Harrison expertly problematizes both ideas of community. He observes: “The notion of community is usually associated with something ‘good’ and predicated on the acceptance that if humans are not actually social animals, then circumstances have forced sociality upon us so that we must learn to live socially in the best way possible.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, we are either destined to form communities by a drive at the level of human biology, or we are driven to form communities because they are necessary formations in the context of our societies. In any case, humans tend toward community of one kind or another. But often, what we call community is not at all what we want to think of as a *real* or *ideal* community:

It seems that our a priori certainty of community tends to fall apart under an a posteriori scrutiny: the neighbourhood community turns out to fail to be a proper community because it is full of strangers, just as the medieval village community turns out to be a mass of competing and exploiting interests.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that writers from Marx to Jacques Camatte have distinguished between false community and real community time and again.<sup>9</sup> Harrison argues that so-called real community has never actually existed, and that our faith in community has to be regarded as one of the fundamental pathologies of Western political thought. So fundamental is this pathological faith that we don’t even know how to think without the concept of community. But sometimes community is more a figment of imagination than a really existing thing. Consider the examples of the so-called community of office workers, white supremacists, cops, students, women, Black people, or communists. Close inspection shows

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>9</sup> See Marx’s *Grundrisse* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1973) and Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community*, translated by David Brown (New York: Prism Key Press, 2011).

*atomization* where there is supposed to be *collectivity*, a thin or superficial common sensibility that is often held together by nothing more than affiliation or self-interest amongst strangers without real affection. This cynical view may well be accurate.

However, do we not still need a concept of community? I think we have to answer “yes.” This “yes” does not mean that we should valorize any one community, or any imaginable or utopian communal being. Also, this does not mean that we need an ideal-typical notion of “community,” only that we are in search of other possibilities for human solidarity mobilized by other logics than those of the capitalist lifeworld.

Harrison invokes Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of *doxa*, which refers to thoughts and beliefs that keep a group of people together. *Doxa* is, essentially, the content of a common or shared lifeway which is transmitted by a group of people across generations and keeps that group together internally by way of shared practices, customs, language, and belief. But *doxa* also functions as an exclusionary force, because those who question it, who reject its recommended behaviors, are outsiders to the community as such. A collective sensibility that congeals and transmits through *doxa* may pull people together, but it also keeps others out. And because *doxa* is not one person’s sole creation and predates each community’s existence in history, much of the community that each of us has experienced is accidental. In other words, our experiences with community inculcate a *doxa* that tells us how to think about community in general.

Harrison points out that the concept “of community continues to exert an insistence upon us, whether it is through remorse for the loss of community, even though... we stand amid a plethora of communities. However community is conjured, it always seems to contain an essentially political dynamic.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, each person is variously in and participant to multiple communities, but usually, these communities are like accidents of birth. One is born here or there, not by any choice of their own, and finds oneself in a Black community or Jewish community or Francophone community or the community of women or of people with disabilities, and all of these communities are there from the start, and we just find ourselves *in them*. Although they *may* be intentional or political communities, they are not necessarily intentional or political for those of us who simply turn up and grown up within them.

Still, we are accustomed to thinking of community in relation to political power, struggle, or liberation. And indeed, this is one of the

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<sup>10</sup> Harrison, *The Freedom of Things*, 116.

pervasive influences of Marxism, which Harrison thinks we should finally and fully confront, criticize, and leave behind: “Although there is no prospect of the ideas of community and communism disappearing from our daily and intellectual discourse, it seems appropriate nevertheless to indicate that the time might have come to abandon these concepts.”<sup>11</sup> Harrison argues that our connection to the concept of community in political theory and everyday life has long led us astray by concealing an ideological way of thinking about ourselves, the world, and politics that we seem incapable of even noticing because of the total integration of this thinking into our common sense. Harrison argues that we have long been obsessed with the idea of a community that does not and cannot exist.

In a peculiar twist, however, Harrison turns to work as being a better focus than community. As he puts it:

We need to work: the anticipation of work anticipates meaning; work enables us; it defines us. Why else have I written this book? Work gives us purpose and justifies our existence. The joke is on us. If anything, this is our community, this is our communism. Impossible though it may be, it is time to stop talking of community.<sup>12</sup>

There are many problems with this particular conclusion, and this is where we should make an intervention and, possibly, a departure.

Firstly, why would work anticipate meaning? To connect work with meaning, one has to presuppose at least two problematic premises: (1) that work is good for one’s self and for others, and (2) that people are doing the work they would like to do. Harrison makes his point by invoking the reasons he wrote his book. But even his work—which was surely not done for money, and which is not like the work of most people (few of whom are authors)—necessarily presupposes readers who will take it up. The purpose of his work, which according to him justifies his existence, is (in this example) a published book that is meant for other readers than him. That is why it is published and why there is more than one copy. Like any author on a similar terrain, Harrison hopes to participate in the debates that interest him, a participation that is largely dependent upon the attention of other people. A published book presupposes a hopeful community of readers, a community that may

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

have nothing else in common beyond the fact that they have read the same text. The thoughtful attention of other people is what every book seeks. In this way, the work hopefully presupposes a particular community. So, shifting the focus from community to work neither transcends nor leaves behind the question of community.

Far more importantly, however, precious few can actually work as authors of books. We live in societies where our work is usually *not* what gives our lives their purpose or justification. Sometimes, work is what brings us to the brink of anxiety, despair, or suicide, and very often, it would be healthier to do something else than the work that we must do in order to live in our societies. Many people have written well on this subject, including Franco Berardi, Harry Cleaver, Peter Fleming, and Kathi Weeks.<sup>13</sup> Harrison's conclusion on work generating a life of purpose is all but obliterated by the fact that, for most people on planet Earth, work is exactly the opposite of how Harrison describes it. Work in capitalist societies defines us against the purposes we might like to make of a human life. Paul Lafargue understood this basic point brilliantly well over a century ago in *The Right to be Lazy*.<sup>14</sup> Work may colonize our existence, and usually, it takes other things than work to justify a life. For most people in the world today, work only makes sense within a community of exchange relations, to the extent that work is done for and governed by money in capitalist societies.

As mentioned above, Harrison's book concludes with a discussion of indigeneity and indigenous community. He is deeply critical of capitalism, yet wants to advance lines of inquiry that reject Marxian assumptions about work and community. He finds a way to do this in the example of indigenous community: "It is the consideration of the incommensurability of different ways of living that provides us with some of the theoretical tools to critically evaluate our way of life and, for those who still live a different life, the threat to their way of life... The indigenous way of living and the Western way of living are not two sets of discrete knowledge interacting uneasily at a complicated cultural

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<sup>13</sup> See Franco "Bifo" Berardi's *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (2009), Harry Cleaver's *Rupturing the Dialectic: The Struggle against Work, Money, and Financialization* (2017), Peter Fleming's *Resisting Work: The Corporatization of Life and Its Discontents* (2014), and Kathi Weeks's *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (2011). Also useful here is the classic anarchist essay by Bob Black "The Abolition of Work" which was recently republished in a volume with other important antiwork essays by Black entitled *Instead of Work* (2016). There are many other good criticisms of work going back at least to Paul Lafargue's 1883 *The Right to be Lazy*.

<sup>14</sup> See Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy* (Oakland: AK Press, 2011).

crossing point. They are radically different ways of occupying the land and relating to others.”<sup>15</sup> In the end, then, Harrison does not stop talking about community at all. He talks about a radically different form of life, of being-together, of community. And also in *The Freedom of Things*—where everything belongs to everyone, and to no one in particular in the indigenous mode of life—there is even an enduring communism, at least to the extent that the communism of things is understood as the freedom of things from capitalist exchange relations.

To those born into indigenous lifeworlds, whether in Chiapas, Mexico, the Amazonia, or in Canada, Australia, or elsewhere, their *doxa* is also (for them) an accident of birth, and while Harrison does not romanticize any indigenous way of life, he does identify indigeneity as a rival model of life to that accepted in Western Marxism and left-wing politics. But even if we agree that we should pursue radically different ways of living with and relating to others, we cannot make indigenous community into a community of choice, whether we live in Australia or anywhere else. You cannot simply declare yourself a member of whatever community you like.

With the famous refrain of “Todos somos Marcos,” and with the international encuentros that were organized after their rebellion, the Mexican Zapatistas did make an invitation to anyone disaffected anywhere on Earth to join them.<sup>16</sup> However, “becoming-indigenous” has not proven to be a real strategy for escaping capitalism for anyone, including even for indigenous peoples themselves. Indeed, if we take the movements of indigenous people seriously, from the Zapatistas to Idle No More, then we can’t uphold the romantic mythology that these communities exist outside of the world of capital. It is the world of capital that endangers them, and they know it. Any idea of indigenous community as a destination or escape functions as just another political idealization, complete with its own romanticization and ideology, including even that of the Marxist dream for another world on Earth.

People who seek to imagine and hopefully create a radically different way of relating to others cannot be expected to strive for indigeneity, because such a form of life is itself contingent upon historical acculturations, inherited intergenerational valuations, and inculcations that are neither present nor pervasive around the world today. I would argue that it makes more sense to pursue rival logics of relationality—to

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *The Freedom of Things*, 249.

<sup>16</sup> I have written about the Mexican Zapatistas at great length in my book, *Unbounded Publics: Transgressive Public Spheres, Zapatismo, and Political Theory* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield/Lexington Books, 2008).



the extent we are able to do that—within the lifeworlds that we actually inhabit, taking the raw materials of our lived experience as a starting position, because that is really where we find ourselves.

Notwithstanding these critical appraisals, I commend Harrison and his book, which has far more in it that is worthy of your attention than the parts I have engaged here. It is a bit of a sprawling book too, which gave me the sense that it contained (and that its author wanted to express) a whole lot of thinking that accumulated on a wide range of subjects and sources for a long time. It is not that the book is too long (it is not), but that given its ambitious theoretical and topical range, I could not help but wonder if it would have been more effective as two or three books instead of one. Although *The Freedom of Things* makes no real break with the theoretical sources it relies on, it is a book that should be read and read carefully.

I highly recommend Harrison's *The Freedom of Things* to social and political theorists (perhaps especially to those interested in Georges Bataille), Marxists, anarchists, and activists. Harrison's book should be recommended to anyone with the will and interest to think deeply about our current situation in the world today, and about how we understand ourselves within it, in relation to what is possible and desirable.