intellectual history, and intellectual history's conspicuously indeterminate relation to the production of philosophical ideas. The boundaries have always been a bit porous for Jay, who began his career as one of the first historians of the Frankfurt School's critical theory; the exposition of critical theory, and its attendant if sometimes opaque tendency towards 'emancipation', have shaped the parameters of his intellectual historical project. Sometimes this involves seeing the ways in which such tendencies are blocked. After all, much like Jay, the current generation of Frankfurt School critical theorists are ensnared in a stalemate over intruding Eurocentrism, relativism and context, arguing that such forces undermine the capacity for social criticism in the first place. In writing a book that attempts to reconcile and deal with the same set of problems, Jay shows that one of intellectual history's most formidable if implicit goals has been to save philosophy from itself, and to set it back on its path.

Mimi Howard

Back from the future

Keti Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (Minneapolis: eflux/University of Minnesota Press, 2020). 336pp., £22.99 pb., 978 1 51790 955 0

Spinoza's dictum that we ought to understand first – not ridicule, not cry, nor detest – is ignored surprisingly often, even in philosophical scholarship, when it comes to revising and appropriating intellectual labour from the context of 'real existing socialism' (RES). Such dismissal is usually not based on any kind of engagement with the contents and contexts of that project and thus ironically affirms what it pretends to criticise: since the intellectual labour and culture of RES, so it is said, were completely dependent on ideological pregivens, it may not be taken seriously, except perhaps in its early phases or dissident aspects. This view, apart from being historically inadequate, begs the question of its own ideological dependence and amounts to a taboo, cutting off past experiences, achievements and failures, debates and struggles from contemporary appropriation, which could help us to understand our own times better. In fact, the communist heritage of RES continues to pose a challenge not only in 'post-communist' contexts but globally.

Keti Chukhrov's recent book *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* can be best evaluated as an intervention in contemporary theoretical and cultural debates. It presents a perspective that uses cultural production in 'historical socialism', as she calls it, as a model to rethink the connection of political economy and cultural production in terms of alternatives to contemporary art and critical theory.

In its own way, the book thus relates to the question of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, Jameson et al.) without discussing it explicitly. Chukhrov does not refute that analysis of the internalisation of neoliberal capitalism, but from the outset widens its scope, historically and methodologically. If capitalist mechanisms of extraction have infiltrated our minds so pervasively that they manage our desires, what about desire in socialism? Against the naturalisation of libidinal economy (an argument often used to explain the demise of RES), she argues that in a different society with a different political economy the emergence, meaning and expression of desire changes along with other 'ontics'. In this sense, cultural production in RES seems somewhat futuristic today.

This bold claim probably encompasses more than a single book can account for. Accordingly, Chukhrov aims at giving hints in this direction rather than trying to prove the hypothesis. With its four loosely interwoven parts – Political Economy, Sexuality, Aesthetics, and Philosophic Ontics of Communism – the book is best read as partly exploring and partly experimenting with communist thought embodied in late Soviet works, ranging from philosophical to artistic projects, to this end. What Chukhrov aims to unveil in these works is the actual experience of being part of a project towards the common good, reflecting the cultural implications of a non-surplus-value-economy on different levels.

The book allows us to get to grips, first, with the continuing Cold War schema in the 'West' that presents its own norms as the only possible universals, with all its stereotypes, contradictions and projections; and, second, with the capitalist unconscious of post-'68 'critical theories' and art. As Chukhrov argues, the dismissal of intellectual labour in RES, even within openly anti-capitalist projects since the 1960s, as in 'Western (post-)Marxism' and later poststructuralist continuations, leads to an impasse when attempting to think about the overcoming of capitalist conditions. Chukhrov argues that most of these projects do not really engage in changing what they criticise; they reflect rather than overturn capitalist social relations. In such projects, the desire to overcome capitalism is often not as strong as the desire to unbound desire. But as Spinoza said, 'a passion can only be overcome by a stronger passion'. The rebuke of socialist culture in terms of its dependence on historical societal constraints and prescriptive ideology is thus turned around by Chukhrov: what kind of ideology and which concrete socio-economic constellations shape the cultural production and mental labour of 'western modern-

ity', a modernity we 'capitalist subjects', somehow share, and which after 1989 presented itself as the only realistic socio-economic and political formation (an ideology presented as non-ideology, parading as pure neutrality)?

When the western left, in particular artists and critical theorists (in the broad sense), dismissed socialist culture in RES, Chukhrov argues, it followed assumptions (in particular about hedonism) formed by a capitalist reality, or implicitly hypostatised them. Unable to integrate the experience of what it actually means to develop communism and socialist culture under the abhorred conditions of RES, there was only one choice – the apology of the classic practice of avant-garde art: subversion.

For Chukhrov, this was (and still is) a necessary effect of the inability to actually have the slightest chance of changing societal conditions. But this has a psychological twist: the inability to think alternative realities to capitalism leads to a fascination *with* it and hence to its disavowed affirmation. In this way, the complicity of those forms of culture and reflection which are meant to criticise capitalism's practices in fact reproduce it theoretically, producing either hopelessness or auto-aggression.

Chukhrov follows here a basic idea of Soviet thinker Mikhail Lifshitz, who in discussions of the philosophy of avant-garde and modernist art called this predicament the 'herostratus complex' of (post-)modern culture, and already pointed to its inherent anti-enlightenment stance, with auto-aggressive tendencies and a zeal for destruction of humanist ideals. Chukhrov takes up Lifshitz's critique and concretises it with respect to contemporary art and theory in particular. Since subversion mostly remains on the level of negation, the actual question then becomes how 'the negation of negation' turns out.

This topic is particularly present in the first part of the book, where Chukhrov engages in an explicit critique of thinkers including Butler, Castoriadis, Deleuze, Guattari and Lyotard, among others. By trying to ground political action in subversion, they follow the modernist strategy in art: only a 'break' with, or a going 'beyond' of, all kinds of cultural and symbolic forms makes an overcoming of the existing modes of perception and social ontology conceivable. Any kind of generality or universal must be attacked. Nowadays, it may be obvious that this kind of apology of counterculture did not lead much further. For Chukhrov, it amounts to fighting alienation with more alienation.

After a transitional chapter on 'the poor object of the Soviet Commonwealth', drawing on Groys, Kolganov and artists of Moscow conceptualism, the last – very interesting – chapter of the first part on 'Political Economy' is dedicated to an analysis of Soviet films of the 1960s and 1970s. For Chukhrov, late Soviet fdrive is, from today's viewpoint, a 'non-cinema', not only because it did not work in terms of a capitalist cultural industry, but because of the framework intricately connecting the individual to their social conditions. Although western observers might assume that after the thaw period, socialist realism in film was abandoned (think, for example, of Tarkovsky), it in fact lived on. With discussions of selected works by filmmakers such as Larisa Shepitko and Vadim Zobin, Chukhrov illustrates a kind of socialist subjectivity present in these works, where protagonists had to face the tedious realities of everyday life under post-Stalinist socialist conditions – leading to a stance of resignation, while at the same time holding tight to the communist ideal. In this context, Chukhrov argues that desire changed form: 'in a constant conflict between individual desire and the necessity of the commons.' Thus Chukhrov argues that an inherent problem of RES was 'too much socialism', in which developing a socialist subjectivity was hindered by the actual contradictions of relations and forces of production, on the one hand, and on those between ideology, not least as associated with the commodity fetish, and the plain reality of use-value production, on the other. Nevertheless, Chukhrov reminds us that these 'realia' show what it means to practice the good, since they show that at the centre of these films is the urge to de-alienate.

This question is also discussed in the book's next section, 'Sexuality', which delves into Soviet theatre and literature, especially the work of Andrei Platonov, in comparison to the works of, for example, Pier Paolo Pasolini, while also referring to Alexandra Kollontai and György Lukács. The topic of desire is presented in the framework of the critique of psychoanalysis in Voloshinov and Vygotsky and again draws on the concept of 'anti-libidinal self-resignation'. One of Chukhrov's more controversial claims is her insistence on defending a conception of resignation, which does not refer to a death drive or self-annihilation, but relates to care for the commons.

The third part of the book on 'Aesthetics' mainly discusses the work of Lifshitz, a friend of both Platonov and Lukács. Chukhrov defends the realist conception of aesthetics in Lifshitz, emphasising its universal (non-prescriptive) normative claims. Lifshitz envisioned a Grand Aesthetic analogous to Spinoza's *Ethics* and defended a classicist conception of art because, as Chukhrov puts it poignantly, classical art actually is the most communist. In the same vein she discusses 'The Philosophic Ontics of Communism' in relation to the philosophy of Evald Ilyenkov. In siding with the Soviet Hegelo-Marxism of Lifshitz and Ilyenkov, understood as a form of 'cosmological humanism', it becomes clear why Chukhrov emphasises concepts like the universal (*vseobshee*), metanoia, human resignation, the ideal, the classical and realism as indispensable for rethinking critical theory. It is only through the transformation that these concepts underwent in the Soviet context (by including them in a truly materialist dialectic) that the significance of their absence or rather abolishment in the Western context becomes conceivable.

It is at this point that the possible limits of her argument about political economy and its influence on cultural production, social ontology and ontics become apparent. If capitalist conditions led to an abolishment of basic ideals of emancipation in capitalist contexts from the 1960s onwards because of the inability to overcome capitalism, how can the emergence of these ideals be explained? As is well-known, the communist ideal from Marx to Lenin and Ilyenkov is in explicit continuity with emancipatory projects which emerged in quite different conditions (like the French Enlightenment or German Idealism). Furthermore, criticising the synthesis of (post-)modernism and critical theory, Chukhrov often subsumes various thinkers under one category (e.g. 'Western Marxism'). But the incompatibility in terms of, say, a fascination with libidinal economy or even an internalised lust for capitalist liquidations can hardly be equated to the critique of the historical realities of RES for meeting neither the standards of Marxist insights nor the horizon of trans-capitalist prospects.

Chukhrov concedes from the start that she uses her claim about the frame of political economy as a 'logical tool' rather than for historical analysis. This defines the limits of her argument in historical terms. Since there is no consistent genealogical account, the argument is purely structural and works mainly as a foil for the present. Since the contrast does not work well before World War II, the book concentrates on the situation from the 1960s onwards, since by then the geopolitical stalemate seemed cemented and the forms of socialist culture concretised.

But another question remains: if Soviet culture was somehow *practically* in continuity with the Enlightenment project in terms of *Bildung* (also the word in Russian), while the West *practically* and (in the seemingly most advanced forms of art and critical theories) *theoretically* gave up on basic conceptual premises of emancipation and liberation, wouldn't it be more obvious to concentrate more concretely on what Lifshitz called 'the capitalist training of the people', that is, on the effects and possible real life contradictions in the concepts of education and psychology? To be sure, Chukhrov gives hints in this direction, as for example in her discussion of Vygotsky and the activity theory of Leontiev and in particular Ilyenkov's emphasis on educational and psychological conceptions from a Marxist point of view, which he developed further in engaging with the once famous Zagorsk school for blind-deaf children.

In a daring project like this, open questions remain. Chukhrov seems to oscillate between an explorative presentation and experimental provocations. The products of intellectual labour she focuses on, which reflect the conditions of life in socialism and embody the spirit of the common cause, can of course not be taken *pars pro toto* for conditions under RES. And how far did these conditions already represent actually dealienated conditions? Her suggestions, when taken generally, sometimes remain at the level of a provocative travesty of the western story and may be read as a parody of today's ideology. If the Soviet Union allegedly was not part of a 'common modernity' but was the 'absolute other' of modernity's legitimate representatives, it may follow that we can use its (counter-) image in a productive way. However, it is a merit of the ways in which Chukhrov's book tries to productively relate different levels that it goes beyond such mirroring. In this respect, Chukhrov insists, it needs to be asked why the Soviet experience was not taken into account in critical theories of the West? Why did that historical 'experiment' not become common knowledge, improving democratic conditions in the East and the West after 1989?

Her basic assumption throughout is that a society which abolished private property and surplus value along with the libidinal economy did actually exist. We therefore have to concede that despite all its failures and shortcomings, RES has to be seen as the most advanced societal experiment to date.

The book is engaged not so much with the past as with the present and the future: it is a counterhegemonic undertaking reclaiming something like radical leftism from the false appropriations of anti-communist postmodernisms. It provides an insightful, estranging perspective that shifts the settled horizon beyond its given normality in order to appropriate experiences from an at least partly more 'advanced' societal formation. In this way, a new panorama opens up in whose light a whole set of realities appear that have been hidden from view. Indeed, this ideology-critical shift is the most important move that *Practicing the Good* practices: a debunking heuristic tool. To reject implicit Cold War settings also *within* Western (post-)Marxism, Chukhrov makes clear that dialectical universalism is a more promising way to think towards a communist ideal on a global level. Since her book delivers a basic deconstruction of the capitalist re-conditioning of critical theories along the lines of the postmodern, it is to be counted as one of the most important publications for leftist self-criticism in recent years.

Sascha Freyberg and Lukas Meisner

Theoretical practices

Natalia Romé, *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time* (Lanham, Boulder, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). 206pp., £81.00 hb., 978 1 53814 764 1

Although Natalia Romé's book *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time* comes in the disguise of humble secondary literature, it is not just an account of Althusser's theory of temporality but also makes a claim for the power of theory in political struggle. She insists on the precise relation of theory and practice as central to Marxism. The book reengages with Althusser's most important question: how does theory accomplish the differentiation and demarcation that unites it with practice? In attempting to find an answer, Romé's book deals with what Warren Montag calls in his introduction Althusser's 'impatient' concepts: concepts, suddenly appearing only to disappear again, concepts that are used as vehicles to get him through certain kinds of terrain. On this ground, Romé presents a detailed account of Althusserian theory, that flourishes in close readings of the Althusserian classics, as well as providing an account of texts that were only recently edited.

Romé introduces us into her reading of Althusser through the political experience of her home country of Argentina. This project is connected with a certain theoretical tradition of reading Althusser, but it also uncovers a field of political struggle, first against the dictatorship and then against the 'democratic' variation