

ideas in any real sense. How a naïve realist position might or might not fit with Bourdieu's ideas is not addressed.

The life history chapters are intrinsically fascinating but they illustrate the add-on use of concepts like *habitus* where the term itself does little to advance our understanding of the lives recounted. An extreme example of this is provided by Tchouikina who analyses Soviet dissidents' activities within a framework of professional career development. This kind of sociological imperative leads her to describe the imprisonment of dissidents as a 'career break'.

Anna Rotkirch's chapter on Russian working-class autobiographies provides a good example of the kind of thickly textured accounts that only life histories can provide. Despite the failure to deliver its theoretical promise this volume will be of interest to historians, sociologists and life history researchers.

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COPULATORY OBSESSION AND MISSIONARY ZEAL

The Sexual Life of Catherine M. Catherine Millet, 2003. London: Corgi. ISBN 0-552-77172-4 (paper), 223 pp. £6.99.

Some authors choose to narrate their lives on the basis of the political campaigns they have been involved with, seeking to relate private troubles to public issues, while others move to the centre of their stories career, family, or sporting and leisure interests. Catherine Millet takes a somewhat different route: while her autobiography has been interpreted as a work of 'libertine philosophy', one would do it a disservice without saying that it was also, or at least as much as, a chronicle of her life as a voyage of fucking. The book is not about relationships, and nor is it about eroticism. To describe it simply in terms of sex, moreover, would be do injustice to the mechanical, impersonal, visceral physicality that characteristically marked her encounters with individuals, with couples, with small groups, and with numerous 'partners' in park benches, car parks, sports stadia, and at swingers' parties. This is a book that insists we take *bodily* relationships and identities into account when analysing a life.

The Sexual Life of Catherine M is an autobiography that recounts the seemingly countless acts of sex Catherine Millet engaged in on the basis of their relationship to 'numbers', 'space', 'confined space' and

'details'. Sex is both absolutely central to the narrative and also serves at times to erase the author's cognitive identity in an inverted Cartesianism in which the flesh becomes everything. Sexual acts were Catherine M's chosen mode of being and communicating. They facilitated an erasure of the self at times and in places that were chosen, or consented to, by Millet – this is not a tale that can be apprehended sympathetically through the interpretive frame of subjection or oppression. How to narrate such a tale poses an obvious challenge – words are so often treated as disconnected from the flesh by the academic who lives predominantly in a world of Foucauldian discourse, textual analysis or cultural codes – but it is perhaps no surprise that this Parisian art critic has no need to draw on Giddensian notions of 'pure relationships' (based on talk and 'dialogical democracy') or on traditional feminist notions of male domination or patriarchy. Instead, Bataille serves as a more friendly resource, 'a ready-made philosophy' to help describe the difficulty at orgies of distinguishing between individual bodies, the sweat and sperm 'that dried along the tops of my thighs, sometimes on my breasts or my face, even in my hair', and 'the pleasure of sinking into a sea of undifferentiated flesh' (pp. 52, 24, 99).

It may be the fate of theory to be unable to capture a life in all its complexity, and Millet reflects that her 'copulatory obsession' and 'missionary zeal' derived more from a youthful playfulness than any libertine philosophy (p. 52). If the body outruns and exceeds words and theories, however, it does not necessarily make these redundant. Bataille apart, Millet also reflects on how she 'grew into a rather passive woman, having no goal other than those that other people set for me', that at orgies she was placed into, and extricated from, circuits of sexual organs by her male partners, and that it was not until she was 35 years old that she realized that her 'own pleasure could be the aim of a sexual encounter' (pp. 32, 200). There are glimpses of other worlds, other relationships going on in this book that we want to know more about. Perhaps there is after all a performativity on show in this book that has been captured, if only in small part, by theories of the 'heterosexual matrix'. Nevertheless, Catherine Millet insists that she exercised 'complete free will' in her 'chosen sexual life' (p. 63).

Sociology has made us aware of the vocations of politician and scientist. Here is a book that shows us how it is possible to embark upon a more immanently *physical* vocation. In order to understand the social contexts in which such a vocation can be chosen and pursued we have to look elsewhere, yet this does not downgrade the significance of Millet's autobiography. It stands as a story which

illustrates how it is possible to foreground the flesh in a manner, which does not make it a simple appendage of some theory or other.

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ANTI-SYSTEM, ANTI-TOTALITY

Fragments: conversations with François L'Yvonnet. Jean Baudrillard, 2004. London: Routledge; ISBN 0-4153-0548-9, 119 pp., £13.99.

From the mid-1960s through to the present day, Jean Baudrillard has touched on just about everything to do with contemporary social theory and philosophy. He looks for meaning everywhere, bringing his perverse wit to bear on an array of subjects. Amongst contemporary culture and thought that he has already made his trademark (virtual reality, television, capitalism) he has addressed the more unusual and specific topics such as Holocaust revisionism, children's rights, Aids, geneticism, BSE, the Gulf War and the Rushdie fatwa. His work today cuts across many genres, so that there is something for everyone. However, it is only during the last decade or so that Baudrillard's work has appeared in English translation; the timing could not have been better given the virtual take that now colours our society. *Fragments* is an excellent starting point for anyone who is trying to get to grips with Baudrillard for the first time.

Fragments presents a set of intriguing interviews with Baudrillard, whose work today occupies centre stage in the analysis of consumerism, terrorism, and contemporary culture. In these discussions with François L'Yvonnet, Baudrillard reveals for the first time in detail the thinkers who have been the dominant influences on his work during his career. Instead of examining his work as a project of intellectual accumulation, he challenges all the major interpretations of his work by suggesting he has always adopted an anti-system, anti-totality strategy. Even globalization is accompanied in his view by a Western culture that itself is no longer a well-founded, confident universalism. The system of Western culture is subject to radical uncertainty and chaos. Such fractalization can be opposed, in Baudrillard's view, by letting the thesis and the antithesis live, and by not trying to move to a goal in the synthesis.

In his fractured take on the world, Baudrillard discusses his life's work in relationship to his contemporaries – Bataille, Barthes, Lyotard and Deleuze, to name a few – and explores his position as an outsider in the field of French philosophy. Since the world has