

**Paolo Virno.** *Deja Vu and the End of History*. Trans. David Broder. Verso Books 2015. 200 pp. \$108.00 CAD (Hardcover ISBN 9781781686119); \$15.95CAD (Paperback ISBN 9781781686126)

Virno's new book, originally printed in 1999 as *Il Ricordo del Presente*, has recently been translated by David Broder. Sixteen years later, the book still proves a deeply insightful, rigorous, and radical text for English-speaking readership. Virno has written his treatise on time in three parts: 'Déjà vu and the End of History', 'Temporality of Potential, Potentiality of Time', and 'Historical Materialism'. By using the evocative allegory of the *déjà vu*, he manages successfully to not only address the 'end of history', but also to problematize the conceptions surrounding it (Part 1), its inception as a phenomenon (Parts 1 and 2), and the reason for its persistence (Part 3). In order to do so, Virno draws on the works of St Augustine, Bergson, Nietzsche, Kant, and Aristotle throughout the book, and to a lesser extent he also references the works of Benjamin, Kojève, Heidegger, Marx, Mircea and de Martino. As one can imagine, Virno has written a complicated, albeit small book that takes the reader on multiple paths of understanding time and its implications.

From the outset the book takes the idea of *déjà vu* quite seriously. By using Bergson's writings on the topic, Virno notes that the phenomenon of *déjà vu* is 'an only apparent repetition, one that is entirely illusory' (7), where one experiences the belief that a new experience is something that has already been experienced (7). By using this evocative image, he then moves on to dismantle the experience in a phenomenological manner. He argues that *déjà vu* is a particular state of spectatorship, where one is made to observe the present happening, rather than it being lived; he makes it into a social problem: 'the state of mind correlated to the *déjà vu* is that typical of those set on *watching themselves live*' (8). This results in a suspension of history, where the past itself becomes saturated through the very 'memory of the present' that the *déjà vu* represents (10). This, in turn, leads to the establishment of a despotic 'now' of 'actuality', where present actions are seen almost as final ones, due to the experience of the future as 'closed' (9). Furthermore, the past becomes in Virno's argument a Bergsonian 'passé indéfini' (19), where it is the virtual as an opposite to the actual of the present 'now'. This creates an opposition between the virtual, or what Virno goes on to call potential, and the actual. In the first part of the book, Virno establishes the premise of his whole inquiry by brilliantly equating the experience of *déjà vu* to that of the condition of the end of history. Moreover, particularly worthy of reading is Virno's counterargument against Kojève's view of the end of history being a 'fait accompli' (34).

In the second part of the book, which is also the most considerable in size, Virno retraces his steps from the first chapter. Mostly, he focuses on a more detailed exploration of the past as an 'indefinite past', an abstract 'back then', and the place of potential as a concept. The temporal aspect of actuality and potential is perhaps the most radical contribution that Virno makes through this book. He not only opposes Aristotle through a thorough analysis of his account of actuality, but manages quite convincingly to propose a new model, where potential, potential act, and act are differentiated in detail. Contrary to Aristotle's argument in *Metaphysics*, Virno demonstrates the difference in nature, rather than degree, between potential and act. Potential becomes synonymous with 'faculty'—of language, of thought, of labour—while act is the particular performance, such as an utterance, a formed thought, or a labour task. For Virno, potential is a 'before', but its character is that of a 'permanent', indefinite 'before'. In Virno's view potential is the 'not-now' to actuality's 'now'; it is 'time as a whole' and as a totality that not only precedes the 'now' of a given act, but it is also simultaneous to it. Thus, Virno claims that potential is not only 'time as a whole' (95), but it is also

‘the world’ —in the sense of ‘the *perceptible context* to which the being devoid of any definite environment belongs’ (89). This ‘permanent’ character of potential, according to Virno, shows that it is a ‘lacuna’ (87), where ‘the lack of form is equivalent to a lack of actuation’ (89).

Another interesting point to Virno’s radical restructuring of time is his dealing with the relation between potential and act, or actuality. He not only challenges previous arguments about time, but carefully justifies his own—in terms of time, of being, and of knowledge. In the second part of the book, he fastidiously untangles one by one the intricacies of his assertions and follows up on the implications diligently; this includes the detailed definition of both concepts. Even more so, Virno continues and problematizes the two in terms of time, both in terms of chronological progression ‘*in time*’ and ‘*of temporal order*’ (97). Using the example of Kant’s stove (97), Virno opposes both Aristotle’s and Kant’s views on chronological progression and temporal order. Virno problematizes the notion that their relation is fixed and it is either/or, he successfully argues that they are both. He does so by reaching an intriguing moment where ‘the potential/act couple ... is the theatre of both a *diachrony* and a *concomitance*’ (103). Thus Virno reaches a fascinating claim that ‘not-now’ and ‘now’ are, in fact, simultaneous in terms of chronological progression, but from the standpoint of temporal order, they are ‘before’ and ‘after’ (104-32). He explicates this by demonstrating a brilliant articulation of what he terms ‘a historical moment’ (136-46), the requisites of which are ‘its *dual directionality* and *incompleteness*’ (142). In other words, the historical moment is ‘unsaturated’ (142), but it becomes constituted by its need to be filled (as a lacuna), as well as its retrospective or prefigurative directionality to other moments. It is not a fixed process, but one of dynamic construction (143), reminiscent of Benjamin’s approach (144).

Before delving into the less conceptual and more Marxist third part of the book, Virno manages to deal a passing blow to Heidegger’s ‘nexus between historicity and death’ (146), and Koyre’s and Kojève’s Heideggerian interpretations of Hegel are not spared either (147). In the third part of the book, Virno deliberately emphasizes the faculty of labour power. He problematizes it in the context of mature capitalism, as well as capitalism in general. Following the clarification of the ‘potential/act couple’ (103-47), he then places them in the context of wages. Virno argues that in capitalism, a labourer is not paid for his present actual labour (nor for his past actual labour), but for his potential for labour, i.e. his labour-power (161). While, by his definition, potential remains a non-presence, in such a context it becomes of ‘extraordinary empirical, pragmatic and economic significance’ (160)—Virno calls it a ‘historical fact’ (160). This, in turn, leads to the saturation of history inherent to capitalism (173), which subsequently leads Virno to claim that ‘capitalism is the first fully historical form of social organization’ (161).

Following this is Virno’s historical materialist understanding of capitalism. If one takes meta-history to be ‘the conditions that guarantee the history of any given event’ (161), then capitalism is truly meta-historical. In this case, capitalism’s peculiar historical character is its reducing of the ‘generic production-potential’ (162) into a material commodity. Thus, meta-history takes the form of labour-power in capitalism. Moreover, it is exactly labour-power that leads to the state of mind reminiscent of the ‘end of History’ (173). Virno is determined to understand the very roots of meta-history, and he does so radically by avoiding delving into the materialist elements of historical materialism. Instead, he focuses in the last two sections of Part 3 on ‘the ambivalence of religious symbols’ (173-83) and on ‘contemporary pre-history’ (183-89). His argument in both sections is intriguing and he highlights clearly the differences in meta-history—how capitalism makes use of it in contrast to religious worship, and how capitalism through its ‘contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous’ (189) hides away the ever-present pre-history, i.e., labour power as a faculty, or potential.

Virno has written an insightful and thought-provoking book. It is more than simply a collection of essays on temporal phenomena (such as *déjà vu*), the difference between act and potential, and labour-power; it is a serious treatise on time, critically dispelling misconceptions and further provoking clarity of thought concerning the implications to which they might lead. Although it is only the last chapter that is explicitly Marxist, it makes one retrospectively aware of the whole text as consistently critical of contemporary capitalism. Furthermore, Virno combines the works of many authors in often innovative ways—Nietzsche is used to clarify Bergson, Mircea and de Martino are used to clarify meta-history in relation to capitalism, and Kant and Aristotle are argued against in the same breath. The book is a brilliant, as well as radical, entanglement of economic, philosophical, and social dimensions; at the least, it is thought-provoking, even more so—it makes the reader continue on the paths which Virno lays out ahead.

**Vladimir Rizov**, University of York, UK