Spinoza’s Advice

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Ghassan Hage
AGAINST PARANOID NATIONALISM:
SEARCHING FOR HOPE IN A SHRINKING SOCIETY
Pluto Press, $29.95pb, 174pp, 1 86403 196 4

Mary Zournazi (ed.)
HOPE: NEW PHILOSOPHIES FOR CHANGE
Pluto Press, $29.95pb, 288pp, 1 86403 140 9

In his much-discussed documentary Bowling for Columbine, Mike Moore pursues a practical question: what is it that makes so many Americans shoot each other? He finds an abstract answer: fear. The more guns people have, the less safe they feel. What Moore in his way is doing, and what Paul Davies, Alain de Botton and others are doing in theirs, is popularising philosophy. People for whom faith and belief provide no answers are turning to philosophy in growing numbers. The current proliferation of philosophical books, and books about philosophy, is matched by the evident hunger of readers for discussion of important ideas, in comprehensible English.

Philosophy in Australia went through a dark age when history of ideas courses atrophied and philosophers, obsessed with processes of cognition and the meaning of meaning, discussed issues with each other that few others cared about, in words that even fewer understood. Then, challenged out of their caves by the Parisian deconstructionists and postmodernists, some adopted French verbiage in bad translation, thereby scarcely improving things. So Ghassan Hage’s assertion, in Hope, that he and others have moved beyond postmodernism and identity politics is welcome, even if he in turn inflicts ‘exighophobia/homoiophobia’ on us in Against Paranoid Nationalism.

The concerns of philosophy, as he and Mary Zournazi show, may now include caring, dreaming and jumping for joy, as well as other everyday phenomena, such as globalisation, copyright, branding and marketing. Philosophers now debate with Zournazi the checkpoints in modern life, of which barcodes, PIN numbers, gated communities and refugee detention centres are escalating examples.

Modern philosophy is feminising, as well. Of the twelve philosophers with whom Zournazi converses in Hope, four in addition to herself are women, which is a step forward. Her conversational approach subverts the notorious tendency of philosophers to go on at boring length. Self-revealing about her own unemployment, a broken relationship and the death of a close friend, which led to the book, Greek-Australian Zournazi ranges far and wide with some of the world’s best minds, always refocusing on what it means to be hopeful.

At Columbia University, Michael Taussig speaks to Zournazi of hope as a ‘carnival of the senses’, but that leads
him beyond the obscene ‘American Dream’ to the politics of envy he encounters in Latin America. From there he moves on to consider the endemic corruption of Colombia, and the example of an American television journalist there who has given up his own hope of a career to run a small foundation for local children who are prostitutes and drug addicts, thus giving them hope.

Zournazi re-interviews the French theorist Julia Kristeva in Paris at the moment of the attack on the USA on 11 September 2001. Unaware of it, Kristeva recalls Marx’s critique of the exploitation of human beings by means of technical development, and says that the left now needs to renew the class struggle against the world’s misery and social inequalities, and to resist being locked into a ‘mentality of dogmatic managerialism’. On the other hand, Bengali philosopher Gayatri Spivak, who teaches in the USA, tells Zournazi that the elevation of resistance to a crisis of militancy is a ‘leap of hope’. Spivak, too, appeals for a rereading of Marx, but she argues that for labour the issue is no longer class but the disparity between organised and unorganised workers. Class, she argues, should be the concern of today’s multicultural, migration societies.

Hage, as if responding to Spivak, introduces class into his discussion with Zournazi of multiculturalism. He argues that Asian-Australians who are in the piece-worker category, lacking the upward mobility of other ‘Asians’, are denied access to multicultural civilisation. Hage, who wrote scathingly in White Nation (1998) about Australian multiculturalism as a ploy by ‘Anglos’ who fantasise that they can keep the hands of ‘Third World Looking People’ off the levers of power, now explains that it is not so much a matter of whiteness as of the colonial process. Colonisation, he contends, offered members of the innately uncivilised French or British lower classes the chance of becoming civilised ‘whites’. He then has a revealing exchange with Zournazi about newer migrants being relieved to find things about the host society to hate: to have proof, for instance, that ‘Anglos’ in Australia are hostile and inhospitable, and oppressive of Aboriginal people, and that they, the migrants, are more civilised.

Even with fifty-seven varieties of ‘hope’ listed in her index, and with an impressive array of perceptive and intelligent discussants, Zournazi’s book overlooks certain aspects of hope. It would have been illuminating to have the philosophers consider, for instance, the absence of hope, as evidenced by depression, homelessness, cults, cryogenics, cloning or euthanasia. None of them compares First World youth suicide with Third World children’s struggle to live. None considers interpreting ‘hope’ as a Clayton’s ‘certainty’, something that you say you want but don’t really expect or intend to achieve. None of them discusses the hope that can be implanted, or excised, by educators or bosses. Now that philosophy is back in the real world, such issues are waiting to be explored.

Hassan Hage, as well as being one of Zournazi’s interlocutors, describes himself as an ‘engaged intellectual’ who is researching the lives of Lebanese migrants around the world and their struggles for viability. In Against Paranoid Nationalism, he proposes that Australia has always been a defensive society, one that suffers from a scarcity of hope, ‘border disorder’ and paranoid nationalism. More than ever under what he calls the government of ‘Ayatollah Johnny’, threat-prone Australians have become worriers about themselves, rather than carers about others.

Hage, like Zournazi, has updated his manuscript to take account of 11 September 2001, and also of the Tampa event, but neither had time before publication to include 12 October 2002. This is unfortunate, because Bali particularly relates to Hage’s criticism of the West’s representations of Palestinian suicide bombers. In this book, he suggests that those who condemn any understanding of what drives such bombers are ‘part of a generalised Western culture that fears the humanity of the “bad other” because it puts it in touch with its own “badness”’. But many Australians do deplore the plight of Palestinians, understand their desperate reaction to it and realise that peace in the Middle East is impossible without a Palestinian homeland. Many have no desire for war with Iraq, and disapprove of jailing asylum seekers. In a post-Bali book, would Hage still argue that we should interpret the Bali bombing as the result of our own badness? Or by allying ourselves again and again with the USA, are we proving it?

At a time when compassion for anything that doesn’t directly serve the ‘national interest’ is scorned in Canberra as lacking ‘realism’, Hage challenges Australians to create a caring society that generates hope, not one like Mike Moore’s defensive USA, that generates worry, fear and paranoid nationalism. He warns that Australia is destined to remain an ‘unfinished Western colonial project’, in a permanent state of decolonisation. Analysing the prime minister’s speeches, he detects the lack of any capacity to hear the views of people who are unlike Howard. But, in a refreshing reversal of the usual argument, he then reports the racist statements about Australians that he hears among Greek, Vietnamese, Chinese and Lebanese Australians — without mentioning the recent rape case. He concludes by citing Spinoza’s advice to intellectuals not to deplore, hate or laugh, but to seek to understand.