BOOK REVIEW

In the Monastery

Sarah Bernstein

Knut Stene-Johansen, Christian Refsum, Johan Schimanski, eds, *Living Together: Roland Barthes, the Individual and the Community*. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

In her essay 'Feminism and the Politics of the Commons', Silvia Federici explains why the 'apparently archaic' concept of the commons has become the focus of political discussion in contemporary social movements: 'the defense against old and new enclosures', against the privatisation, commercialisation and destruction of common lands, forests, water, and air, has 'made visible a world of communal properties and relations that many had believed to be extinct'.[1] Ironically, she argues, these acts of enclosure have brought the production and reproduction of new forms of social cooperation to light, both in social movements and in academic discourse.

In this context, the central question of Barthes's 1977 course of lectures at the Collège de France, 'How to Live Together', seems particularly pertinent. In the first session, which took place in January 1977, Barthes describes his 'fantasy' of 'idiorrhythmy' in which individuals can pursue their own rhythms within a community. For Barthes, the ideal setting in which idiorrhythmy might flourish must be larger than the couple or the family – since '[i]n modern-day "communes", the commune falls apart from the moment family groups are reestablished – due to the conflict between sexuality and the law' – and smaller than macro-groupings, whose 'structure is based on an architecture of power […] [which is] openly hostile to idiorrhythmy'.[2] Neither of these arrangements is suitable, since they are likely to lead to 'disrhythmy' or 'heterorhythmy', the imposition of a fixed rhythm on to individuals, which can lead to extreme alienation. Across the lectures, Barthes highlights the possibilities of a variety of likely groupings that appear in five literary texts, including Palladius's *Lausiac History*, which focuses on eremitic life in the eighth century, and four novels: Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924),

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Émile Zola's *Pot Luck* (1882), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and André Gide's *The Confined Woman of Poitiers* (1930).

Living Together: Roland Barthes, the Individual and the Community (edited bt Knut Stene-Johansen, Christian Refsum, Johan Schimanski) takes Barthes's lectures as a point of departure, seeing his propositions as gestures of opening that leave 'food for further reflection and space for more writing' (p. 9). The collection of essays brings together the reflections of thirty scholars on thirty discrete concepts investigated in the lectures. Accordingly, in each chapter, researchers from a variety of fields, from Modern Languages to Aquatic Biology to Church History, read Barthes's propositions in the light of their own area of expertise. The result is a series of brief but nevertheless informative, well-written, and scholarly musings that cover an impressive range of geographical locations and time periods. Contributions like that of Peter J. Meedom, on 'Animals', demonstrate convincingly how Barthes's theories resonate with literary texts and begin to gesture towards the crises of living together specific to the contemporary moment.

However, although the collection promises to draw out the relevance of Barthes's lectures for finding new ways of living together today, its general horizon of imagination is somewhat limited. In their introduction, the editors suggest that Barthes's work is so significant in part because of its intellectual generosity, because of the ways in which his writings act as provocations or occasions for further reflection. And yet for the most part, what it seemed ought to be the central question of such as collection – *how do we live together?* – is set aside in favour of semantic readings of Barthes's key concepts that, instead of opening them up, actually foreclose them.

As a result, the collection's contemporary relevance is stated rather than argued for: in the first place, the corpus of literary texts explored (with notable exceptions) does not extend much beyond the five books discussed by Barthes in 1977. If, as the editors suggest, 'Literature has always been engaged in the problems of "how to live together"', it seems a sorely missed opportunity to limit the discussion to this somewhat rarefied group of texts. Likewise, discussions tend toward the abstract rather than the pragmatic, which is not harmful in itself, except insofar as the majority of the accounts assume a universal human subject. Instead of moving beyond Barthes, as it promises to do, the collection takes his monastery as the primary site of exploration of collective, 'idiorrhythmic' life. Because of this, issues like gender, race, and class are not much accounted for in these discussions (again, with notable exceptions, such as Kjersti Bale's), an

omission particularly noticeable since monasteries do not, as a rule, admit anyone other than men.

It is disappointing that a collection of essays which situates itself as speaking to 'the global problems of finding new ways of organizing the increasing multi-cultural aspects of social life' (p. 17) does not in the main address multiculturalism at all (or indeed colonization, migration, or globalization). Indeed, the book's approach to 'living together' is more or less ahistorical: it fails adequately to address head on any of the issues that make finding new modes of social and ecological cooperation a matter of such pressing urgency. It also evinces a curious lack of awareness of the history of contemporary scholarly discussions of community and the commons, and of the collective organising that has been and continues to be undertaken, largely by women, who are in fact, as Federici suggests, 'the main social force standing in the way of a complete commercialization of nature'.[3]

Notes

[1] Silvia Federici, 'Feminism and the Politics of the Commons', in *The Wealth of the Commons*, ed. by David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (Amherst: Levellers, 2012), *wealthofthecommons.org,* n. pag.
[2] Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, ed. by Claude Coste, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 8.
[3] Federici, 'Feminism', n. pag.

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Sarah Bernstein is a writer and teacher currently working as Early Career Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. Her critical essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studia Neophilologica*, *Contemporary Women's Writing* and *MAP*. Her current research looks at strategies of formal and affective 'difficulty' for imagining new forms of care and community, primarily within the modernist period.

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