

## BOOK REVIEW

**Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 187 pp. Hbk. \$22.95. ISBN 0-674-02329-3.**

It is rather more pleasant to ponder new possibilities opening up than to consider existing possibilities being closed off. But Jonathan Lear has taken on an unpleasant task with elegance and subtlety. Although Lear's new book ostensibly is about the Crow Nation, a formerly powerful tribe crippled and reduced to life on an Indian reservation, the story he tells is an allegory for his real subject, "cultural devastation." He asks how might we respond to cultural devastation with the theological virtue of hope. This is a significant but rarely discussed topic and one increasingly relevant in a globalizing, homogenizing world.

Lear's narrative relies on ethnographic and historical accounts of the Crow but also is deeply indebted to Heidegger, Aristotle, and Freud. This sounds like a difficult task to manage and one more likely to result in a clunky and heavy-handed presentation rather than a seamless story, but Lear manages the latter with the gift of finesse which comes with the best of "analytic" philosophers (Lear trained under that paragon of analytic philosophy, and finesse, Saul Kripke).

The way that new possibilities unfold in the world has recently received provocative treatment by Alain Badiou (on "the event") and Hubert Dreyfus (on "disclosing new worlds"). In their work, the Heideggerian notion of a "horizon of possibility" is expanded—by its replacement with a new horizon or with its extension, respectively. In either case, it now becomes possible to think and do things which previously were unthinkable and undoable.

This Heideggerian framework is accepted by Lear but he is interested in contraction rather than expansion of possibility. The Crow chief Plenty Coups told the story of the decline of his nation to a white visitor: the death of the buffalo, the loss of traditional lands, the dirty tricks of the American government. He concluded by saying "after this nothing happened." Lear reads this conclusion as crucial. Although much did happen to Plenty Coups, in the subsequent years as he negotiated better conditions for his people, in a certain sense "nothing happened."

This statement, Lear suggests, is best understood as a marker of the extinction of cultural roles and practices and their accompanying possibilities of excellence. It was no longer possible to be a "warrior" or a "woman"; these roles no longer existed. They were thick concepts, bound up with a range of other cultural practices which disappeared. To be a woman was to cook foods that were no

longer available, to be proud of a husband who no longer had the opportunity to gain honor in battle.

In the face of the rapid decline of existing practices, dreams took on a particular import. Lear argues convincingly that dreams are an extension of practical rationality. In other words, while the world is normally navigated through a set of social practices, things one actually does in the world, dreams can act as stars on the open sea. When nothing around us is visible, we can continue moving in the direction we desire—just so long as the stars exist in some relation to our world.

Dreams provide an entry point for the discussion of radical hope. But hope is also associated with courage. The virtue of courage is deeply embedded in specific cultural practices—whether they are in ancient Greece or in the Great Plains. When the practices that constitute a culture are disappearing, Lear suggests that we can rely on a “thin” notion of courage. In dreams and in certain forms of religious faith, we gain hope without knowing what we might be hoping for. Like Abraham, we leave behind everything that we have, everything that we are familiar and comfortable with, and follow a voice that is telling us to continue forward. We do not know what the Promised Land will look like, or whether we will ever reach it, but we continue.

Lear’s account of radical hope bears a structural resemblance to Cornel West’s notion of “prophecy” and “prophetic criticism.” But despite the apparent affinity between their work, Lear’s account of radical hope lacks West’s radical democratic politics. Lear is pleased that the Crow decided, post-devastation, to pursue an accommodationist policy with the US government. Plenty Coups, and Lear, look down on the other tribes who fell victim to false messianism (i.e., the peyote cult). But it is curious that Lear only understands there to be two options: false messianism or accommodationism. Has he not just presented a third way: radical hope? Lear associates radical hope with accommodationism because it is the hope that they will persevere that allows the Crow to adopt to changing circumstances—and for the old tradition to eventually reemerge. But in adapting to the new circumstances, might the Crow not lose their hope? Is radical hope something that only exists in moments of transition when the future is particularly opaque? Moreover, Lear praises the recent revival of interest in Crow tradition after a century hiatus. He seems to be suggesting: what Plenty Coups hoped for has come to pass: the Crow live on as a culture, just in altered form. But is not this alteration a castration?

Might not Lear’s account of radical hope be radicalized even further? What if Lear considered “thinking about human extinction” (to borrow the phrase from George Kateb’s *The Inner Ocean*)? If it is not just some human practices that will be destroyed, but all practices—perhaps in a nuclear war—is there still a possibility for hope? Although Lear tries to be religiously neutral, claiming that his account of radical hope is accessible to both secular and religious audiences, does not the possibility of human extinction necessarily push hope onto theological grounds?

Although *Radical Hope* is a graceful presentation of specialized material for an interdisciplinary audience, the religious studies scholar will certainly quibble with Lear’s characterization of Crow religion. In short, he makes them sound awfully

Judeo-Christian. According to Lear, the Crow are monotheists, they worry about how their good god could permit evil in the world, and they consider themselves to be the “chosen people.” But this does not detract from the overall force of the text which is certainly well worth reading.

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