

<http://somatosphere.net/2016/09/top-of-the-heap-paul-rabinow.html>

Top of the Heap: Paul Rabinow

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By Hannah Gibson

For this installment of the Top of the Heap series, I spoke with Paul M. Rabinow, who is a Professor of medical and sociocultural anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley.

Alexander Kluge & Oskar Negt, [History and Obstinacy](#), translated by Richard Langston et.al., edited and with an introduction by Devon Fore, Cambridge: Zone Books, 2014.

Michael Foessel: [Le Temps de la Consolation](#), Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2015.

Marielle Macé, [Le temps de l'essai, Histoire d'un genre en France au XX siècle](#), Paris Belin, 2006.

Tim Blanning, [Frederick the Great, King of Prussia](#), New York: Random House, 2016.

Stephen Parker, [Bertolt Brecht, a Literary Life](#), London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Ben Ratcliff, [John Coltrane, The Story of a Sound](#), New York: Picador, 2007.

As we have long since passed through the moment of the politics and poetics of ethnography, I find my reading still fits into something like the ethics and aesthetics of life. In that light, here are some of the books I have been reading lately.

The Kluge & Negt is the most ambitious as well as the most experimental of the lot. They are (were) well known for their interventions in the public sphere discussions offering a more Marxist interpretation than that of Habermas. This volume is a new English translation of a much longer book in German that the authors collaborated in reducing in size and perhaps increasing in coherence. It is a weird book assembling a

heterogeneous range of materials ranging from concept definitions, to German folklore, to a very long term history of capitalism and the micro forms of resistance, “obstinacy” that they claim have always existed. The book is impossible to summarize: Devon Fore provides a lucid and helpful long introduction that is the place to begin.

The Foessel is an essay in the recent French genre that they now call philosophy. It is an intriguing attempt to demonstrate that while once philosophy (and religion) offered forms of consolation, in modernity this salvational hope has become untenable, at least theoretically. The claim is a rich one raising many questions well worth pondering even if the author’s approach and style are too sweeping to be truly convincing. Had the book ever touched ground in an anthropological sense it would have been vastly improved but the clarity of its argument would have been harder to sustain in such epochal and totalizing terms. Still, a very intriguing contribution to contemporary ethics and thought.

The Macé is a much more scholarly (and convincing) treatment of the importance of the essay in France as straddling and at times occupying the liminal zone between art and science. This is an excellent book.

The Banning is a magisterial account of Frederick the Great, for once not concentrating at length on his encounter with Bach or the thoughts of Kant on the Enlightenment. Rather, if one wants to get a richer, detailed and situated account of what the emergence of bio-power and bio-politics looked like in the eighteenth century, this is a good place to start. It offers a remedy for the vast outpouring of necrophilic accounts of what Foucault had in mind when he coined the terms. Further, it turns out that Frederick was a flamboyant gay, organizing his court to suit his tastes.

The Parker is another magisterial biography, this time of Bertolt Brecht. The deeply appreciative yet complexly nuanced account of this brilliant modernist and the political shoals he had to navigate his whole life from the Americans to the Communists. The presentation of his theater and poetry is helpful if not exactly an introduction; it should serve as a stimulus. Brecht’s domestic practices and his gender politics will not please everyone but are worth knowing about.

The Ratcliff, perhaps most like the Macé in this grouping, is a telling account not so much of John Coltrane the man (although there is some of that and it is done well with great economy) but of his “sound.” Ratcliff, a journalist jazz critic, provides a compelling account of a short period of time (mid to late 1950s until Coltrane’s death in 1967) of his transformations in sound and style. Coltrane practiced relentlessly perfecting his technique and testing his body; he was a far ranging intellectual with a quiet if voracious curiosity. His search for the outer

frontiers of modern music and the institutional setting and racial as well as the critical obstacles he had to face are well told. Coltrane said at the end of his short life (he died at age 40) that he wanted to be remembered as a saint. Food for thought for anthropologists.



Professor Paul M. Rabinow received his Ph.D. (1970) in anthropology from the University of Chicago, and is currently Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley where he has taught since 1978. He has taught in France, Brazil, Iceland and is co-founder of the Berkeley Program in French Cultural Studies. He was named Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government in 1998. He received the University of Chicago Alumni Association Professional Achievement Award in 2000. He was awarded the visiting Chaire Internationale de Recherche Blaise Pascal at the École Normale Supérieure for 2001-2. STICERD Distinguished Visiting Professor- BIOS Centre for the study of Bioscience, Biomedicine, Biotechnology and Society, London School of Economics (2004), Sir James Frazer Lecturer (Cambridge) 2008, Mosse Distinguished Lecture (Berlin) 2010.

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