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Citation: Thomas, Rod (2013) Exodus, Lars Iyer. Melvyn House, New York, 2012 [book review]. SCiO Viability Today Newsletter of the Social Enterprise Group 'Systems and Cybernetics into Management, Autumn (2013). p. 3.

Published by: SCiO

URL: <http://www.scio.org.uk/systems> <<http://www.scio.org.uk/systems>>

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Exodus, LARS IYER. Melvyn House,
New York, 2012, 289 pages

Stafford Beer told a joke that went like this:

'What do you get from a postmodernist Mafioso?

- An offer you can't understand!'

Only viewers of 'The Godfather' movie might get this, but only those who have read what is variably called 'continental', 'post-structural' or 'postmodern' philosophy might find it funny. The joke perhaps implies that Beer was unimpressed with the so-called postmodern turn and its discussants, a movement that is not easily summarised, but one that stressed the West's retreat from the Enlightenment: from a belief in the unity of humanity and a faith in science, truth, reason and progress. In place of these, postmodernism emphasised ideology, a moral and epistemological relativism, and an unfolding crisis as the social legitimacy of key institutions crumbled - sometimes under the barrage of a postmodernist's own ironic ridicule. By way of example, readers of this newsletter might wish to consider Robert Lilienfeld's 1978 book: *The Rise of Systems Theory: An Ideological Analysis* (Wiley).

My own sense is that continental philosophy forms the backdrop to Lars Iyer's trilogy of novels: *Spurious*, *Dogma*, and *Exodus*. Iyer, a philosophy lecturer at Newcastle University, constructs each book around two British philosophy academics - "W" and "Lars" - who do pretty much nothing else other than converse with one another about the difficulty of being a thinker in modern British society. To them, the "majesty of thinking", especially when directed toward imminent personal and societal apocalypse, must dominate their lives, just as it dominated the lives of the continental philosophers to whom they pay regular homage. W does most of the talking, and Iyer's narration of his intellectual administrations - all other kinds of administration being anathema to him - has a peculiarly mesmeric quality: Iyer's oft repeated playschool marker that "..., W says" quickly embeds itself in the reader's psyche.

Each of the books detail W's prolonged philosophical lamentation on Lars's inadequacy. His barbs span virtually every dimension of Lars's being, but one suspects that the meaning of it all is that their friendship is unbreakable, something, in true philosophical style, to be shown and not said. If the apocalypse comes, we can be sure of one thing: W and Lars will face it together with a glass of their favourite Plymouth Gin in each hand.

In Exodus, Iyer's latest offering, W is the subject of a botched redundancy at his university, where the humanities department is closed down, but a job for him is reserved because of a legal technicality; he is thereby left to teach philosophy to sports science students. This compels the duo to investigate "the conditions of his sacking", which means, to them, an investigation into the state of the British university in an age of unabashed capitalism and marketised education. The book chronicles their tour of British universities as they present lectures at a series of philosophy conferences. Needless to say, visits to Oxford, Reading, Manchester, London and Newcastle offer plenty of scope for Lars and W to offer some side-ways observations on the state of the nation, its economy, its history, and its universities. Whilst systems theory might not have been to the taste of sociologists like Lilienfeld, philosophers like W and Lars are not afraid to explore, if only in despair, the connectivity of things. The book ends with the duo finally abandoning the majesty of pure thinking; they lead the last of W's post-graduate philosophy students into the protest occupation of the curb side outside of his university.

Iyer's novels offer a useful, albeit indirect, insight into the mind-set of those thinkers influenced by continental philosophy – an offering that one might well feel every inclination to decline. But the novels are at times great fun and I would certainly recommend their light-hearted touch over the kind of philosophy books that W and Lars, whilst visiting Foyles bookshop, vent their spleen upon: 'The Idiots Guide to...' , 'The Pre-Chewed Guide to...' , 'The One Minute Guide to...' etc. Indeed, Exodus meets W's criterion for a worthy book: "Does it make you think more?" But at the same time, it supplies a kind of cautionary warning against reading the original sources that have made W into the kind of man that he is: books that he says made him "experience his idiocy".

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