

TAYLOR, MARK C. *Intervolution: Smart Bodies, Smart Things*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. xiv+201. \$19.95 (paper).

The first few pages of *Intervolution* present us with a Mark C. Taylor who's less sanguine about the information age than he used to be. Throughout the tech-explosive nineties, Taylor not only refused to indulge in academic luddism, but he threw himself into the fray, writing books that simultaneously interpreted and enacted new media and spearheading an effort to democratize university education by getting it online. As it happened, I was part of one of Taylor's first courses to be "streamed" to another group of students across the country and can recall the camera that sat on a tripod over our shoulders more vividly than I remember most of our classmates.

More than two decades later, Taylor admits that the techno-democratic revolution hasn't come to pass. To be sure, everything has changed, but the transformation has been more sinister than many had imagined. "The optimism of the early days of personal computers and the Internet has given way to anxiety about a panoptical world," Taylor writes in a quasi-confessional tone; "technologies that had been promoted as vastly increasing freedom of choice . . . now threaten the very foundations of a democratic society" (xii). These foundations include equality, cooperation, privacy, and even basic communication. After all, as one of Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonyms reasoned centuries before cyberbullying, Twitterstorms, indecipherable memes, and massive online disinformation campaigns, "if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking" (*Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983], 113).

When it comes to making himself understood, Taylor is a model of clarity. Thanks to his decades of teaching French and German philosophy to late adolescents, he explains even monstrously difficult ideas with patience and very little jargon, introducing the basics of network theory, complexity theory, immunology, surveillance economics, and Hegelian philosophy to anyone willing to sit down with the book. He maps broad intellectual and historical trends and decodes reigning metaphoric regimes for the sake of illuminating the world we have woven ourselves into—a world fueled by and productive of the phenomenon he calls "intervolution."

"In contrast to *evolve*," Taylor explains, "which means to unfold or roll out . . . and *coevolve*, which means to evolve jointly or in parallel . . . *intervolve* means to intertwine . . . each becomes itself in and through the other" (xiv). Like Donna Haraway's "sympoiesis," Taylor's *intervolution* names the interconstitution of those aspirationally bounded oppositions like self and other, body and mind, subject and object, animate and inanimate, private and public, natural and artificial, and human and machine (32). The contemporary world reveals with trumpets and timpani what has always been the case: "the self" is formed provisionally and precariously in relation to everything it thinks it's not, including most dramatically the allegedly inanimate devices that crowd our desktops, pockets, bedside tables, belt loops, and bodily organs. If it ever made sense to talk about "humanity" apart from technology, such talk has at this point become incoherent. "In today's wired world," Taylor suggests alongside Haraway, "we have all become cyborgs" (45).

Taylor finds our intervolved and intervolving cyborgian condition exemplified most clearly in the accelerating proliferation of medical technologies, especially those "smart" devices that are integrated into their host bodies and networked to doctors, databases, and "parent" corporations. Because the body is already a cybernetic system, sensing its innumerable states and then adjusting its temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, and hormone levels accordingly, our "smart" bodies can be supplemented and assisted by "smart" things: cybernetic technologies that function where our bodies fail. As Taylor explains, he has become increasingly aware of this

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medical intervolvement in the process of learning to live with Type I diabetes. In the past three decades, he has been able to turn over more and more of the constant calculation of sugars and dosing of insulin to a “closed loop” device that monitors his blood continuously and administers the insulin he needs at any given time. This is the state of our techno-panoptical cyborgianism with respect to medical health; as Taylor summarizes, “the frontier where the Internet of Things meets the Internet of Bodies is the digital pancreas I wear on my belt” (108).

Of all the disciplines, modes, and subject-objects Taylor weaves together in this personal-political book, the thread that’s often hardest to track is that of religion. Granted, religion surfaces in little ways throughout the analysis: in the utopian longings and dystopian chains of global connectivity, for example, or in the “repetition compulsion” of living with chronic disease, or in surveillance capitalism’s counter-ascetic training of desire (xi, 3, 105). But there is a subtler attention throughout *Intervolution* to the *deus absconditus* that our devices appear at once to reveal and conceal—the “omniscient other” listening to our conversations, monitoring our behavior, harvesting our data, selling our loans, and luring us into buying idiotic things: “we do not even know where our data is,” writes Taylor, “who owns it, or what they are doing with it” (106).

In the face of this apophatic-corporate-omnipotent-omniscience, many voices on the left in particular are calling for regulation, bidirectional transparency, and some sort of restoration of privacy. Although Taylor is well aware of the threats panoptical technologies pose to personal safety, mental health, and economic justice, however, he worries about “overly aggressive policies and regulations that threaten to arrest progress” (27). After all, “the same technologies that enable Amazon to display annoying pop-up ads on your computer screen, or insurance companies to monitor your driving and automatically adjust insurance rates, also make it possible for my insulin pump to continuously monitor my glucose and automatically adjust my insulin dosage in real time” (27).

And so the book that begins in techno-disillusionment ends in a kind of reluctant re-enchantment as Taylor gives himself over to a higher power. Meditating on the interinvolved state of his own body and mind, with one another and with any number of other bodies, minds, and machines, he marvels, “I am but a fleeting moment in a process that both includes and surpasses me. Body and mind I once thought were my own, I now realize are expressions of an intelligence that is neither simply natural nor merely artificial” (174). Taylor may not have found God, but it seems he’s found *Geist*. And although I find nothing objectionable about the argument itself, this final flight into cybernetic Hegelianism did leave me wondering where his flight went.

In the course of *Intervolution*, Taylor exposes innumerable scandals endemic to global networking in the forms of military surveillance, police surveillance, corporate surveillance, obscene wealth disparities, hacked elections, hacked cars and airplanes, hacked bodies, personalized advertising, and the impending massive loss of human jobs to AI doctors, teachers, engineers, cleaning crews, and manufacturers. There are other disasters that Taylor leaves unnamed, including the escalation of anxiety disorders, the multiplication of cancers, the accelerated deforestation and exploitative strip mining that make and power our omnipresent devices, and the attendant loss of biodiversity and unleashing of zoonotic viruses into the human population. There is the often unjustified technological drive to optimize, innovate, and “go further” (Kierkegaard, 123), amplified by modernity’s perennial denial of death. None of this is anything Taylor doesn’t know. On balance, though, he says of his nodal participation in this transcendent network beyond good and evil, “this is not immortality, but it is enough for me” (176). And I, for one, find myself wishing for a bit more

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Kierkegaard to rage against the Hegel, the way it did when Taylor stared into that classroom camera at the dawn of the internet age and warned a bunch of almost-grown-ups, “Don’t let them assimilate you.”

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TOUNSEL, CHRISTOPHER. *Chosen Peoples: Christianity and Political Imagination in South Sudan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 205 pp. \$25.95 (paper).

Christopher Tounsel’s *Chosen Peoples: Christianity and Political Imagination in South Sudan* provides an analysis of how biblical scripture and Christian folklore became crucial source material for the political technologies that shaped the ideological construction of the independent South Sudan. While attending to the reality that so many South Sudanese thinkers have pointed out, that unitary political consciousness in South Sudan is not necessarily an endemic phenomenon, Tounsel traces the genealogy of what he calls a “liberatory, nationalist Christian thought” that was aimed at “non-Christian co-citizens” (4). In this way, Christianity, even if one understands it cynically as a strategic tool in the hands of the ruling elite, produces a particular sociopolitical vision of self and other. The constituent elements of that vision, imagination, and intellectual production are the focus of Tounsel’s book. As such, the book’s title, *Chosen Peoples*, is not simply a familiar religious metaphor but a specific reference to how Christianity and biblical scripture informed the southern resistance struggle against its enemy in the north. One of the major contributions of this text is the archival and ethnographic attention paid to the centrality of Christianity in defining the axis of north/south difference in the former Sudan. That is to say, Tounsel demonstrates how Christianity was the central tool in defining the Arab/Muslim other whose elite oppressed the Black/African/Christian. The Christian God, in this context was positioned as “a God of the black and southern oppressed” and thus, as southern Sudanese writers claimed, he “was uniquely theirs and [they were] especially his” (15). In the context of God’s Blackness then, the production of ethnic diversity became epiphenomenal to a more fundamental identity formation as Christians and, in some cases that Tounsel shows, as biblical Hebrews. Methodologically, his theological focus is not to be conflated with religious determinacy or the dominance of the church. He attends to a range of actors, beyond the clergy, who participated in the production of theological knowledge and its uptake as political technology.

The point of departure for Tounsel’s fourth chapter, “Khartoum Goliath,” is the biblical story of David and Goliath that appears in the Book of Samuel. Goliath and David were both metaphorical figures, and the struggle between them represented the tension “between lifestyles and gods, with the dominant position in a master-slave hierarchy at stake” (89). This reading opens up a useful way to understand the struggle between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), which represented the political interests of the southern rebels. Yet, Tounsel reminds us, if we take into account the SPLA’s vast war machine in the early 1990s, we can see more clearly how the appropriation of the David character by the SPLM provided an ideological “sense of destiny of righteousness” rather than a testament to the material realities of their military might (99). Both parties, the SPLM and the Sudanese government, Tounsel tells us, animated their campaigns with religious themes. The Sudanese army framed their fight as a jihad concealing the war’s high casualties within the veil of Islamic martyrdom. The SPLM, though not officially Christian, nevertheless deployed religious ideas, particularly through its newsletter,