DOMINICK LACAPRA. *Understanding Others: Peoples, Animals, Pasts*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018. Pp. 190. Cloth $95.00, paper $24.95.

One idea that has permeated Dominick LaCapra's work from the beginning is that historical texts pose questions to their readers. They call assumptions into question, render the familiar strange, and challenge contemporary habits of thought. Historians can therefore not contend themselves with "putting texts into context," as if texts are adequately understood once the influences that worked upon them have been charted. Similarly, readers have not yet come to terms with, say, a Holocaust survivor's memoir once they have classified it under "witness literature" or "trauma." Such theoreticism, as LaCapra calls it, is as unproductive as historians' contextualism. Historical texts call for critical engagement—for readers able to reflect on what these texts do with them, if only half-consciously, and what problems, then and now, they elucidate.

That historians engaging with historical texts are not alone in struggling with familiarity and otherness is apparent from the title of LaCapra's latest collection of essays: *Understanding Others: Peoples, Animals, Pasts*. In six closely related articles, on themes like trauma, memory, identity, and deconstruction, LaCapra draws on Freudian psychoanalytic theory to explore how human relations with "others" can be complicated by transference, projection, victimization, and scapegoating. Humans habitually treat animals, for instance, as others, thereby affirming their own agency but forgetting how much they resemble these others or rely on them for survival in a hazardous biological environment. If LaCapra takes it as his mission "to further the development and effectiveness of a 'posthumanist' (or other than narrowly human) frame of reference that situates and limits the human in a broader ecological and existential context" (10), this means that LaCapra seeks to challenge "nondialogic" modes of understanding, which betray themselves by keeping the reader's ego too much intact.

What then does dialogic engagement with historical texts look like? In a long chapter on the "uses" of the humanities, LaCapra argues that dialogues are always problem-oriented (139). Indeed, for LaCapra, the humanities revolve around "the study of basic, indeed cross-

or even transdisciplinary problems that are not narrowly utilitarian but instead allow one to intervene in, or contribute to, an open, questioning, and self-questioning process of inquiry" (156). This does not imply that there is no space for "puzzle-solving"—sorting out issues of authorship, causes, effects, and influences. But such puzzle-solving always serves the higher good of engaging with problems of justice, trust, agency, temporality, or violence—problems that are too big to resolve but can be "worked through" in encounters that help readers deal with their biases and blind spots.

Like transference, "working through" is a key concept in the volume. Although LaCapra has used these Freudian notions on many previous occasions, they are nowhere as sharply defined as in this volume. *Understanding Others* can well be read as an extended meditation on how a self that identifies uncritically with others, for instance, by repeating unconsciously what is projected on to them can be taught to transcend this transferential bond, to a limited extent at least, through "countervailing forces" (58) that present the self with alternative modes of relating to others. Although working through is not a recipe for success, it potentially helps readers to relate to others in more nuanced, complicated, and productive ways.

That this is not exactly a mode of engaging with others that is politically *en vogue* goes without saying. It has never been and most likely will never be. Still, in every single chapter, LaCapra spends significant time commenting on the rise of Trump-style politics. Convinced that the self-centered, prejudiced, nondialogic kind of discourse currently favored in the White House deserves "criticism, resistance, and organized opposition" (23), the author does not hesitate to adopt the stance of a cultural critic horrified by the speed-obsessed culture that breeds media like Twitter—Trump's favorite platform. He even wonders what gives human beings the right to elevate themselves above animals as long as they engage in instinctive habits of the sort exhibited by the current president of the United States (71).

Few readers will disagree with LaCapra that carefulness, attentiveness, and self-criticism are important virtues in a culture like ours. But the question is: How can such virtues be nurtured if politics and media cultivate habits detrimental to them? It is one thing to say that the humanities may stimulate critical thinking (182), but it is quite another to foster conditions under which humanities can fulfil this task despite them being co-opted in a culture of speed. In other words, while sharing LaCapra's commitment to dialogical virtues,

I wonder how citizens, students, and scholars can learn to be the kind of readers that LaCapra wants them to be—and what kind of *conditions* such learning would require. Peter Berkowitz has argued that liberalism presupposes a virtuous citizen—committed to the common good, interested in others—but often fails to invest more than superfluously in pedagogical practices that nourish political virtues. Analogously, I wonder why LaCapra, despite his worries about "the corporatization of academy" (178), does not address the question of how critical thinking can be cultivated in humanities departments that face tough budget cuts or struggle for survival in universities that are run like businesses.

Perhaps the answer is that only texts—difficult texts that demand their readers' full attention—can nourish self-critical interpretative habits. If so, the good news is that readers will find in LaCapra's latest volume a stimulating model of how to engage carefully with texts that call into question some of the dominant modes of selfhood in our time.

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