

# *Explaining* Postmodernism

*Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to  
Foucault*

Stephen R. C. Hicks

ROUSSEAU KANT HERDER FICHTE SCHLEIERMACHER

HEGEL SCHOPENHAUER KIERKEGAARD MARX

NIETZSCHE FREUD SPENGLER HEIDEGGER

RUSSELL WITTGENSTEIN AYER POPPER KUHN

LENIN SOMBART HORKHEIMER MARCUSE

RORTY LYOTARD FOUCAULT DERRIDA

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## Chapter One

# What Postmodernism Is

### *The postmodern vanguard*

By most accounts we have entered a new intellectual age. We are postmodern now. Leading intellectuals tell us that modernism has died, and that a revolutionary era is upon us—an era liberated from the oppressive strictures of the past, but at the same time disquieted by its expectations for the future. Even postmodernism's opponents, surveying the intellectual scene and not liking what they see, acknowledge a new cutting edge. In the intellectual world, there has been a changing of the guard.

The names of the postmodern vanguard are now familiar: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty. They are its leading strategists. They set the direction of the movement and provide it with its most potent tools. The vanguard is aided by other familiar and often infamous names: Stanley Fish and Frank Lentricchia in literary and legal criticism, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin in feminist legal criticism, Jacques Lacan in psychology, Robert Venturi and Andreas

Huyssen in architectural criticism, and Luce Irigaray in the criticism of science.

Members of this elite group set the direction and tone for the postmodern intellectual world.

Michel Foucault has identified the major targets: “All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence.”<sup>1</sup> Such necessities must be swept aside as baggage from the past: “It is meaningless to speak in the name of—or against—Reason, Truth, or Knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

Richard Rorty has elaborated on that theme, explaining that that is *not* to say that postmodernism is true or that it offers knowledge. Such assertions would be self-contradictory, so postmodernists must use language “ironically.”

The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic to this suggestion [e.g., Foucault’s]—one who thinks of himself as auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist—is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are. For this talk of correspondence brings back just the idea my sort of philosopher wants to get rid of, the idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature.<sup>3</sup>

If there is no world or self to understand and get right on their terms, then what is the purpose of thought or action? Having deconstructed reason, truth, and the idea of the correspondence of thought to reality, and then set them aside—“reason,” writes Foucault, “is the ultimate language of madness”<sup>4</sup>—there is nothing to guide or constrain our thoughts and feelings. So we can do or say whatever we feel like. Deconstruction, Stanley Fish confesses

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault 1988, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, in May 1993, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Rorty 1989, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault 1965, 95.

happily, “relieves me of the obligation to be right ... and demands only that I be interesting.”<sup>5</sup>

Many postmodernists, though, are less often in the mood for aesthetic play than for political activism. Many deconstruct reason, truth, and reality because they believe that in the name of reason, truth, and reality Western civilization has wrought dominance, oppression, and destruction. “Reason and power are one and the same,” Jean-François Lyotard states. Both lead to and are synonymous with “prisons, prohibitions, selection process, the public good.”<sup>6</sup>

Postmodernism then becomes an activist strategy against the coalition of reason and power. Postmodernism, Frank Lentricchia explains, “seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.” The task of postmodern professors is to help students “spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one’s time”<sup>7</sup>

Those horrors, according to postmodernism, are most prominent in the West, Western civilization being where reason and power have been the most developed. But the pain of those horrors is neither inflicted nor suffered equally. Males, whites, and the rich have their hands on the whip of power, and they use it cruelly at the expense of women, racial minorities, and the poor.

The conflict between men and women is brutal. “The normal fuck,” writes Andrea Dworkin, “by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation.” This special insight into the sexual psychology of males is matched and confirmed by the sexual experience of women:

Women have been chattels to men as wives, as prostitutes, as sexual and reproductive servants. Being owned and being fucked are or have been virtually synonymous

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<sup>5</sup> Fish 1982, 180.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard, in Friedrich 1999, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Lentricchia 1983, 12.

experiences in the lives of women. He owns you; he fucks you. The fucking conveys the quality of ownership: he owns you inside out.<sup>8</sup>

Dworkin and her colleague, Catharine MacKinnon, then call for the censorship of pornography on postmodern grounds. Our social reality is constructed by the language we use, and pornography is a form of language, one that constructs a violent and domineering reality for women to submit to. Pornography, therefore, is not free speech but political oppression.<sup>9</sup>

The violence is also experienced by the poor at the hands of the rich and by the struggling nations at the hands of the capitalist nations. For a striking example, Lyotard asks us to consider the American attack on Iraq in the 1990s. Despite American propaganda, Lyotard writes, the fact is that Saddam Hussein is a victim and a spokesman for victims of American imperialism the world over.

Saddam Hussein is a product of Western departments of state and big companies, just as Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco were born of the 'peace' imposed on their countries by the victors of the Great War. Saddam is such a product in an even more flagrant and cynical way. But the Iraqi dictatorship proceeds, as do the others, from the transfer of aporias [insoluble problems] in the capitalist system to vanquished, less developed, or simply less resistant countries.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the oppressed status of women, the poor, racial minorities, and others is almost always veiled in the capitalist nations. Rhetoric about trying to put the sins of the past behind us, about progress and democracy, about freedom and equality before the law—all such self-serving rhetoric serves only to mask the brutality of

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<sup>8</sup> Dworkin 1987, 63, 66.

<sup>9</sup> MacKinnon 1993, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Lyotard 1997, 74-75.

capitalist civilization. Rarely do we catch an honest glimpse of its underlying essence. For that glimpse, Foucault tells us, we should look to prison.

Prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as moral force. ... What is fascinating about prisons is that, for once, power doesn't hide or mask itself; it reveals itself as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is cynical and at the same time pure and entirely 'justified,' because its practice can be totally formulated within the framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil, of order over disorder.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, for the inspirational and philosophical source of postmodernism, for that which connects abstract and technical issues in linguistics and epistemology to political activism, Jacques Derrida identifies the philosophy of Marxism:

deconstruction never had meaning or interest, at least in my eyes, than as a radicalization, that is to say, also *within the tradition* of a certain Marxism in a certain *spirit of Marxism*.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Modern and postmodern***

Any intellectual movement is defined by its fundamental philosophical premises. Those premises state what it takes to be real, what it is to be human, what is valuable, and how knowledge

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault 1977b, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida 1995; see also Lilla 1998, 40. Foucault too casts his analysis in Marxist terms: "I label political everything that has to do with class struggle, and social everything that derives from and is a consequence of the class struggle, expressed in human relationships and in institutions" (1989, 104).

is acquired. That is, any intellectual movement has a metaphysics, a conception of human nature and values, and an epistemology.

Postmodernism often bills itself as anti-philosophical, by which it means that it rejects many traditional philosophical alternatives. Yet any statement or activity, including the action of writing a postmodern account of anything, presupposes at least an implicit conception of reality and values. And so despite its official distaste for some versions of the abstract, the universal, the fixed, and the precise, postmodernism offers a consistent framework of premises within which to situate our thoughts and actions.

Abstracting from the above quotations yields the following. *Metaphysically*, postmodernism is anti-realist, holding that it is impossible to speak meaningfully about an independently existing reality. Postmodernism substitutes instead a social-linguistic, constructionist account of reality. *Epistemologically*, having rejected the notion of an independently existing reality, postmodernism denies that reason or any other method is a means of acquiring objective knowledge of that reality. Having substituted social-linguistic constructs for that reality, postmodernism emphasizes the subjectivity, conventionality, and incommensurability of those constructions. Postmodern accounts of *human nature* are consistently collectivist, holding that individuals' identities are constructed largely by the social-linguistic groups that they are a part of, those groups varying radically across the dimensions of sex, race, ethnicity, and wealth. Postmodern accounts of human nature also consistently emphasize relations of conflict between those groups; and given the de-emphasized or eliminated role of reason, postmodern accounts hold that those conflicts are resolved primarily by the use of force, whether masked or naked; the use of force in turn leads to relations of dominance, submission, and oppression. Finally, postmodern themes in *ethics and politics* are characterized by an identification with and sympathy for the groups perceived to



be oppressed in the conflicts, and a willingness to enter the fray on their behalf.

The term “post-*modern*” situates the movement historically and philosophically against modernism. Thus understanding what the movement sees itself as rejecting and moving beyond will be helpful in formulating a definition of postmodernism. The modern world has existed for several centuries, and after several centuries we have good sense of what modernism is.

### ***Modernism and the Enlightenment***

In philosophy, modernism’s essentials are located in the formative figures of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650), for their influence upon epistemology, and more comprehensively in John Locke (1632-1704), for his influence upon all aspects of philosophy.

Bacon, Descartes, and Locke are modern because of their philosophical naturalism, their profound confidence in reason, and, especially in the case of Locke, their individualism. Modern thinkers start from nature—instead of starting with some form of the supernatural, which had been the characteristic starting point of pre-modern, Medieval philosophy. Modern thinkers stress that perception and reason are the human means of knowing nature—in contrast to the pre-modern reliance upon tradition, faith, and mysticism. Modern thinkers stress human autonomy and the human capacity for forming one’s own character—in contrast to the pre-modern emphasis upon dependence and original sin. Modern thinkers emphasize the individual, seeing the individual as the unit of reality, holding that the individual’s mind is sovereign, and that the individual is the unit of value—in contrast to the pre-modernist,

feudal subordination of the individual to higher political, social, or religious realities and authorities.<sup>13</sup>

**Chart 1.1: Defining Pre-modernism and Modernism**

	<b>Pre-modernism</b>	<b>Modernism</b>
<b><i>Metaphysics</i></b>	Realism: Super-naturalism	Realism: Naturalism
<b><i>Epistemology</i></b>	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: Experience and reason
<b><i>Human Nature</i></b>	Original Sin; subject to God's will	<i>Tabula rasa</i> and autonomy
<b><i>Ethics</i></b>	Collectivism: altruism	Individualism
<b><i>Politics and Economics</i></b>	Feudalism	Liberal capitalism
<b><i>When and Where</i></b>	Medieval	The Enlightenment; twentieth-century sciences, business, technical fields

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<sup>13</sup> "Pre-modernism," as here used, excludes the classical Greek and Roman traditions and takes as its referent the dominant intellectual framework from roughly 400 CE to 1300 CE. Augustinian Christianity was pre-modernism's intellectual center of gravity. In the later medieval era, Thomism was an attempt to marry Christianity with a naturalistic Aristotelian philosophy. Accordingly, Thomistic philosophy undermined the pre-modern synthesis and helped open the door to the Renaissance and modernity.

On the use of "modernism" here, see also White (1991, 2-3) for a similar linking of reason, individualism, liberalism, capitalism, and progress as constituting the heart of the modern project.

Modern philosophy came to maturity in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment *philosophes* quite rightly saw themselves as radical. The pre-modern Medieval worldview and the modern Enlightenment worldview were coherent, comprehensive—and entirely opposed—accounts of reality and the place of human beings within it. Medievalism had dominated the West for 1000 years, from roughly 400 CE to 1400 CE. In a centuries-long transition period, the thinkers of the Renaissance, with some unintended help from the major Reformation figures, undermined the Medieval worldview and paved the way for the revolutionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the eighteenth century, the pre-modern philosophy of Medieval era had been routed intellectually, and the *philosophes* were moving quickly to transform society on the basis of the new, modern philosophy.

The modern philosophers disagreed among themselves about many issues, but their core agreements outweighed the disagreements. Descartes's account of reason, for example, is rationalist while Bacon's and Locke's are empiricist, thus placing them at the heads of competing schools. But what is fundamental to all three is the central status of reason as objective and competent—in contrast to the faith, mysticism, and intellectual authoritarianism of earlier ages. Once reason is given pride of place, the entire Enlightenment project follows.

If one emphasizes that reason is a faculty of the individual, then individualism becomes a key theme in ethics. Locke's *A Letter concerning Toleration* (1689) and *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) are landmark texts in the modern history of individualism. Both link the human capacity for reason to ethical individualism and its social consequences: the prohibition of force against another's independent judgment or action, individual rights, political equality, limiting the power of government, and religious toleration.

If one emphasizes that reason is the faculty of understanding nature, then that epistemology systematically applied yields

science. Enlightenment thinkers laid the foundations of all the major branches of science. In mathematics, Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz independently developed the calculus, Newton developing his version in 1666 and Leibniz publishing his in 1675. The most monumental publication in the history of modern physics, Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, appeared in 1687. A century of unprecedented investigation and achievement led to the production of Carolus Linnaeus's *Systema naturae* in 1735 and *Philosophia Botanica* in 1751, jointly presenting a comprehensive biological taxonomy, and to the production of Antoine Lavoisier's *Traité élémentaire de chimie* (Treatise on Chemical Elements) in 1789, the landmark text in the foundations of chemistry.

Individualism and science are thus consequences of an epistemology of reason. Both applied systematically have enormous consequences.

Individualism applied to politics yields liberal democracy. Liberalism is the principle of individual freedom, and democracy is the principle of decentralizing political power to individuals. As individualism rose in the modern world, feudalism declined. England's liberal revolution in 1688 began the trend. Modern political principles spread to America and France in the eighteenth century, leading to liberal revolutions there in 1776 and 1789. The weakening and overthrow of the feudal regimes then made possible the practical extension of liberal individualist ideas to all human beings. Racism and sexism are obvious affronts to individualism and so had been increasingly on the defensive as the eighteenth century progressed. For the first time ever in history, societies were formed for the elimination of slavery—in America in 1784, in England in 1787, and a year later in France; and 1791 and 1792 saw the publication of Olympe de Gouges's *Declaration of the Rights of Women* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the*

*Rights of Women*, landmarks in the push for women's liberty and equality.<sup>14</sup>

Individualism applied to economics yields free markets and capitalism. Capitalist economics is based on the principle that individuals should be left free to make their own decisions about production, consumption, and trade. As individualism rose in the eighteenth century, feudal and mercantilist arguments and institutions declined. With the development of free markets came a theoretical grasp of the productive impact of the division of labor and specialization and of the retarding impact of protectionism and other restrictive regulations. Capturing and extending those insights, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, is the landmark text in the history of modern economics. Theory and practice developed in tandem, and as markets became freer and more international the amount of wealth available increased dramatically. For example, N. F. R. Crafts's estimates of British average annual income, accepted by both pro- and anti-capitalist historians, show a historically unprecedented rise, from \$333 in 1700 to \$399 in 1760, to \$427 in 1800, to \$498 in 1830, and then a big jump to \$804 in 1860.<sup>15</sup>

Science applied systematically to material production yields engineering and technology. The new culture of reasoning, experimenting, entrepreneurship, and the free exchange of ideas and wealth meant that by the mid-1700s scientists and engineers were discovering knowledge and creating technologies on a historically unprecedented scale. The outstanding consequence of this was the Industrial Revolution, which was metaphorically picking up steam by 1750s, and literally picking up steam with the

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<sup>14</sup> The application of reason and individualism to religion led to a decline of faith, mysticism, and superstition. As a result, the religious wars finally cooled off until, for example, after the 1780s no more witches were burned in Europe (Kors and Peters 1972, 15).

<sup>15</sup> Measured in 1970 U.S. dollars; Nardinelli, 1993.

success of James Watt's engine after 1769. Thomas Arkwright's water-frame (1769), James Hargreaves's spinning-jenny (c. 1769), and Samuel Crompton's mule (1779) all revolutionized spinning and weaving. Between 1760-80, for example, British consumption of raw cotton went up 540 percent, from 1.2 to 6.5 million pounds. The rich stuck to their hand-made goods for awhile, so the first things to be mass-produced in the new factories were cheap goods for the masses: soap, cotton clothes and linens, shoes, Wedgwood china, iron pots, and so on.

Science applied to the understanding of human beings yields medicine. The new approaches to understanding the human being as a naturalistic organism drew upon new studies, begun in the Renaissance, of human physiology and anatomy. Supernaturalistic and other pre-modern accounts of human ailments were swept aside as, by the second half of the eighteenth century, medicine put itself increasingly on a scientific footing. The outstanding consequence was that, combined with the rise in wealth, modern medicine increased human longevity dramatically. Edward Jenner's discovery of the smallpox vaccine in 1796, for example, both provided a protection against a major killer of the eighteenth century and established the science of immunization. Advances in obstetrics both established it as a separate branch of medicine and, more strikingly, contributed to the significant decline of infant mortality rates. In London, for example, the death rate for children before the age of five fell from 74.5 percent in 1730-49 to 31.8 percent in 1810-29.<sup>16</sup>

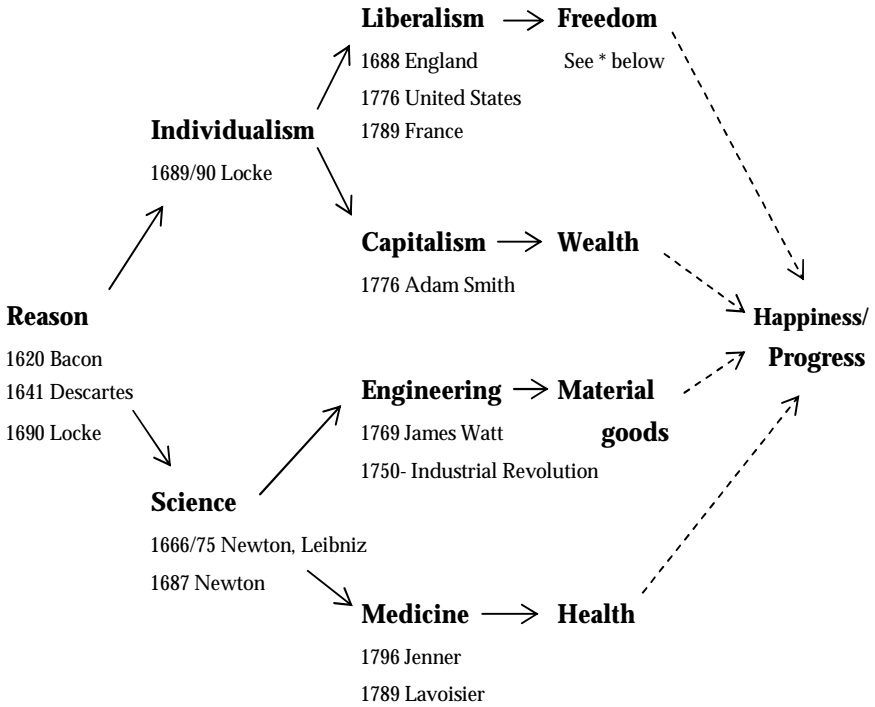
Modern philosophy matured in the 1700s until the dominant set of views of the era were naturalism, reason and science, *tabula rasa*, individualism, and liberalism. The Enlightenment was both the dominance of those ideas in intellectual circles and their translation into practice. As a result, individuals were becoming

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<sup>16</sup> Hessen 1962, 14; see also Nardinelli 1990, 76-79.

freer, wealthier, living longer, and enjoying more material comfort than at any point before in history.

**Chart 1.2: The Enlightenment Vision**



\* 1764 Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishment*

1780s: Last witches burned legally in Europe

1784 American Society for Abolition of Slavery

1787 British Society for Abolition of Slave Trade

1788 French Société des Amis des Noirs

1792 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*

***Postmodernism versus the Enlightenment***

Postmodernism rejects the entire Enlightenment project. It holds that the modernist premises of the Enlightenment were untenable from the beginning and that their cultural manifestations have now reached their nadir. While the modern world continues to speak of reason, freedom, and progress, its pathologies tell another story. The postmodern critique of those pathologies is offered as the death knell of modernism: “The deepest strata of Western culture” have been exposed, Foucault argues, and are “once more stirring under our feet.”<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, states Rorty, the postmodern task is to figure out what to do “now that both the Age of Faith and the Enlightenment seem beyond recovery.”<sup>18</sup>

Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment project in the most fundamental way possible—by attacking its essential philosophical themes. Postmodernism rejects the reason and the individualism that the entire Enlightenment world depends upon. And so it ends up attacking all of the consequences of the Enlightenment philosophy, from capitalism and liberal forms of government to science and technology.

Postmodernism’s essentials are the opposite of modernism’s. Instead of natural reality—anti-realism. Instead of experience and reason—linguistic social subjectivism. Instead of individual identity and autonomy—various race, sex, and class group-isms. Instead of human interests as fundamentally harmonious and tending toward mutually-beneficial interaction—conflict and oppression. Instead of valuing individualism in values, markets, and politics—calls for communalism, solidarity, and egalitarian restraints. Instead of

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault 1966/1973, xxiv.

<sup>18</sup> Rorty 1982, 175. Also John Gray: “We live today amid the dim ruins of the Enlightenment project, which was the ruling project of the modern period” (1995, 145).



prizing the achievements of science and technology—suspicion tending toward outright hostility.

That comprehensive philosophical opposition informs the more specific postmodern themes in the various academic and cultural debates.

**Chart 1.3: Defining Pre-modernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism**

	<b>Pre-modernism</b>	<b>Modernism</b>	<b>Postmodernism</b>
<b><i>Meta-physics</i></b>	Realism: Supernaturalism	Realism: Naturalism	Anti-realism
<b><i>Epistemology</i></b>	Mysticism and/or faith	Objectivism: Experience and reason	Social subjectivism
<b><i>Human Nature</i></b>	Original Sin; Subject to God's will	<i>Tabula rasa</i> and autonomy	Social construction
<b><i>Ethics</i></b>	Collectivism: altruism	Individualism	Collectivism: egalitarianism
<b><i>Politics &amp; Economics</i></b>	Feudalism	Liberal capitalism	Socialism
<b><i>When and Where</i></b>	Medieval	The Enlightenment; 20 <sup>th</sup> -century sciences, business, and technical fields	Late twentieth century humanities and related professions

***Postmodern academic themes***

Postmodern literary criticism rejects the notion that literary texts have objective meanings and true interpretations. All such claims to objectivity and truth can be deconstructed. In one version of deconstruction, represented by those who agree with the quotation from Fish on page 2 above, literary criticism becomes a form of subjective play in which the reader pours subjective associations into the text. In another version, objectivity is replaced by the view that an author's race, sex, or other group membership most deeply shapes the author's views and feelings. The task of the literary critic, accordingly, is to deconstruct the text to reveal the author's race, sex, or class interests. Authors and characters who least embody the correct attitudes are naturally subject to the greatest amount of deconstruction. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, in *The Scarlet Letter* seems at least ambivalent about Hester Prynne's moral status—and this ambivalence reveals that he has sold out to an authoritarian, conformist, and repressive masculine religious establishment.<sup>19</sup> Or: Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* may have thought that he was exploring universal themes of personal and social ambition, man and nature—but what Captain Ahab really represents is the exploitative authoritarianism of imperialistic patriarchalism and the insane drive of technology to conquer nature.<sup>20</sup>

In law, versions of Legal Pragmatism and Critical Legal Theory embody the new wave. For the pragmatist version of post-modernism, any abstract and universal theory of the law is to be distrusted. Theories are worthwhile only to the extent that they provide the lawyer or judge with useful verbal tools.<sup>21</sup> Standards

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<sup>19</sup> Hoffman 1990, 14-15, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Schultz 1988, 52, 55-57.

<sup>21</sup> Luban 1998, 275; Grey 1998.

for usefulness, however, are subjective and variable, so the legal world becomes a postmodernist battleground. As there are no universally valid legal principles of justice, arguments become rhetorical battles of wills. The Critical Legal Theorists represent the race, class, and sex version of legal postmodernism. According to the Crits, legal constitutions and precedents are essentially indeterminate, and the so-called objectivity and neutrality of legal reasoning are frauds. All decisions are inherently subjective and driven by preference and politics. The law is a weapon to be used in the social arena of subjective conflict, an arena driven by competing wills and the coercive assertion of one group's interests over those of other groups. In the West, for too long the law has been a cover for the assertion of white male interests. The only antidote to that poison is the equally forceful assertion of the subjective interests of historically oppressed groups. Stanley Fish marries the pragmatist and Crit approaches in arguing that if lawyers and judges come to think of themselves as "supplementers" rather than "textualists," they "will thereby be marginally more free than they otherwise would be to infuse into constitutional law their current interpretations of our society's values."<sup>22</sup>

In education, postmodernism rejects the notion that the purpose of education is primarily to train a child's cognitive capacity for reason in order to produce an adult capable of functioning independently in the world. That view of education is replaced with the view that education is to take an essentially indeterminate being and give it a social identity.<sup>23</sup> Education's method of molding is linguistic, and so the language to be used is that which will create a human being sensitive to its racial, sexual, and class identity. Our current social context, however, is characterized by oppression that benefits whites, males, and the rich at the expense of everyone else. That oppression in turn leads

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<sup>22</sup> Fish quoting Thomas Grey (Fish 1985, 445).

<sup>23</sup> Golden 1996, 381-382.

to an educational system that reflects only or primarily the interests of those in positions of power. To counteract that bias, educational practice must be recast totally. Postmodern education should emphasize works not in the canon; it should focus on the achievements of non-whites, females, and the poor; it should highlight the historical crimes of whites, males, and the rich; and it should teach students that science's method has no better claim to yielding truth than any other method and, accordingly, that students should be equally receptive to alternative ways of knowing.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Postmodern cultural themes***

These broad academic themes in turn inform our more specific cultural debates.

- Whether the Western canon of great books is a distillation of the best of the West and reflective of a multi-faceted debate—or whether it is ideologically narrow, exclusive, and intolerant.
- Whether Christopher Columbus was a modern hero, bringing two worlds together to their mutual benefit—or whether he was an insensitive, smugly superior point man for European imperialism, bringing armed force that rammed European religion and values down indigenous cultures' throats.
- Whether the United States of America is progressive on liberty, equalities, and opportunities for everyone—or whether it is sexist, racist, and class-bound, e.g., using its mass market pornography and glass ceilings to keep women in their place.
- Whether our ambivalence over affirmative action programs reflects a strong desire to be fair to all parties—or whether those programs are merely a cynical bone thrown to women and minorities until they seem to be helping, at which point there is a violent reaction by the *status quo*.

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<sup>24</sup> Mohanty 1980, 185.

- Whether social conflicts should be defused by encouraging the principle that individuals should be judged according to their individual merits and not according to morally irrelevant features such as race or sex—or whether group identities should be affirmed and celebrated, and whether those who balk at doing so should be sent for mandatory sensitivity training.
- Whether life in the West, and especially America, is improving, with average longevity and wealth increasing in each generation—or whether Amerika has abandoned its urban underclass and fostered a bland consumerist culture of shopping malls and suburban sprawl.
- Whether the liberal West is leading the rest of the world to a freer and more prosperous future—or whether its heavy-handed intrusiveness in foreign policy and its command of the international financial markets are exporting its McJobs to non-Western nations, locking them into the System and destroying their indigenous cultures.
- Whether science and technology are good for all, extending our knowledge of the universe and making the world healthier, cleaner, and more productive—or whether science betrays its elitism, sexism, and destructiveness by making the speed of light the fastest phenomenon, thereby unfairly privileging it over other speeds—by having chosen the phallic symbol  $i$  to represent the square root of negative one—by asserting its desire to “conquer” nature and “penetrate” her secrets—and, having done so, by having its technology consummate the rape by building bigger and longer missiles to blow things up.
- And whether, in general, liberalism, free markets, technology, and cosmopolitanism are social achievements that can be enjoyed by all cultures—or whether non-Western cultures, since they live simply and in harmony with nature, are superior—and whether the West is arrogantly blind to that fact, being elitist and imperialistic,

imposing its capitalism, its science and technology, and its ideology upon other cultures and an increasingly fragile ecosystem.

### ***Why postmodernism?***

What makes all of these debates postmodern is not that the skirmishes are vigorous and heated—but that the terms of the debate have shifted.

Modern debates were over truth and reality, reason and experience, liberty and equality, justice and peace, beauty and progress. In the postmodern framework, those concepts always appear in quotation marks. Our most strident voices tell us that “Truth” is a myth. “Reason” is a white male Eurocentric construct. “Equality” is a mask for oppressions. “Peace” and “Progress” are met with cynical and weary reminders of power—or explicit *ad hominem* attacks.

Postmodern debates thus display a paradoxical nature. Across the board, we hear, on the one hand, abstract themes of relativism and egalitarianism. Those themes come in both epistemological and ethical forms. Objectivity is a myth; there is no Truth, no Right Way to read nature or a text. All interpretations are equally valid. Values are socially subjective products. Culturally, therefore, no group’s values have special standing. All ways of life from Afghani to Zulu are legitimate.

Coexisting with these relativistic and egalitarian themes, we hear, on the other hand, deep chords of cynicism. Principles of civility and procedural justice simply serve as masks for hypocrisy and oppression born of asymmetrical power relations, masks that must be ripped off by crude verbal and physical weapons: *ad hominem* argument, in-your-face shock tactics, and equally cynical power plays. Disagreements are met—not with argument, the benefit of the doubt, and the expectation that reason can prevail—but with assertion, animosity, and a willingness to resort to force.

Postmodernism, therefore, is a comprehensive philosophical and cultural movement. It identifies its target—modernism and its realization in the Enlightenment and its legacy—and it mounts powerful arguments against all of the essential elements of modernism.

The existence of any prominent cultural movement raises questions of intellectual history. In the case of postmodernism, independent developments in many intellectual areas—primarily in epistemology and politics, but also in metaphysics, the physical sciences, and our understanding of human nature and values—came together in the middle part of the twentieth century. Understanding the development of those independent strands and how and why they came to be woven together is essential to understanding postmodernism.

Why is it, for example, that skeptical and relativistic arguments have the cultural power that they now do? Why do they have that power in the humanities but not in the sciences? Why have themes of exhaustion, nihilism, and cynicism come to have the cultural dominance they do? And how can those intellectual themes coexist with a broader culture that is richer, freer, and more vigorous than any culture at any other point in history? Why is it that the leading postmodern thinkers are Left in their politics—in most cases, far Left? And why is it that that prominent segment of the Left—the same Left that traditionally defended its positions on the modernist grounds of reason, science, fairness for all, and optimism—is now voicing themes of anti-reason, anti-science, all's-fair-in-love-and-war, and cynicism?

The Enlightenment re-shaped the entire world, and postmodernism hopes to do the same. Forming such an ambition and developing the arguments capable of mobilizing a movement to realize that ambition is the work of many individuals over several generations. Contemporary second-tier postmodernists, when looking for philosophical support, cite Rorty, Foucault, Lyotard, and

Derrida. Those figures in turn, when looking for heavy-duty philosophical support, cite Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx—the modern world’s most trenchant critics and its most prophetic voices about the new direction. Those figures in turn cite Georg Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant, and to a lesser extent David Hume. The roots and initial impetus of postmodernism thus run deep. The battle between modernism and the philosophies that led to postmodernism was joined at the height of the Enlightenment. Knowing the history of that battle is essential to understanding postmodernism.

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## Chapter Two

# The Counter-Enlightenment Attack on Reason

### *Enlightenment reason, liberalism, and science*

The Enlightenment developed those features of the modern world that many now take largely for granted—liberal politics and free markets, scientific progress and technological innovation. All four of those institutions depend upon confidence in the power of reason.

Political and economic liberalism depend upon confidence that individuals can run their own lives. One gives political power and economic freedom to individuals only to the extent one thinks they are capable of using it wisely. That confidence in individuals is fundamentally a confidence in the power of reason—reason being the means by which individuals can come to know their world, plan their lives, and interact socially the way that reasonable people do—by trade, discussion, and the force of argument.

Science and technology more obviously depend upon confidence in the power of reason. Scientific method is an increasingly refined application of reason to understanding nature. Trusting science's results cognitively is an act of confidence in reason, as is trusting one's life to its technological products.

Institutionalizing confidence in the power of reason is the most outstanding achievement of the Enlightenment.

One indication of this is that of the thousands of brilliant and hardworking individuals who made the Enlightenment happen, the three men, all of them English, most often identified as being most influential in making the Enlightenment possible are: Francis Bacon, for his work on empiricism and scientific method; Isaac Newton, for his work on physics; and John Locke, for his work on reason, empiricism, and liberal politics. Confidence in the power of reason underlay all of their achievements. Their analyses and arguments carried the day, and it was the framework that they developed that provided the intellectual basis for every major development in the eighteenth century.

### ***The beginnings of the Counter-Enlightenment***

The Enlightenment confidence in reason, however, upon which all progress had been based, had always been philosophically incomplete and vulnerable. These philosophical weaknesses had emerged clearly by the middle of the eighteenth century, in the skepticism of David Hume's empiricism and the dead-end reached by traditional rationalism. The perceived vulnerability of Enlightenment reason was one of the major rallying points for an emerging Counter-Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

The era from 1780 to 1815 is one of the defining periods of the modern era. During those thirty-five years, Anglo-American culture

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<sup>1</sup> See Beck 1969, Berlin 1980, Williams 1999, and Dahlstrom 2000 for the historical and philosophical range of "Counter-Enlightenment" as used here.

and German culture split decisively from each other, one following a broadly Enlightenment program, the other a Counter-Enlightenment one.

The Enlightenment had started in England, and it took England from having been a second-rate European power to being a first rate one. The rest of Europe noticed. Especially the French and the Germans noticed. The French were first to pick up on the English Enlightenment and to transform brilliantly their own intellectual culture on the basis of it, before the Rousseauians wrested the Revolution away from the Lockeans and turned it into the chaos of the Terror.

Many Germans, however, had been suspicious of the Enlightenment long before the French Revolution. Some German intellectuals absorbed Enlightenment themes, but most were deeply troubled by its implications for religion, morality, and politics.

Enlightenment reason, the critics charged, undermined traditional religion. The leading Enlightenment thinkers were deists, having abandoned the traditional theistic conception of God. God was no longer a personal, caring creator—he was now the supreme mathematician who had aeons ago designed the universe in terms of the beautiful equations that Johannes Kepler and Newton had discovered. The deists' God operated according to logic and mathematics—not will and whim. The deists' God also seemed to have done his work a long time ago, and to have done it well—meaning he was no longer needed on the scene to operate the machinery of the universe. Deism thus did two things: it turned God into a distant architect, and it accepted a rational epistemology. Both of those features caused major problems for traditional theism.

A distant architect is a far cry from a personal God who is there looking after us or checking up on us day to day—he is not someone we pray to or look to comfort from or fear the wrath of. The deists' god is a bloodless abstraction—not a being that is going

to get people fired up in church on Sunday morning and give them a sense of meaning and moral guidance in their lives.

An even more important consequence of deism is the loss of faith. To the extent that reason is the standard, faith loses, and the theists of the eighteenth century knew that. To the extent that reason develops, science develops; and to the extent that science develops, supernaturalistic religious answers to be accepted on faith will be replaced with naturalistic scientific explanations that are rationally compelling. By the middle of the eighteenth century, everyone had spotted that trend and everyone knew where it was headed.

Even worse, from the perspective of the early Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, was the content of the naturalistic answers that science was giving in the eighteenth century. Science's most successful models then were mechanistic and reductionistic. When applied to human beings, such models posed an obvious threat to the human spirit. What place is there for free will and passion, spontaneity and creativity if the world is governed by mechanism and logic, causality and necessity?

And what about the value consequences? Reason is a faculty of the individual, and respect for reason and individualism had developed together during the Enlightenment. The individual is an end in himself, the Enlightenment thinkers taught, not a slave or servant of others. His happiness is his own to pursue, and by giving him the tools of education, science, and technology he can be set free to set his own goals and to chart his own course in life. But what happens, worried the early Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, to traditional values of community and sacrifice, of duty and connectedness, if individuals are encouraged to calculate rationally their own gain? Will not such rational individualism encourage cold-blooded, short-range, and grasping selfishness? Will it not encourage individuals to reject long-standing traditions and to

sever communal ties, thus creating a non-society of isolated, rootless and restless atoms?

The Enlightenment's championing of reason and individualism thus confronted the early Counter-Enlightenment thinkers with the specter of a godless, spiritless, passionless, and amoral future.

Horror at that specter was most prevalent among intellectuals in the German states, where the prevailing attitude was hostility toward the Enlightenment. Many drew inspiration from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's collectivist social philosophy. Many drew inspiration from Hume's attack on reason. And many wanted to reinvigorate the German traditions of faith, duty, and ethnic identity that had been undermined by the Enlightenment's emphasis upon reason, the pursuit of happiness, and cosmopolitanism. As the Enlightenment grew in power and prestige in England and France, an emerging Counter-Enlightenment gathered its forces in the German states.

Our concern in this chapter and the next is with post-modernism's attack on reason. Postmodernism emerged as a social force among intellectuals because in the humanities the Counter-Enlightenment defeated the Enlightenment. The weakness of the Enlightenment account of reason was its fatal flaw. Postmodernism's extreme skepticism, subjectivism, and relativism are the results of a two-centuries-long epistemological battle. That battle is the story of pro-reason intellectuals trying to defend realist accounts of perception, concepts, logic, but gradually giving ground and abandoning the field while the anti-reason intellectuals advanced in the sophistication of their arguments and developed increasingly non-rational alternatives. Postmodernism is the end result of the Counter-Enlightenment attack on reason.

***Kant's skeptical conclusion***

Immanuel Kant is the most significant thinker of the Counter-Enlightenment. His philosophy, more than any other thinker's, buttressed the pre-modern worldview of faith and duty against the inroads of the Enlightenment; and his attack on Enlightenment reason more than anyone else's opened the door to the nineteenth-century irrationalists and idealist metaphysicians. Kant's innovations in philosophy were thus the beginning of the epistemological route to postmodernism.

Kant is sometimes considered to be an advocate of reason. Kant was in favor of science, it is argued. He emphasized the importance of rational consistency in ethics. He posited regulative principles of reason to guide our thinking, even our thinking about religion. And he resisted the ravings of Johann Hamann and the relativism of Johann Herder. Thus, the argument runs, Kant should be placed in the pantheon of Enlightenment greats.<sup>2</sup> That is a mistake.

The fundamental question of reason is its relationship to reality. Is reason capable of knowing reality—or is it not? Is our rational faculty a cognitive function, taking its material from reality, understanding the significance of that material, and using that understanding to guide our actions in reality—or is it not? This is the question that divides philosophers into pro- and anti-reason camps, this is the question that divides the rational gnostics and the skeptics, and this was Kant's question in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kant was crystal clear about his answer. Reality—real, noumenal reality—is forever closed off to reason, and reason is limited to awareness and understanding of its own subjective products. Reason has “no other purpose than to prescribe its own formal rule for the extension of its empirical employment, and not

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Höffe 1994, 1.

any extension *beyond all limits of empirical employment*.”<sup>3</sup> Limited to knowledge of phenomena that it has itself constructed according to its own design, reason cannot know anything outside itself. Contrary to the “dogmatists” who had for centuries held out hope for knowledge of reality itself, Kant concluded that “[t]he dogmatic solution is therefore not only uncertain, but impossible.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus Kant, that great champion of reason, asserted that the most important fact about reason is that it is clueless about reality.

Part of Kant’s motivation was religious. He saw the beating that religion had taken at the hands of the Enlightenment thinkers, and he agreed strongly with them that religion cannot be justified by reason. So he realized that we need to decide which has priority—reason or religion. Kant firmly chose religion. This meant that reason had to be put in its proper, subordinate, place. And so, as he stated famously in the Second Preface to the first *Critique*, “I here therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.”<sup>5</sup> One purpose of the *Critique*, accordingly, was to limit severely the scope of reason. By closing noumenal reality off to reason, all rational arguments against the existence of God could be dismissed. If reason could be shown to be limited to the merely phenomenal realm, then the noumenal realm—the realm of religion—would be off limits to reason, and those arguing against religion could be told to be quiet and go away.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Kant’s problematic from empiricism and rationalism***

In addition to his religious concerns, Kant was also grappling with the problems that the empiricists and the rationalists had run into in attempting to develop satisfactory accounts of reason.

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<sup>3</sup> Kant 1781, A686/B714.

<sup>4</sup> Kant 1781, B512/A484.

<sup>5</sup> Kant 1781, Bxxx.

<sup>6</sup> Kant 1781, Bxxxix.

For all of their differences, the empiricists and rationalists had agreed with the broadly Enlightenment conception of reason—that human reason is a faculty of the individual, that it is competent to know reality objectively, that it is capable of functioning autonomously and in accordance with universal principles. Reason so conceived underlay their confidence in science, human dignity, and the perfectibility of human institutions.

Of those five features of reason—objectivity, competence, autonomy, universality, and being an individual faculty—Kant concluded that the sad experience of recent philosophy demonstrated that the most fundamental of them, objectivity, must be abandoned. The failures of empiricism and rationalism had shown that objectivity is impossible.

For reason to be objective, it must have contact with reality. The most obvious candidate for such direct contact is sense-perception. On realist accounts, the senses give us our most direct contact with reality, and they thereby provide the material that reason then organizes and integrates into concepts, those concepts in turn becoming integrated into propositions and theories.

If, however, the senses give us only internal representations of objects, then an obstacle is erected between reality and reason. If reason is presented with an internal sensory representation of reality, then it is not aware directly of reality; reality then becomes something to be inferred or hoped for beyond a veil of sense-perception.

Two arguments had traditionally generated the conclusion that we are aware only of internal sensory representations. The first was based on the fact that sense-perception is a causal process. Since it is a causal process, the argument ran, it seems that one's reason comes to be aware of an internal state at the end of the causal process and not of the external object that initiated the process. The senses, unfortunately, get in the way of our consciousness of reality. The second argument was based on the fact that the features of sense-



perception vary from individual to individual and across time for any given individual. One individual sees an object as red while another sees it as gray. An orange tastes sweet—but not after tasting a spoonful of sugar. What then is the real color of the object or the real taste of the orange? It seems that neither can be said to be the real feature. Instead, each sense-perception must be merely a subjective effect, and one's reason must be aware only of the subjective effect and not the external object.

What both of these arguments have in common is a recognition of the uncontroversial fact that our sense organs have an identity, that they work in specific ways, and that the form in which we experience reality is a function of our sense organs' identities. And they have in common the crucial and controversial premise that our sense organs' having an identity means that they become obstacles to direct consciousness of reality. This latter premise was critical for Kant's analysis.

The empiricists had drawn from this analysis of sense-perception the conclusion that while we must rely on our sense perceptions, we must always be tentative with regard to our confidence in them. From sense-perception we can draw no certain conclusions. The rationalists had drawn the conclusions that sense-experience is useless as a source of significant truths and that for the source of such truths we must look elsewhere.

This brings us to abstract concepts. The empiricists, stressing the experiential source of all of our beliefs, had held that concepts too must be contingent. As based on sense-perception, concepts are two stages removed from reality and so less certain. And as groupings based on our choices, concepts are human artifices, so they and the propositions generated from them can have no necessity or universality ascribed to them.

The rationalists, agreeing that necessary and universal concepts could not be derived from sense-experience—but insisting that we do have necessary and universal knowledge—had concluded that

our concepts must have a source somewhere other than in sense-experience. The problematic implication of this was that if concepts did not have their source in sense-experience, then it was hard to see how they could have any application to the sensory realm.

What these two analyses of concepts had in common is the following hard choice. If we think of concepts as telling us something universal and necessary, then we have to think of them as having nothing to do with the world of sense experience; and if we think of concepts as having something to do with the world of sense experience, then we have to abandon the idea of knowing any real universal and necessary truths. In other words, experience and necessity have nothing to do with each other. This premise too was critical for Kant's analysis.

The rationalists and the empiricists had jointly struck a blow to the Enlightenment confidence in reason. Reason works with concepts. But now we were to accept either that reason's concepts have little to do with the world of sense experience—in which case, science's conception of itself as generating universal and necessary truths about the world of sense-experience was in big trouble—or we were to accept that reason's concepts are merely provisional and contingent groupings of sense-experiences—in which case science's conception of itself as generating universal and necessary truths about the world of sense-experience was in big trouble.

Thus, by the time of Kant, the Enlightenment philosophers' account of reason was faltering on two counts. Given their analysis of sense-perception, reason seemed cut off from direct access to reality. And given their analysis of concepts, reason seemed either irrelevant to reality or limited to merely contingent truths.

Kant's significance in the history of philosophy is that he absorbed the lessons of the rationalists and empiricists and, agreeing with the central assumptions of both sides, transformed radically the terms of the relationship between reason and reality.

***Kant's essential argument***

Kant began by identifying a premise common to both empiricists and rationalists. They had assumed that knowledge must be objective. That is, they took for granted that the object of knowledge sets the terms and that therefore it was up to the subject to identify the object on the object's terms. In other words, the empiricists and the rationalists were realists: they believed that reality is what it is independently of consciousness, and that the purpose of consciousness is to come to an awareness of reality as it is. In Kant's terms, they assumed that the subject is to conform to object.<sup>7</sup> Kant then noted that the realist/objectivist assumption had led repeatedly to failure, and—more strikingly—that it *must* necessarily lead to failure.

To demonstrate this, Kant proposed a dilemma for all analyses of knowledge. The first premise of the dilemma is given at the beginning of the Transcendental Deduction. Here Kant states that knowledge of objects can come to be in only one of two ways.

There are only two possible ways in which synthetic representations [i.e., what one experiences] and their objects can establish connection, obtain necessary relation to one another, and, as it were, meet one another. Either the object alone must make the representation possible, or the representation alone must make the object possible.<sup>8</sup>

The terms of the dilemma are crucial, particularly for the first alternative. If we say that “the object alone must make the representation possible,” then we imply that the subject must have nothing to do with the process. The implication is that the subject can have no identity of its own, that the mind must not be anything in particular, that consciousness must be, to borrow a phrase, a

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<sup>7</sup> Kant 1781, Bxvi.

<sup>8</sup> Kant 1781, A92/B125.

purely “diaphanous” medium on which or through which reality writes itself.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Kant assumed—as had most thinkers before him—that objectivity presupposes naïve realism’s metaphysics of an identity-less subject.

But clearly that metaphysics of mind is hopeless. This was Kant’s next premise. The knowing subject is something: its processes are causal and definite, and they shape the subject’s awareness. In Kant’s words, when we experience “we always remain involved in *conditions*,” conditions that make our experiences a “finite synthesis.”<sup>10</sup>

This is why naïve realism has been an impossible project. The knowing subject is not a blank, identity-less tablet, so it cannot be that the object alone makes knowledge possible. Given its finite identity, the knowing subject is implicated in producing its experiences, and from the limited and conditioned experiences that are produced the subject cannot read off what is really real.

Thus we arrive at the second alternative, the one that Kant proposed as being true—namely that the representation makes the object possible. And thus we have part of the motivation for Kant’s “Copernican” revolution in philosophy, announced in the Second Preface.<sup>11</sup> Given that the knowing subject has an identity, we must abandon the traditional assumption that the subject conforms to the object. Accordingly, the converse must be true: the object must conform to the subject, and only if we make that assumption—i.e., only if we abandon objectivity for subjectivity—can we make sense of empirical knowledge.

The second part of Kant’s motivation was attempting to make sense of necessary and universal concepts and propositions. Neither the rationalists nor the empiricists had found a way to derive them from experience. Kant again faulted their assumption

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<sup>9</sup> Kelley 1986, 22-24.

<sup>10</sup> Kant 1781, A483/B511.

<sup>11</sup> Kant 1781, Bxvi-Bxvii.

of realism and objectivism. Those assumptions made the project impossible. “In the former case [i.e., the object alone making the representation possible], this relation is only empirical, and the representation is never possible *a priori*.”<sup>12</sup> Or putting the point in language Kant had learned from Hume, passive experience will never reveal what *must* be, for such experience “teaches us that a thing is so and so, but not that it cannot be otherwise.”<sup>13</sup>

So again we must infer that the converse is true: Necessity and universality must be functions of the knowing subject, not items impressed upon subjects by objects. If we assume that our identity as knowing subjects is implicated in constructing our experiences, then we can assume that our identity will generate certain necessary and universal features of our experiences.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly we have Kant’s central project in the first *Critique* of tracking down fourteen such constructive functions of the subject: space and time as two forms of sensibility, and the twelve categories. As a result of the operations of those constructive functions, we can find necessary and universal features within our experiential world—because we have put them there.

Now for the payoffs and trade-offs. The first payoff is that the phenomenal world of experience now has necessary and universal features built into it, so we get a nice, orderly world for science to explore. Science is rescued from the unintended skepticism that the empiricists and rationalists had reached, and its aspiration to discover necessary and universal truths is made possible.

But there is also the Kantian trade-off. The objects that science explores exist “only in our brain,”<sup>15</sup> so we can never come to know the world outside it. Since the phenomenal world’s necessary and universal features are a function of our subjective activities, any

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<sup>12</sup> Kant 1781, A92/B125.

<sup>13</sup> Kant 1781, B3.

<sup>14</sup> Kant 1781, Bxvii-Bxviii; A125-A126.

<sup>15</sup> Kant 1781, A484/B512.

necessary and universal features that science discovers in the phenomenal world have application only in the phenomenal world. Science must work with experience and reason, and on Kantian grounds this means that science is cut off from reality itself.

[E]verything intuited in space or time, and therefore all objects of experience possible to us, are nothing but appearances, that is, mere representations, which in the manner in which they are represented, as extended beings, or as series of alterations, have no independent existence outside our thoughts.<sup>16</sup>

As for what has independent existence outside our thoughts, nobody knows or can know.

From Kant's perspective, that is a trade-off he was happy to make, for science's loss is religion's gain. Kant's argument, if successful, means that "all objections to morality and religion will be forever silenced, and this in Socratic fashion, namely, by the clearest proof of the ignorance of the objectors."<sup>17</sup> Reason and science are now limited to playing with phenomena, leaving the noumenal realm untouched and untouchable. Having denied knowledge, room was made for faith. For who can say what is or is not out there in the real world?

### ***Identifying Kant's key assumptions***

Kant's strikingly skeptical conclusions depend upon philosophical assumptions that continue to inform contemporary debates between postmodernists and their foes. Most postmodernists take these assumptions to be solid, and many times their foes are at a loss to challenge them. Yet they are the assumptions that must be addressed if postmodernist conclusions are to be avoided. So it is worth highlighting them for future reference.

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<sup>16</sup> Kant 1781, B519/A491.

<sup>17</sup> Kant 1781, Bxxxii.

The first assumption is that the knowing subject's having an identity is an obstacle to cognition. This assumption is implicit in many verbal formulations: the critics of objectivity will insist that the mind is not a diaphanous medium; nor is it a glossy mirror within which reality reflects itself; nor is it a passive tablet upon which reality writes. The assumption emerges when those facts are taken to disqualify the subject from awareness of reality. The assumption then is that for awareness of reality to occur, the mind *would* have to be a diaphanous medium, a glossy mirror, a passive tablet.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the mind would have to have no identity of its own; it would have to be nothing itself, and cognition would have to involve no causal processes. The mind's identity and its causal processes are thus taken to be the enemies of cognition.

The diaphanous assumption is implicit in the relativity and causality of perception arguments that were part of the background problematic to Kant's philosophy.

In the relativity-of-senses argument, the diaphanous assumption plays out as follows. We notice that one person reports seeing an object as red while another reports seeing it as gray. This puzzles us because it draws our attention to the fact that our sense organs differ in how they respond to reality. This is an epistemological puzzle, however, only if we assume that our sense organs should have nothing to do with our awareness of reality—that somehow awareness should occur by a pure stamping of reality upon our transparent minds. That is, it is a problem only if we assume our senses should operate diaphanously.

In the case of the causality of perception argument, the diaphanous assumption is involved if we are puzzled by the fact that consciousness requires that one's brain be in a certain state, and that between that brain state and the object in reality is a causal process involving sense organs. This is puzzling only if we have previously assumed that awareness should be an unmediated

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<sup>18</sup> This is exactly Rorty's key conclusion in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).

phenomenon, that one's brain being in the appropriate state should just somehow happen. That is, the causal process of perception is a puzzle only on the assumption that our senses should have no identity of their own but rather be a diaphanous medium.<sup>19</sup>

In the arguments based on the relativity and the causality of perception, the identity of our sense organs is taken to be the enemy of awareness of reality.

Kant generalized this point to all organs of consciousness. The subject's mind is not diaphanous. It has identity: it has structures that limit what the subject can be aware of, and they are causally active. From this Kant inferred that the subject is prohibited from awareness of reality. Whatever we take our mind's identity to be—in Kant's case, the forms of sensibility and the categories—those causal processes block us. On the Kantian model, our minds' structures are seen not as existing for the purpose of *registering* or *responding* to structures that exist in reality, but as existing for the purpose of *imposing* themselves upon a malleable reality.

The question to return to is: Is there not something perverse about making our organs of consciousness obstacles to consciousness?<sup>20</sup>

The second key assumption of Kant's argument is that abstractness, universality, and necessity have no legitimate basis in our experiences. This assumption was not original to Kant, but had a long history in the traditional problem of universals and the problem of induction. Kant, however, following Hume, declared

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<sup>19</sup> The diaphanous assumption is sometimes but not necessarily assisted by a lingering mind/body dualism in two ways. In one way, dualism encourages us to conceive of the mind as a ghostly, pure substance that somehow magically confronts and comes to know physical reality. In another way, such dualism posits a non-physical mind that is distinct from the physical sense organs and brain, and so immediately leads us to conceive of the physical senses and the brain as obstacles standing in the way of contact between mind and reality.

<sup>20</sup> See Kelley 1986 for an extended analysis and response to the diaphanous and Kantian theses.



the problems to be in principle unsolvable on the realist/objectivist approach, and he institutionalized that declaration in the subsequent history of philosophy. In the case of abstract, universal concepts, the argument was that there is no way to account for their abstractness and universality empirically: Since what is given empirically is concrete and particular, abstractness and universality must be added subjectively. The parallel argument in the case of general and necessary propositions was that there is no way to account for their generality and necessity empirically: Since what is given empirically is particular and contingent, generality and necessity must be subjectively added.

Institutionalizing this premise is crucial for postmodernism, since what has been added subjectively can be taken away subjectively. Postmodernists, struck by and favoring contingency and particularity for a host of reasons, accept the Humean/Kantian premise that neither abstractness nor generality can be derived legitimately from the empirical.

### ***Why Kant is the turning point***

Kant was the decisive break with the Enlightenment and the first major step toward postmodernism. Contrary to the Enlightenment account of reason, Kant held that the mind is not a response mechanism but a constitutive mechanism. He held that the mind—and not reality—sets the terms for knowledge. And he held that reality conforms to reason, not vice versa. In the history of philosophy, Kant marks a fundamental shift from objectivity as the standard to subjectivity as the standard.

Wait a minute, a defender of Kant may reply. Kant was hardly opposed to reason. After all, he favored rational consistency and he believed in universal principles. So what is anti-reason about that? The answer is that more fundamental to reason than consistency and universality is a connection to reality. Any thinker who

concludes that in principle reason cannot know reality is not fundamentally an advocate of reason. That Kant was in favor of consistency and universality is of derivative and ultimately inconsequential significance. Consistency with no connection to reality is a game based on subjective rules. If the rules of the game have nothing to do with reality, then why should everyone play by the same rules? These were precisely the implications the postmodernists were to draw eventually.

Kant was thus different from previous skeptics and religious apologists. Many earlier skeptics had denied that we can know anything, and many earlier religious apologists had subordinated reason to faith. But earlier skeptics had never been as sweeping in their conclusions. Earlier skeptics would identify particular cognitive operations and raise problems for them. Maybe a given experience is a perceptual illusion—thus undermining our confidence in our perceptual faculties; or maybe it is a dream—thus undermining our confidence in distinguishing truth from fantasy; or maybe induction is only probabilistic—thus undermining our confidence in our generalizations; and so on. But the conclusion of those skeptical arguments would be merely that we cannot be sure that we are right about the way reality is. We might be, but we cannot guarantee it, the skeptics would conclude. Kant's point was deeper, arguing that in principle *any* conclusion reached by *any* of our faculties must necessarily not be about reality. *Any* form of cognition, because it must operate a certain way, cannot put us in contact with reality. On principle, because our minds' faculties are structured in a certain way, we cannot say what reality is. We can only say how our minds have structured the subjective reality we perceive. This thesis had been implicit in the works of some earlier thinkers, including Aristotle's, but Kant made it explicit and drew the conclusion systematically.

Kant is a landmark in a second respect. Earlier skeptics had, despite their negative conclusions, continued to conceive of truth as

correspondence to reality. Kant went a step further and redefined truth on subjective grounds. Given his premises, this makes perfect sense. Truth is an epistemological concept. But if our minds are in principle disconnected from reality, then to speak of truth as an external relationship between mind and reality is nonsense. Truth must be solely an internal relationship of consistency.

With Kant, then, external reality thus drops almost totally out of the picture, and we are trapped inescapably in subjectivity—and that is why Kant is a landmark. Once reason is in principle severed from reality, one then enters a different philosophical universe altogether.

This interpretive point about Kant is crucial and controversial. An analogy may help drive the point home. Suppose a thinker argued the following: “I am an advocate of freedom for women. Options and the power to choose among them are crucial to our human dignity. And I am wholeheartedly an advocate of women’s human dignity. But we must understand that a scope of a woman’s choice is confined to the kitchen. Beyond the kitchen’s door she must not attempt to exercise choice. Within the kitchen, however, she has a whole feast of choices—whether to cook or clean, whether to cook rice or potatoes, whether to decorate in blue or yellow. She is sovereign and autonomous. And the mark of a good woman is a well-organized and tidy kitchen.” No one would mistake such a thinker for an advocate of woman’s freedom. Anyone would point out that there is a whole world beyond the kitchen and that freedom is essentially about exercising choice about defining and creating one’s place in the world as a whole. The key point about Kant, to draw the analogy crudely, is that he prohibits knowledge of anything outside our skulls. He gives reason lots to do within the skull, and he does advocate a well-organized and tidy mind, but this hardly makes him a champion of reason. The point for any advocate of reason is that there is a whole world outside our skulls, and reason is essentially about knowing it.

Kant's contemporary Moses Mendelssohn was thus prescient in identifying Kant as "the all-destroyer."<sup>21</sup> Kant did not take all of the steps down to postmodernism, but he did take the decisive one. Of the five major features of Enlightenment reason—objectivity, competence, autonomy, universality, and being an individual faculty—Kant rejects objectivity. Once reason is so severed from reality, the rest is details—details that are worked out over the next two centuries. By the time we get to the postmodernist account, reason is seen not only as subjective, but also as incompetent, highly contingent, relative, and collective. Between Kant and the postmodernists comes the successive abandonment of the rest of reason's features.

***After Kant: reality or reason, but not both***

Kant's legacy to the next generation is a principled separation of subject and object, of reason and reality. His philosophy is thus a forerunner of postmodernism's strong anti-realist and anti-reason stances.

After Kant, the story of philosophy is the story of German philosophy. Kant died early in the nineteenth century, just as Germany was beginning to replace France as the world's leading intellectual nation, and it was German philosophy that set the program for the nineteenth century.

Understanding German philosophy is crucial to understanding the origins of postmodernism. Continental postmodernists such as Foucault and Derrida will cite Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Hegel as their major formative influences—all of them German thinkers. American postmodernists such as Rorty emerged primarily from the collapse of the Logical Positivist tradition, but will also cite Heidegger and pragmatism as major formative influences. When we look to the roots of Logical Positivism we find cultural Germans

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Beck 1969, 337.

such as Wittgenstein and the members of the Vienna Circle. And when we look at pragmatism, we find it to be an Americanized version of Kantianism and Hegelianism. Postmodernism is thus the supplanting of the Enlightenment with its roots in seventeenth century English philosophy by the Counter-Enlightenment with its roots in late eighteenth-century German philosophy.

Kant is central to that story. By the time of his death Kant's philosophy had conquered the German intellectual world,<sup>22</sup> and so the story of German philosophy became the story of extensions and reactions to Kant

Three broad strains of post-Kantian philosophy emerged. What shall we do, members of each strain asked, about the gulf between subject and object that Kant has said cannot be crossed by reason?

1. Kant's closest followers decided to accept the gulf and live with it. Neo-Kantianism evolved during the nineteenth century, and by the twentieth century two main forms had emerged. One form was Structuralism, of which Ferdinand de Saussure was a prominent exponent, representing the broadly rationalist wing of Kantianism. The other was Phenomenology, of which Edmund Husserl was a prominent representative, representing the broadly empiricist wing of Kantianism. Structuralism was a linguistic version of Kantianism, holding that language is a self-contained, non-referential system, and that the philosophical task was to seek out language's necessary and universal structural features, those features taken to underlie and be prior to the empirical, contingent features of language. Phenomenology's focus was upon careful examination of the contingent flow of the experiential given, avoiding any existential inferences or assumptions about what one experiences, and seeking simply to describe experience as neutrally and as clearly as possible. In effect, the Structuralists were seeking subjective noumenal categories, and the Phenomenologists were

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<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Wood, in Kant 1996, vi; also Meinecke 1977, 25.

content with describing the phenomena without asking what connection to an external reality those experiences might have.

Structuralism and Phenomenology came to prominence in the twentieth century, however, and so my focus next will be on the two strains of German philosophy that dominated the nineteenth century. For those two strains, Kant's philosophy set a problem to be solved—though one to be solved within the constraints of Kant's most fundamental premises.

2. The speculative metaphysical strain, best represented by Hegel, was dissatisfied with the principled separation of subject and object. This strain granted Kant's claim that the separation cannot be bridged *epistemologically* by reason, and so proposed to bridge it *metaphysically* by identifying the subject with the object.

3. The irrationalist strain, best represented by Kierkegaard, was also dissatisfied by the principled separation of subject and object. It granted Kant's claim that the separation cannot be bridged epistemologically by *reason*, and so proposed to bridge it epistemologically by *irrational* means.

Kantian philosophy thus set the stage for the reign of speculative metaphysics and epistemological irrationalism in the nineteenth century.

### ***Metaphysical solutions to Kant: from Hegel to Nietzsche***

Georg W. F. Hegel's philosophy is another fundamentally Counter-Enlightenment attack on reason and individualism. His philosophy is a partially secularized version of traditional Judeo-Christian cosmology. While Kant's concerns centered upon epistemology, Hegel's centered upon metaphysics. For Kant, preserving faith led him to deny reason, while for Hegel preserving the spirit of Judeo-Christian metaphysics led him to be more anti-reason and anti-individualist than Kant ever was.

Hegel agreed with Kant that realism and objectivism were dead ends. Kant had transcended them by making the subject prior, but from Hegel's perspective he had been too wishy-washy in doing so. Kant made the subject responsible only for the phenomenal world of experience, leaving noumenal reality forever closed off to us. This was intolerable to Hegel—after all, the whole point of philosophy is to achieve union with reality, to escape the merely sensuous and finite and to come to know and be one with the supersensuous and infinite.

However, Hegel had no intention of trying to solve the epistemological puzzles about perception, concept-formation, and induction that had set Kant's agenda, in order to show us how we might acquire knowledge of the noumenal. Instead, taking a cue from Johann Fichte, Hegel's strategy was to assert boldly an identity of subject and object, thus closing the gap metaphysically.

On Kantian grounds, the subject is responsible for the form of awareness; but Kant was still enough of a realist to posit a noumenal reality that was the source of the content that our minds shape and structure. For Hegel, the realist element drops out entirely: the subject generates both content and form. The subject is in no way responsive to an external reality; instead, the whole of reality is a creation of the subject.

"In my view," Hegel wrote at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*".<sup>23</sup> The Subject that Hegel had in mind is not the empirical, individual subject of traditional philosophy. The creative Subject that is also Substance is the universe as a whole (or God, or Spirit, or the Absolute), of which we individual subjects are mere portions. Realists had seen the universe as a whole as an object or set of objects within which there are some subjects. Hegel reversed that:

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<sup>23</sup> Hegel 1807, 17.

the universe as a whole is a subject, and within the subject are objects. Such a bold posit solves a lot of problems.

We can get even more necessity and universality than Kant had given us. Hume had told us that we cannot get necessary and universal truths from reality. Kant, agreeing with Hume's conclusion, had suggested that we supply necessity and universality from ourselves. That grounded necessity and universality, but at a price: since we supply them subjectively, we cannot be sure that they apply to reality. Hegel agreed with Kant that our minds supply necessity and universality, but said that *all* of reality is a product of mind, the Mind that contains all of our little minds within it. Since reality comes from us, we can know all of reality in all of its glorious necessity.

We can also get a universe that does not dehumanize us. Hegel argued that the realist and objectivist models had, by separating subject and object, inevitably led to mechanical and reductionist accounts of the self. By taking the everyday objects of empirical reality as the model and explaining everything in terms of them, they necessarily had to reduce the subject to a mechanical device. But if instead we start with the subject and not the object, then our model of reality changes significantly. The subject, we know from the inside, is conscious and organic, and if the subject is a microcosm of the whole, then applying its features to the whole generates a conscious and organic model of the world. Such a model of the world is much more hospitable to traditional values than the materialist and reductionist leanings of the Enlightenment.

Hegel could also claim to be more of an advocate of reason than Kant was. Reason, Kant, taught us, is fundamentally a creative function. And, Kant also taught us, it can know only its own phenomenal creations. But having asserted that reason creates all of reality, Hegel could offer us the very optimistic, Enlightenment-sounding conclusion that reason can know *all* of reality.



***Dialectic and saving religion***

We are now, however, talking about a very different Reason than the Enlightenment one. Hegel's reason is fundamentally a creative function, not a cognitive one. It does not come to know a pre-existing reality; it brings all of reality into existence.

More notoriously, Hegel's reason operates by dialectical and contradictory means, and not in accordance with the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction.

Hegel's dialectic is driven partly by the fact that by the early nineteenth century evolutionary ideas are in the air. In contrast to Kant's belief that the subjective categories of reason are necessarily unchanging and universal, Hegel argued that the appropriate categories themselves are changeable. But Hegel's dialectic is a special kind of evolution, one designed less to be responsive to discoveries in biology than to square with Judeo-Christian cosmology.

Judeo-Christian cosmology had traditionally been plagued by metaphysical assertions that were repugnant to reason. Respect for reason during the Enlightenment had led accordingly to a significant decline in religious belief among the intellectuals. Aristotelian reason cannot countenance a god that creates something out of nothing, that is both three and one, that is perfect but creates a world that contains evil. Accordingly, the thrust of Enlightenment theology had been to alter religion by eliminating its contradictory theses in order to make it compatible with reason. Hegel's strategy was to accept that Judeo-Christian cosmology is rife with contradictions—but to alter reason in order to make it compatible with contradiction.

Here Hegel made another significant step beyond Kant and further away from the Enlightenment. Kant had come close to the truth, Hegel believed, in developing the antinomies of reason in the

first *Critique*. Kant's purpose there was to show that reason is out of its depth when it tries to figure out noumenal truths about reality. He did so by developing four pairs of parallel arguments on four metaphysical issues and by showing that in each case reason leads to contradictory conclusions. One can prove that the universe must have had a beginning in time, but one can equally soundly prove that the universe must be eternal. One can prove the world must be made up of simplest parts and also that it cannot be, that we have free will and that strict determinism is true, that God must exist and that He does not exist.<sup>24</sup> These contradictions of reason show, Kant concluded, that reason can never know reality, and that therefore our reason is limited to structuring and manipulating its subjective creations.

Hegel thought that Kant had missed a deep point here. The antinomies are not a problem for reason, contrary to Kant but rather the key to the whole universe. The antinomies of reason are a problem *only* if one thinks that logical contradictions are a problem. That was Kant's mistake—he was too trapped in the old Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction. What Kant's antinomies show is not that reason is limited but rather that we need a new and better kind of reason, one that embraces contradictions and sees the whole of reality as evolving out of contradictory forces.

Such a conception of contradictory evolution is compatible with Judeo-Christian cosmology. That cosmology begins with a creation *ex nihilo*, posits a perfect being that generates evil, believes in a just being that gives humans independent judgment but punishes them for using it, includes accounts of virgin births and other miracles, says that the infinite becomes finite, the immaterial becomes material, the essentially unitary becomes plural, and so on. Given the primacy of that metaphysics, reason must give way. Reason, for example, must be adapted to the demands of this metaphysics of creation:

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<sup>24</sup> Kant 1781, A426-A452.

As yet, there is nothing and there is to become something. The beginning is not pure nothing, but a nothing from which something is to proceed; therefore being, too, is already contained in the beginning. The beginning, therefore, contains both, being and nothing, is the unity of being and nothing; or is non-being which is at the same time being, and being which is at the same time non-being.<sup>25</sup>

While that account of creation is incoherent from the perspective of Aristotelian reason, such a poetically grand-sounding drama of evolution by contradiction is perfectly rational—if one grants that reason contains within itself contradiction, that analysis consists in seeking the implicit contradiction within anything and teasing it out in order to put the contradictory elements explicitly in tension with each other, thus leading to a resolution that both goes beyond the contradiction to another evolutionary stage while at the same time preserving the original contradiction. Whatever that means.

Hegel thus explicitly rejected Aristotle's law of non-contradiction: Absolutely everything depends on "the identity of identity and non-identity," Hegel wrote in *The Science of Logic*.<sup>26</sup>

Hegelian dialectical reason also differs from Enlightenment reason by implying a strong relativism, against the universality of Enlightenment reason. For all of Hegel's talk of the ultimate Universal perspective of the Absolute, from any other perspective nothing holds for long: dialectic injects contradiction into reality at any given time as well as across eras. If everything is evolving by the clash of contradictions, then what is metaphysically and epistemologically true in one epoch will be contradicted by what is true in the next, and so on.

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<sup>25</sup> Hegel 1812-16, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Hegel 1812-16, 74.

Finally, Hegel's reason differs from Enlightenment reason by not only being creative of reality and in embracing contradiction, but also by being a fundamentally collective function rather than an individual one. Here again, Hegel went beyond Kant in rejecting the Enlightenment. While Kant preserved some elements of individual autonomy, Hegel rejected those elements. Just as the Judeo-Christian cosmology sees everything as God working out His plan for the world in, around, and through us, for Hegel individuals' minds and whole being are a function of the deeper forces of the universe operating upon them and through them. Individuals are constructed by their surrounding cultures, cultures that have an evolutionary life of their own, those cultures themselves being a function of yet still deeper cosmic forces. The individual is a tiny emergent aspect of the largest whole, the collective Subject's working itself out, and the creation of reality occurs at that level with little or no regard for the individual. The individual is merely along for the ride. Speaking in *Philosophy of History* of collective reason's operations, Hegel stated that as "Universal Reason *does* realize itself, we have indeed nothing to do with the individual empirically regarded"; "This *Good*, this *Reason*, in its most concrete form, is God. God governs the world; the actual working of his government—the carrying out of his plan—is the History of the World."<sup>27</sup>

### ***Hegel's contribution to postmodernism***

Hegel's place historically is to have institutionalized four theses in nineteenth-century metaphysics.

1. Reality is an entirely subjective creation;
2. Contradictions are built into reason and reality;
3. Since reality evolves contradictorily, truth is relative to time and place; and

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<sup>27</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 35-36.

4. The collective, not the individual, is the operative unit.

Hegel's influence was and is profound upon future metaphysicians. Among those metaphysicians, fierce debates emerged over secondary theses. Was the clash of contradiction ultimately progressive, as Hegel thought—or was Hegel willfully blinding himself to the totally irrational chaos that Schopenhauer believed reality to be? Was the ontological substrate of clash and contradiction ideal, as Hegel held—or was it material, as Marx argued? Was the process as totally collectivizing as Hegel took it to be—or were there some individualist elements within an overall collectivizing framework, as Nietzsche asserted?

Whatever the variations, the metaphysical themes of clash and conflict, of truth as relative, of reason as limited and constructed, and of collectivism were dominant. For all of their differences with Hegel, postmodernists adopt all four of these theses.

### ***Epistemological solutions to Kant: irrationalism from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche***

The Kantians and the Hegelians represent the pro-reason contingent in nineteenth century German philosophy.

While the Hegelians pursued metaphysical solutions to Kant's unbridgeable gap between subject and object, in the process altering reason into something unrecognizable to the Enlightenment, they had competition from the explicitly irrationalist wing of German philosophy. This line of development included major figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Denmark's lonely contribution to the history of modern philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard.

The irrationalists divided over whether religion is true—Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard being theists, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche being atheists—but all shared a contempt for reason. All condemned reason as a totally artificial and limiting faculty, one

that must be abandoned in the bold quest to embrace reality. Perhaps Kant had prohibited access to reality—but he had shown *only* that *reason* could not get us there. That left other options open to us: faith, feeling, and instinct.

Schleiermacher (1768-1834) came of age in a Kant-dominated intellectual scene, and he took Kant's cue for how religion could respond to the threat of the Enlightenment. Intellectually most active from 1799, with the publication of *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*, Schleiermacher more than anyone made happen the revival of Pietism and orthodox Protestantism over the course of the next generation. So great was Schleiermacher's influence that, as theologian Richard Niebuhr put it, he "may justifiably be called the Kant of modern Protestantism."<sup>28</sup>

As someone who came of age in the 1790s in Germany, Schleiermacher was broadly Kantian in his approach and embraced whole-heartedly the Kantian rejection of reason's access to reality. Schleiermacher, like Kant, was deeply offended by the assault that reason, science, and naturalism had made on the true faith. Following Hamann, Schleiermacher held that feeling, especially religious feeling, is a mode of cognition, one that gives us access to noumenal reality. Except, argued Schleiermacher, these feelings are not so much directed outward as inward. One cannot grasp noumena directly, but one can phenomenologically inspect oneself, one's deepest feelings, and therein find indirect senses of the divine ultimate.<sup>29</sup> As Hamann had stated, directly confronted religious feeling reveals one's essential nature.

When one discovers one's essential nature, the core self-feeling that one is forced to accept is that of absolute dependence. In Schleiermacher's words, "The essence of religion is *the feeling of absolute dependence*. I repudiated rational thought in favour of a

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<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, in Schleiermacher 1963, ix.

<sup>29</sup> Schleiermacher 1799, 18.

theology of feeling.”<sup>30</sup> One should strive to realize oneself by exploring and embracing this feeling of absolute dependence. This requires attacking reason, for reason gives one a feeling of independence and confidence. Limiting reason is thus the essence of religious piety—for it makes possible a fully-entered-into feeling of dependence and orientation toward that being upon which one is absolutely dependent. That being is of course God.<sup>31</sup>

In the next generation, Kierkegaard (“Hamann’s most brilliant and profound disciple”<sup>32</sup>) gave irrationality an activist twist. Educated in Germany, Kierkegaard was, like Kant, deeply worried by the beating religion had taken during the Enlightenment. So he was cheered—or at least as cheered as Kierkegaard could ever be—to learn from Kant that reason cannot reach the noumena.

The Enlightenment thinkers had said that individuals relate to reality as knowers. On the basis of their acquired knowledge, individuals then act to better themselves and their world. “Knowledge is power,” wrote Bacon. But after Kant we know that knowledge of reality is impossible. So while we still must act in the real world, we do not and cannot have the necessary knowledge upon which to base our choices. And since our entire destinies are at stake in the choices we make, we cannot choose dispassionately between options. We must choose, and choose passionately, all the while knowing that we are choosing in ignorance.

For Kierkegaard, the core lesson from Kant was that one must not try to relate to reality cognitively—what is needed is action, commitment, a leap into that which one cannot know but which one feels is essential to give meaning to one’s life. In accordance with Kierkegaard’s felt religious needs, what is needed is an irrational leap of faith. It must be a leap because after the Enlightenment it is clear that the existence of God cannot be

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<sup>30</sup> Schleiermacher 1821-22, Section 4.

<sup>31</sup> Schleiermacher 1821-22, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Berlin 1980, 19.

justified rationally, and it must be irrational because the God that Kierkegaard finds compelling is absurd.

But such a leap into the absurd puts one in a crisis. It flies in the face of everything sensible, rational, and moral. So how should one deal with this crisis of both wanting and not wanting to leap into absurdity? In *Fear and Trembling* we find Kierkegaard's panegyric to Abraham, a hero of the Hebrew Scriptures who in defiance of all reason and morality was willing turn off his mind and kill his son Isaac. Why? Because God ordered him too. How could that be—would a good God make such a demand of a man? That makes God incomprehensibly cruel. What about God's promise that through Isaac the future generations of Israel would be born? The demand makes God a promise-breaker. What about the fact that it is killing an innocent? That makes God immoral. What about the immense pain that the loss of their son would cause in Abraham and Sarah? That makes God a sadist. Does Abraham rebel? No. Does he even question? No. He shuts down his mind and obeys. *That*, said Kierkegaard, is the essence of our cognitive relation to reality. Like Abraham, each of us must learn "to relinquish his understanding and his thinking, and to keep his soul fixed upon the absurd."

Like Abraham, we do not know and we cannot know. What we must do is jump blindly into the unknown. Kierkegaard revered Abraham as a "knight of faith" for his willingness to "crucify reason" and leap into absurdity.<sup>33</sup>

Schopenhauer, also of the generation after Kant and a contemporary of Hegel, disagreed violently with the cowardly attempts to return to religion after the rejection of Enlightenment reason. While Hegel populated Kant's noumenal realm with Dialectical Spirit and Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard felt or hoped desperately that God was out there, Schopenhauer's feelings had revealed to him that reality is Will—a deeply irrational and

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<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard 1843, 31.



conflictual Will, striving always and blindly toward nothing.<sup>34</sup> No wonder then that reason had no chance of comprehending it: Reason's rigid categories and neat organizational schemes are wholly inadequate for a reality that is the opposite of that. Only like can know like. Only via our own wills, our passionate feelings—especially those evoked in us by music—can we grasp the essence of reality.

But most of us are too cowardly to try, for reality is cruel and frightening. This is why we cling to reason so desperately—reason allows us to tidy things up, to make ourselves feel safe and secure, to escape from the swirling horror that, in our honest moments, we sense reality to be. Only the bravest few have the courage to pierce through the illusions of reason to the irrationality of reality. Only a few individuals of special sensitivity are willing to pierce reason's veil and intuit passionately the seething flow.

Of course, having intuited the cruel horror of the seething flow, Schopenhauer wished for self-annihilation.<sup>35</sup> This was the weakness that his disciple, Nietzsche urged us to overcome.

Nietzsche began epistemologically by agreeing with Kant: "When Kant says: 'reason does not derive its laws from nature but prescribes them to nature,' this is, in regard to the concept of nature, completely true." All of the problems of philosophy, from the decadent Socrates<sup>36</sup> to that "catastrophic spider" Kant,<sup>37</sup> are

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<sup>34</sup> Reality, Schopenhauer wrote, is a "world of constantly needy creatures who continue for a time merely by devouring one another, pass their existence in anxiety and want, and often endure terrible affliction, until they fall at last into the arms of death" (1819/1966, 349).

<sup>35</sup> Schopenhauer: "we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world, that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence" (1819/1966, Vol. 2, 576). As for mankind: "nothing else can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist" (1819/1966, Vol. 2, 605).

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am So Wise," 1.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 11.

caused by their emphasis on reason. The rise of the philosophers meant the fall of man, for once reason took over, men

no longer possessed their former guides, their regulating, unconscious and infallible drives: they were reduced to thinking, inferring, reckoning, co-ordinating cause and effect, these unfortunate creatures; they were reduced to their ‘consciousness,’ their weakest and most fallible organ!<sup>38</sup>

And: “how pitiful, how shadowy and fleeting, how aimless and capricious the human intellect is.” Being merely a surface phenomenon and dependent upon underlying instinctual drives, the intellect certainly is not autonomous or in control of anything.<sup>39</sup>

What Nietzsche meant, then, with his passionate exhortations to be true to oneself, is to break out of the artificial and constricting categories of reason. Reason is a tool of weaklings who are afraid to be naked in the face of a cruel and conflictual reality and who therefore build fantasy intellectual structures to hide in. What we need to bring out the best possible in us is “the perfect functioning of the regulating *unconscious* instincts.”<sup>40</sup> The yea-sayer—the man of the future—will not be tempted to play word-games but will embrace conflict. He will tap into his deepest drives, his will to power, and channel all of his instinctual energies in a vital new direction.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, II:16.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 478.

<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, I:7.

<sup>41</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil* (252), Nietzsche shares the view that the deepest battle is the Enlightenment, with its roots in English philosophy, against the Counter-Enlightenment, with its roots in German philosophy: “They are no philosophical race, these Englishmen: Bacon signifies an *attack* on the philosophical spirit; Hobbes, Hume, and Locke a debasement and lowering of the value of the concept of ‘philosophy’ for more than a century. It was *against* Hume that Kant arose, and rose; it was Locke of whom Schelling said, *understandably, je méprise Locke* [I despise Locke]; in their fight against the English-mechanistic doltification of the world, Hegel and Schopenhauer were of one mind (with Goethe)—these two hostile

***Summary of irrationalist themes***

In contrast to Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, then, Kant and Hegel seem like champions of reason. Yet Kantian and Hegelian assumptions launched the irrationalist movements of the nineteenth century.

The legacy of the irrationalists for the twentieth century included four key themes:

1. An agreement with Kant that reason is impotent to know reality;
2. an agreement with Hegel that reality is deeply conflictual and/or absurd;
3. a conclusion that reason is therefore trumped by claims based on feeling, instinct, or leaps of faith; and
4. that the non-rational and the irrational yield deep truths about reality.

The death of Nietzsche in 1900 brings us to the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century German philosophy had developed two main lines of thought—the speculative metaphysical and the irrationalist epistemological. What was needed was a way to bring together these two strands of thought into a new synthesis for the next century. The philosopher who accomplished this was Martin Heidegger.

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brother geniuses in philosophy who strove apart toward opposite poles of the German spirit and in the process wronged each other as only brothers wrong each other. “

See also *Daybreak*: “The whole great tendency of the Germans ran counter to the Enlightenment” (Section 197).

## Chapter Three

# The Twentieth-Century Collapse of Reason

### *Heidegger's synthesis of the Continental tradition*

Martin Heidegger took Hegelian philosophy and gave it a personal, phenomenological twist.

Heidegger is notorious for the obscurity of his prose and for his actions and inactions on behalf of the National Socialists during the 1930s, and he is unquestionably the leading twentieth-century philosopher for the postmodernists. Derrida and Foucault identify themselves as followers of Heidegger.<sup>1</sup> Rorty cites Heidegger as one of the three major influences on his thinking, the other two being Dewey and Wittgenstein.<sup>2</sup>

Heidegger absorbed and modified the tradition of German philosophy. Like Kant, Heidegger believed reason to be a super-

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault 1989, 326.

<sup>2</sup> Rorty 1979, 368.

ficial phenomenon, and he adopted the Kantian view of words and concepts as obstacles to our coming to know reality, or Being. However, like Hegel, Heidegger believed that we can get closer to Being than Kant allowed, though not by adopting Hegel's abstracted third-person pretense of Reason. Setting aside both reason and Reason, Heidegger agreed with Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer that by exploring his feelings—especially his dark and anguished feelings of dread and guilt—he could approach Being. And like all good German philosophers, Heidegger agreed that when we get to the core of Being we will find conflict and contradiction at the heart of things.

So what is new? Heidegger's distinctiveness was his use of phenomenology to get us there.

Phenomenology becomes philosophically important once we accept the Kantian conclusion that we cannot start as realists and scientists do by assuming that we are aware of an external, independent reality that is made up of objects that we are trying to understand. But, from the phenomenological standpoint, we must also realize that Kant took only a timid half-step. While Kant was willing to give up the noumenal object, he held onto the belief in an underlying, noumenal self with a specific nature available to us for our investigation. But a noumenal self underlying the flow of phenomena is just as problematic a notion as the notion of noumenal objects underlying the flow. Recognizing this, Heidegger therefore wanted to start, following Nietzsche's occasional but undeveloped suggestions, without making the assumption of the existence of either an object or a subject.

So we start phenomenologically—that is, by simply and clearly describing the phenomena of experience and change.

On Heidegger's account, what one finds when starting so is a sense of projection into a field of experience and change. Do not think *objects*, Heidegger counseled, think *fields*. Do not think *subject*,

think *experience*. We start small and local, with Da-sein's being projected into reality.

"Da-sein" is Heidegger's substitute concept for "self," "subject," or "human being," all of which he thought carried undesirable baggage from earlier philosophy. Heidegger explained his choice of "Da-sein" by defining it as follows: "*Da-sein* means *being projected into Nothing*."<sup>3</sup> Ignoring the "Nothing" for now, it is the *being projected* that is Da-sein—not that, if anything, which is projected or does the projecting. The emphasis is on activity, thus avoiding assumptions that there are two things, a subject and an object, that enter into a relationship. There is simply action, the action of being out there, being thrust into.

The *being projected* reveals and clothes successively over time various semi-stable fields or "beings"—what we would call "objects" if we had not already shed our naïve realism.

Yet the long process of describing the phenomena of beings, Heidegger found, led him inexorably to a question—the question that has haunted all of philosophy: What is the Being of the various beings? The beings differ and change, come and go, yet for all their changeability and difference they still manifest a oneness, a commonality: They all *are*. What is that Being underlying or behind or common to all beings? What makes the beings Be? Or, raising the stakes to the Heideggerian Question of all questions: Why is there even Being at all? Why is there not rather Nothing?<sup>4</sup>

This is no ordinary question. With a question like this, Heidegger pointed out, reason quickly finds itself in trouble—the same kind of trouble that Kant had pointed out with his antinomies: reason *always* reaches contradictions whenever it attempts to explore deep metaphysical issues. A question such as "Why is there Being and not rather Nothing?" is therefore repugnant to reason. For Heidegger, this meant that if we are to explore the question,

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 251.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger 1953, 1.

then reason—the “most stiff-necked adversary of thought”<sup>5</sup>—was an obstacle that had to be discarded.

### ***Setting aside reason and logic***

The Question is repugnant to reason, as Heidegger wrote in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, because we reach logical absurdity whichever way we go in attempting to answer it.<sup>6</sup> If we say, on the one hand, that there is no answer to the question of why there is Being—if Being just is for no reason—then that makes Being absurd: something that cannot be explained is an absurdity to reason. But if, on the other hand, we say that Being is for a reason, then what could that reason be? We would have to say that that reason, whatever it is, is outside of Being. But outside of Being is nothing—which means that we would have to try to explain Being from nothingness, which is also absurd. So either way we go in trying to answer the Question, we are deeply into absurdity.

Logic wants at this point to forbid the Question. Logic wants to say that the absurdity shows that the question is ill-formed and so should be set aside: Logic wants instead to make the existence of reality its axiom, and to proceed from there with discovering the identities of the various existents.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, switching back to a Heideggerian perspective, the questions spawned by the Question strike very deep feelings in Da-sein. What about the Nothingness that Being would have come from? Could Being not have been? Could Being return once again to the Nothing? Such questions are compellingly awesome, and yet at the same time they fill Da-sein with a sense of dis-ease and anxiety. So here Da-sein has a conflict: Logic and reason say that the question is contradictory and so should be set

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<sup>5</sup> Heidegger 1949, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger 1953, 23, 25.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Rand 1957, 1015-ff.

aside, but Da-sein's feelings urge Da-sein to explore the question in a non-verbal, emotional way. So which does Da-sein choose: contradiction and feeling—or logic and reason?

Fortunately, as we have learned from Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, this contradiction and conflict is yet another sign that logic and reason are impotent. As we all know by now, we should *expect* to find conflict and contradiction at the heart of things—contradiction is the sign that we are on to something important.<sup>8</sup> So mere logic, Heidegger concluded—an “invention of schoolteachers, not of philosophers”<sup>9</sup>—cannot and should not get in the way of probing the ultimate mystery that is Being. We must reject entirely the assumption “that in this enquiry ‘logic’ is the highest court of appeal, that reason is the means and thinking the way to an original comprehension of Nothing and its possible revelation.” Again:

If this [contradiction] breaks the sovereignty of reason in the field of enquiry into Nothing and Being, then the fate of the rule of ‘logic’ is also decided. The very idea of ‘logic’ disintegrates in the vortex of a more original questioning.<sup>10</sup>

And again, in case we have missed the point: “Authentic speaking about nothing always remains extraordinary. It cannot be vulgarized. It dissolves if it is placed in the cheap acid of merely logical intelligence.”<sup>11</sup> Deep feeling about Nothing trumps logic any day.

### ***Emotions as revelatory***

Having subjected reason and logic to *Destruktion* and then set them aside as merely one superficial way of thinking—one that the Greeks had established fatefully for all subsequent Western

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Heidegger 1929/1975, 245-246.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger 1953, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 245, 253.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger 1953, 26.



thought<sup>12</sup>—we need another route to Being and Nothing. We can try to explore language without the presuppositions of reason and logic, but even the elements of language, words, have evolved over time and become so twisted and crusted over with layers of meaning that they almost entirely hide Being from us. Their original force and contact with reality has been lost. We can therefore try to strip away from our language the encrusted layers to reveal the ur-words that had original and genuine connective force to Being, but that will require special efforts.

For Heidegger, the special effort that is required is emotional, an exploratory letting oneself go into the revelatory emotions of boredom, fear, guilt, and dread.

Boredom is a good mood to start with. When we are bored—really, really, really bored—we are no longer engaged with the ordinary, trivial, day-to-day things that occupy most of our time. When we are bored, “drifting hither and thither in the abysses of existence like a mute fog,”<sup>13</sup> all beings become a matter of indifference, undifferentiated from one another. Everything merges or dissolves into an un-distinguished unity.

Progress has thus been made: “This boredom reveals what-is in totality.”<sup>14</sup> Real boredom takes one away from one’s normal focus on particular beings and one’s cares for them and diffuses one’s awareness into a sense of Being-as-a-whole’s being revealed to one.

But this revelation also brings with it anxiety and dread. For part of the process of the dissolution of particular beings into a state of undifferentiation is the dissolution of one’s own sense of being a unique, individual being. One has the feeling of beings being dissolved into an undifferentiated Being—but at the same time one has the feeling of one’s self-identity as also slipping into a state of

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<sup>12</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 261.

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 247.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 247.

being nothing-in-particular—that is, of becoming nothing. This is distressing.

In dread we are ‘in suspense’ (*wir schweben*). Or, to put it more precisely, dread holds us in suspense because it makes what-is-in-totality slip away from us. Hence we too, as existents in the midst of what-is, slip away from ourselves along with it. For this reason it is not ‘you’ or ‘I’ that has the uncanny feeling, but ‘one.’<sup>15</sup>

This sense of dread that comes with a sense of the dissolution of all beings along with oneself was for Heidegger a metaphysically potent state, for in effect one gets a foretaste of one’s own death, a sense of one’s being annihilated, a sense of going into nothingness—and thus a sense of getting to the metaphysical center of Being.

One must absolutely not, therefore, give into one’s overpowering sense of distress and run away from dread and back to the safety of one’s petty, day-to-day life. One must embrace one’s dread and surrender to it, for “the dread felt by the courageous”<sup>16</sup> is the emotional state that prepares one for the ultimate revelation. That ultimate revelation is of the truth of Judeo-Christian and Hegelian metaphysics.

In dread we come to feel that Being and Nothing are identical. This is what all philosophy based on the Greek model had missed, and what all philosophies not based on the Greek model had been struggling toward.

“Nothing,” wrote Heidegger, “not merely provides the conceptual opposite of what-is but is also an original part of essence.”<sup>17</sup> Heidegger credited Hegel with having reclaimed this lost insight for the Western tradition: “‘Pure Being and pure Nothing are thus one and the same.’ This proposition of Hegel’s (‘The Science of

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<sup>15</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 249.

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 253.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 251.

Logic,' I, WW III, p. 74) is correct." Hegel of course got it from trying to resuscitate the Judeo-Christian account of creation, in which God created the world out of nothing. As Heidegger put it in re-affirming that Judeo-Christian claim, "every being, so far as it is a being, is made out of nothing."<sup>18</sup>

So after abandoning reason and logic, after experiencing real boredom and terrifying dread, we unveil the final mystery of mysteries: Nothing. In the end, all is nothing and nothing is all. With Heidegger, we reach metaphysical nihilism.

### ***Heidegger and postmodernism***

Heidegger's philosophy is the integration of the two main lines of German philosophy, the speculative metaphysical and the irrationalist epistemological. After Kant, the Continental tradition quickly and gleefully abandoned reason, putting wild speculation, clashing wills, and troubled emotion at the forefront. In Heidegger's synthesis of the Continental tradition, we can see clearly many of the ingredients of postmodernism. Heidegger offered to his followers the following conclusions, all of which are accepted by the mainstream of postmodernism with slight modifications:

1. Conflict and contradiction are the deepest truths of reality;
2. Reason is subjective and impotent to reach truths about reality;
3. Reason's elements—words and concepts—are obstacles that must be un-crusted, subjected to *Destruktion*, or otherwise unmasked;
4. Logical contradiction is neither a sign of failure nor of anything particularly significant at all;
5. Feelings, especially morbid feelings of anxiety and dread, are a deeper guide than reason;

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<sup>18</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 254-255.

6. The entire Western tradition of philosophy—whether Platonic, Aristotelian, Lockean, or Cartesian—based as it is on the law of non-contradiction and the subject/object distinction, is the enemy to be overcome.

This is not yet to introduce Heidegger's strong social and political collectivism, which is also part of his inheritance from the main lines of German philosophy. Nor is it to make explicit, as Heidegger did, his strong anti-science and anti-technology views.<sup>19</sup> Nor is it yet to discuss his anti-humanism,<sup>20</sup> with his regular calls for us to be obedient to Being, to feel guilty before Being, to pay homage to Being, and even to "sacrifice man for the truth of Being"<sup>21</sup>—which, if we are still allowed to be logical, means sacrificing ourselves to Nothing. (Those elements in Heidegger's philosophy will arise in Chapter Four, in the context of discussing the political background to postmodernism.)

What the postmodernists will do in the next generation is abandon the remnants of metaphysics in Heidegger's philosophy, along with his occasional streaks of mysticism. Heidegger was still doing metaphysics, and he spoke of there being a truth out there about the world that we must seek or let find us. The postmodernists, by contrast, are anti-realists, holding that it is meaningless to speak of truths out there or of a language that could capture them. As anti-realists, accordingly, they will reject the formulation of (1) above as a metaphysical assertion, and instead reformulate its assertion of the reign of conflict and contradiction as descriptive merely of the flow of empirical phenomena; and while they will accept (3) above, they will accept it while abandoning Heidegger's faint hope that ultimate ur-concepts connecting us to reality may be revealed at the end of the unmasking.

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<sup>19</sup> Heidegger 1949.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger 1947.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger 1929/1975, 263.

The postmodernists will effect a compromise between Heidegger and Nietzsche. Common to Heidegger and Nietzsche epistemologically is a contemptuous rejection of reason. Metaphysically, though, the postmodernists will drop the remnants of Heidegger's metaphysical quest for Being, and put Nietzschean power struggles at the core of our being. And especially in the cases of Foucault and Derrida, most major postmodernists will abandon Nietzsche's sense of the exalted potential of man and embrace Heidegger's anti-humanism.

***Positivism and Analytic philosophy: from Europe to America***

So far my account of the epistemological origins of postmodernism has concentrated on German developments in philosophy. Those developments are most of the story of the background to postmodernism. In Europe, if one was a philosophically-trained intellectual in the middle part of the twentieth century, one's training was primarily in Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Those thinkers set the philosophical framework of discussion for European intellectuals, and that framework goes a long way toward accounting for the rise of postmodernism.

Yet my account of postmodernism as developed so far is incomplete. Postmodernism's strongholds are in the *American* academy, not the European. Rorty is of course American, and while Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard are French, they have many more adherents in America than they do in France or even Europe. So there is a gap that must be bridged. How did the Counter-Enlightenment tradition come to prominence in the English-speaking world, especially in North America?

The gap is wider intellectually than it is geographically. For the longest time, the American academy had little use for Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. The Anglo-American tradition saw itself as a champion of the Enlightenment project. It allied itself

with science, with rigor, with reason, and with objectivity—and it rejected contemptuously Hegel's speculative wanderings and Kierkegaard's wallowings. It had been deeply impressed with science, and it saw science as the alternative to now-discredited religious and speculative philosophy. It wanted to make philosophy scientific and to justify the roots of science. This positivist spirit—pro-science and pro-logic—dominated the Anglo-American intellectual world for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The collapse of the positivistic spirit in Anglo-American philosophy is therefore part of the story of the rise of postmodernism.

As strong as Enlightenment traditions were and are in America and Britain, those cultures never were Enlightenment islands unto themselves. European and especially German philosophical influences began to be a presence shortly after the revolution in France. The English Romantics, most famously, were among the first to turn to Germany for philosophical and literary inspiration. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, for example, spent time in Germany for that purpose.<sup>22</sup> Wordsworth's famous lines signal the new anti-reason trend:

*Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;  
—We murder to dissect.*

John Keats's lines continue it:

*Do not all charms fly  
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?*

And Thomas de Quincey is perhaps the clearest prose representative of what many of the English Romantics absorbed from German philosophy:

Here I pause for one moment to exhort the reader never to pay any attention to his understanding when it stands in

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<sup>22</sup> Abrams 1986, 328-29.

opposition to any other faculty of his mind. The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted; and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else—which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophical purposes.<sup>23</sup>

Germany's rising star was also signaled by the popularity of Germaine de Staël's *Germany* (1813), a book that had a major impact on French, English, and American intellectual life.

In the United States, Madame de Staël's book inspired many budding intellectuals to take up the study of German language and literature. It was read by the young Ralph Waldo Emerson, later to become America's leading man of letters. In conjunction with her book's popularity, the 1810s and 1820s also began a trend of young intellectuals going to Germany to study. This group included many of those later prominent in American intellectual life. Edward Everett was one of Emerson's professors at Harvard. Ralph's brother William studied the new Schleiermacher- and Hegel-inspired approaches to theology and biblical criticism at Heidelberg. George Ticknor later became professor of *belles-lettres* at Harvard. And George Bancroft, "the father of American history," attended several German universities, including hearing Hegel's lectures in Berlin.

"Until 1830," historian Thomas Nipperdey points out, "it was the general rule that talented and curious young minds gravitated to Paris; but from then on they came, in ever-increasing numbers (American students, for example) to Germany, to Berlin."<sup>24</sup> They brought back with them Kantian and Hegelian philosophy. By the middle of the nineteenth century, German ideas were established in America. One indication of this is that the most important phil-

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas de Quincey, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," 1823.

<sup>24</sup> Nipperdey 1996, 438. See also Burrow 2000, Chapter 1, for the impact of German ideas on Russian, French, and English students in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

osophical journal in America from 1867 to 1893, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, was founded in 1867 by a group of Hegelians in the St. Louis Philosophical Society.<sup>25</sup>

This list of German philosophical influences is not yet especially weighty, for America in the nineteenth century was not yet an intellectual or cultural powerhouse, and the intellectual and cultural life that did flourish was still largely guided by Enlightenment philosophy. To the extent that intellectual life flourished in America, German philosophy existed as a minority tradition alongside the dominantly pro-reason and pro-science traditions coming out of the Enlightenment.

### ***From Positivism to Analysis***

Yet early in the twentieth century, the influence of German philosophy began to increase significantly. Setting aside until Chapters Four and Five better-known German imports such as Marxism, and setting aside the massive exodus of intellectuals from Germany to England and America in the 1930s because of the rise of National Socialism, the impact of German philosophy upon Anglo-American intellectual life was being felt even by the beginning of the century.

Our focus in this chapter is upon epistemology, and epistemological concerns dominated Anglo-American philosophy for the first half of the twentieth century.

The various leading schools of twentieth century Anglo-American philosophy, broadly positivist in their orientation and collectively known as analytic philosophy, are deeply indebted to German philosophy. As philosopher Michael Dummett has written, "The sources of analytical philosophy were the writings of philosophers who wrote, principally or exclusively, in the German

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<sup>25</sup> Goetzmann 1973, 8.



language.”<sup>26</sup> Analytic philosophy is not however a variant on Hegelian speculative or Husserlian phenomenological philosophy (although Bertrand Russell was a Hegelian and a partial Kantian early in his career, and Gilbert Ryle was an early exponent of Husserl’s approach.)

Analytic philosophy developed out of nineteenth-century positivism. Positivism was developed in the nineteenth century by scientists with a strong philosophical bent and by philosophers strongly impressed with science. The philosophical framework that they operated within drew heavily upon Hume’s nominalist and skeptical empiricism and upon Kant’s epistemology. Positivism accepted as firm philosophical principles the Humean dichotomy of facts and values, the Humean and Kantian analytic/synthetic dichotomy, and as a premise the Kantian conclusion that while seeking metaphysical truths about the universe may be fruitless and meaningless, science could at least make progress with organizing and explaining the flow of phenomena.

In the second half of the century, Positivism was given further impetus and a new direction by innovations in logic and the foundations of mathematics—developed primarily by the German mathematicians Gottlob Frege, Richard Dedekind, David Hilbert, and Georg Cantor. To the extent that these mathematicians were philosophical, they offered Platonic and Kantian interpretations of mathematics. The new impetus was felt strongly in the English-speaking world early in the twentieth century when, just prior to World War I, Bertrand Russell brought the German developments to the English-speaking world, publishing with A. N. Whitehead *Principia Mathematica* (1910-1913). Russell’s work on logic and the philosophy of logic was in turn one of the streams that fed into the creation of the Logical Positivist school.

Logical Positivism’s origins are also culturally German, in the regular meetings of the Vienna Circle, begun after the Great War by

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<sup>26</sup> Dummett 1993, ix.

a talented group of philosophically-informed scientists and science-impressed philosophers. Logical Positivism developed into a philosophical force and was then re-imported into the English-speaking world, most famously by A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936).

While initially motivated to uphold reason, logic, and science, Positivism's and Analysis's internal developments led to their core commitments becoming hollowed out and their consequent collapse.

### ***Recasting philosophy's function***

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bertrand Russell best foreshadowed what was to come. In the final chapter of an often-read introductory book, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Russell summarized the history of philosophy as a repeating series of failures to answer its questions. Can we prove that there is an external world? No. Can we prove that there is cause and effect? No. Can we validate the objectivity of our inductive generalizations? No. Can we find an objective basis for morality? Definitely not. Russell concluded that philosophy cannot answer its questions and so came to believe that any value philosophy might have cannot lie in being able to offer truth or wisdom.<sup>27</sup>

Ludwig Wittgenstein and the early Logical Positivists agreed with Russell, taking his conclusions one step further by offering an explanation for philosophy's failure: Philosophy cannot answer its questions because its questions are simply meaningless. It is not the case, they argued, that philosophy asks questions that, unfortunately, are just too difficult for us to answer—philosophy's questions themselves are not even intelligible; they are pseudo-formulations. Foreshadowing postmodernism's anti-realism, for example, Moritz Schlick wrote of the meaninglessness of prop-

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<sup>27</sup> Russell 1912, 153-ff.

ositions about an external world: “Does the external world exist?” is an unintelligible question, for “both its denial and affirmation are meaningless.”<sup>28</sup> And if we cannot speak meaningfully of an external world, then ascribing cause and effect to the world is also meaningless—causality is a “superstition,” wrote Wittgenstein.<sup>29</sup>

The mistake earlier philosophers had made was in thinking that philosophy was about its own unique subject matter. But that is wrong, the Logical Positivists asserted: Philosophy has no *content* such as metaphysics, ethics, theology, or aesthetics. Those are all meaningless inquiries and should be dismissed.<sup>30</sup>

The meaninglessness of philosophy’s traditional questions means that we must recast philosophy’s function. Philosophy is not a *content* discipline but a *method* discipline. The function of philosophy is *analysis*, elucidation, clarification.<sup>31</sup> Philosophy is not a *subject*: its only role is to be an analytical *assistant* to science.

Hence “analytic” philosophy. The new purpose of philosophy is only to analyze the perceptual, linguistic, and logical tools that science uses. Scientists *perceive*, organize their observations linguistically in *concepts* and *propositions*, and then they structure

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<sup>28</sup> Schlick 1932-33, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Wittgenstein 1922, 5.1361. See also Rudolf Carnap: “In the domain of metaphysics, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless” ([1932] in Ayer 1959, 60-61).

<sup>30</sup> Even talking about the meaninglessness of philosophy’s traditional questions is meaningless. Foreshadowing Derrida’s “crossing-out” device of using a word but then crossing it out to indicate that its use is ironical, Wittgenstein closed the *Tractatus* with the following remark about the book he had just written: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)” (6.54)

<sup>31</sup> See Wittgenstein 1922, 4.112; cf. 6.11 and 6.111. Following Kant: “Philosophers, whose task it is to examine concepts ...” (1781, A510/B538).

those linguistic units using *logic*. Philosophy's job, accordingly, is to figure out what perception, language, and logic are all about.

The question then is: What conclusions has twentieth-century analytic philosophy reached about perception, language, and logic?

### ***Perception, Concepts, and Logic***

By the middle of the century, the dominant conclusion about perception was that it is theory-laden. The biggest names in the philosophy of science—Otto Neurath, Karl Popper, Norwood Hanson, Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, and W. V. O. Quine—despite wide variations in their versions of analytic philosophy—all argued that our theories largely dictate what we will see.<sup>32</sup> Putting their point in Kant's original language, our perceptual intuitions do not conform to objects but rather our intuition conforms to what our faculty of knowledge supplies from itself. This conclusion about perception is devastating for science: If our percepts are theory-laden, then perception is hardly a neutral and independent check upon our theorizing. If our conceptual structures shape our observations as much as vice versa, then we are stuck inside a subjective system with no direct access to reality.

Similarly by the middle of the century, the mainstream conclusion about concepts and the propositions of logic and mathematics was that they are conventional. Most of the Logical Positivists started by agreeing with Hume and Kant that logical and mathematical propositions are analytic or *a priori*, and necessary. On this account, *Twice two makes four*, for example, has to be true, and we can determine its truth without appeal to experience, simply by analyzing the meanings of its constituent concepts. Such a proposition contrasts with one such as *Beverly's car is white*. That Beverly's car is white is synthetic—neither “car” nor “white” is

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<sup>32</sup> See Neurath 1931, Hanson 1958, Feyerabend 1975 (164-168), Kuhn 1962, Quine 1969, and Popper 1972 (68 n. 31, 72, and 145).

contained in the other concept's meaning; so the connection between the two has to be established by experience; and the established connection between them is merely contingent—the car could have been painted any color.

This standard Humean/Kantian dichotomy of analytic and synthetic propositions immediately yields a very problematic implication: Logical and mathematical propositions are disconnected from experiential reality. Propositions about the world of experience such as *Beverly's car is white* are never necessarily true, and propositions of logic and mathematics such as *Twice two makes four*, being necessarily true, must not be about the world of experience. Logical and mathematical propositions, wrote Schlick, “do not deal with any facts, but only with the symbols by means of which the facts are expressed.”<sup>33</sup> Logic and mathematics, accordingly, tell us absolutely nothing about the experiential world of facts. As Wittgenstein put it succinctly in the *Tractatus*: “All propositions of logic say the same thing. That is, nothing.”<sup>34</sup> Logic and mathematics, then, are on their way to becoming mere games of symbolic manipulation.<sup>35</sup>

Such conclusions about logic and mathematics are devastating for science: If logic and mathematics are divorced from experiential reality, then the rules of logic and mathematics hardly say anything about that reality. The implication is that logical or mathematical proofs cuts no ice in adjudicating competing claims of fact.<sup>36</sup> Analytic propositions “are entirely devoid of factual content. And it is for this reason that no experience can confute them.”<sup>37</sup> Offering logical proofs about real matters of fact is thus pointless. And,

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<sup>33</sup> Schlick in Chisholm 1982, 156; also Ayer 1936, 79.

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein 1922, 5.43.

<sup>35</sup> Or as the editor of the *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, J. Michael Dunn, once put it to me in conversation: “I must say, it kind of tickles me to use the words ‘logic’ and ‘practical’ in the same sentence.”

<sup>36</sup> Ayer 1936, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Ayer 1936, 79.

conversely, it is pointless to expect any amount of factual evidence to add up to a necessary or universal conclusion.

Accepting that the propositions of logic and mathematics are not based in experiential reality and so do not tell us anything about that reality leads one to the question of where logic and mathematics come from. If they have no objective source, then their source must be subjective.

Two broad options emerged at this point within analytic philosophy. The neo-Kantian option, emphasized by the nativists and the coherence theorists, held that the basic propositions of logic and mathematics are innate in us or necessarily emerge psychologically once we start to use words. And some such neo-Kantians scandalized the purer Kantians by holding out the hope that such innate or emergent propositions reflect or represent in some way an external reality. But, critics always asked, given the theory-ladenness of perception, how would we establish such that such a connection exists? Any belief in a connection between reality and subjectively-generated logic could only be reached by a leap of faith.

It was the neo-Humean option, therefore, emphasized by pragmatists such as Quine, Nelson Goodman, and Ernest Nagel, that prevailed. On this account, logical and mathematical propositions are merely a function of how we have *decided* to use words and which combinations of words we have *decided* to privilege. Concepts are merely nominal, based on subjective human choices about how to carve up the flow of phenomenal experience.

Conceptual relativism follows directly from such nominalism: We could have decided differently what concepts to adopt; we could have and still could carve the world up differently. We could, for example, decide not to pick out one section of the color spectrum and call it "blue" and call the neighboring section "green," but rather pick an overlap area between them and,

borrowing words from Goodman for a slightly different purpose, call it either “grue” or “bleen.” That is a matter of convention.

If all concepts are nominal, then one consequence is that there is no basis for a distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions.<sup>38</sup> All propositions then become *a posteriori* and merely contingent. Logical relativism is the next consequence. Logical principles are constructs of concepts. What counts as a principle of logic, then, is not dictated by reality but is rather up to us: “the principles of logic and mathematics are true universally simply because we never allow them to be anything else.”<sup>39</sup> Logical principles become a matter of which formulations we are “willing” to accept, depending on whether or not we like the consequences of accepting any given principle.<sup>40</sup> Logical justification, Rorty wrote of Quine’s doctrine, “is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice.”<sup>41</sup> But what if someone does not like the consequences of adopting a given logical principle? What if conversational or social practices change? If the rules of logic and language are conventional, what is to stop someone, for whatever reason, from adopting different conventions? Absolutely nothing. The rules of logic and grammar then can be as variable as other conventions, such as performing greeting rituals by shaking hands, hugging, or rubbing noses. No form of greeting or system of logic, then, is more objectively right than any other.

By the 1950s, these conclusions were commonplace. Language and logic were seen as conventional, internal systems—and not as objective, reality-based tools of consciousness.

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<sup>38</sup> Quine 1953/1961.

<sup>39</sup> Ayer, 1936, 77. See also Schlick: “the rules of language are, in principle, arbitrary” (1936, 165).

<sup>40</sup> Goodman, in Copi & Gould (1963, 64). See also Nagel 1956 (82-83 and 97-98).

<sup>41</sup> Rorty 1979, 170. See also Dewey 1920, 134-135 and 1938, 11-12.

***From the collapse of Logical Positivism to Kuhn and Rorty***

The next step was Thomas Kuhn's. The publication in 1962 of his landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, announced the developments of the preceding four decades of analytic philosophy and highlighted the dead end it had reached. If science's tools are perception, logic, and language, then science, one of the Enlightenment's prized children, is merely an evolving, socially subjective enterprise with no more claim to objectivity than any other belief system. The idea that science speaks of reality or truth is an illusion. There is no Truth; there are only truths, and truths change.<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, by the 1960s, the pro-objectivity, pro-science spirit had collapsed in the Anglo-American tradition.

Richard Rorty, the best known of the American post-modernists, generalizes the point to antirealism. As Kant had said two centuries ago, we can say absolutely nothing about the noumena, about what is really real. Rorty's anti-realism is the exact same point:

To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or 'true' as a term which repays 'analysis.' 'The nature of

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<sup>42</sup> In a strong formulation in Chapter 12, Kuhn asserted the subjectivity of scientists' paradigms: "the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds" (1962, 150). And in Chapter 13 he drew the conclusion that science has nothing to do with anything called "truth": "We may, to be more precise, have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth" (1962, 170).



truth' is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect 'the nature of man' and 'the nature of God' ... .<sup>43</sup>

***Summary: A vacuum for postmodernism to fill***

Speaking of the post-Kuhn era in Anglo-American philosophy, historian of philosophy John Passmore has stated flatly and accurately: "The Kantian revival is so widespread as scarcely to lend itself to illustration."<sup>44</sup>

The various analytic schools began with Kant's conclusion that metaphysical questions were unanswerable, contradictory, or meaningless nonsense to be set aside. Philosophers were then urged to retreat to conceiving of their discipline as a purely critical or analytical enterprise. As part of that enterprise, some early analytic philosophers sought universal and necessary structural features in grammar and logic. But with no external metaphysical basis for language and logic, they retreated further to the subjective and the psychological. Once there, they found that the subjective and the psychological were highly conventional and variable, and so they felt forced to conclude that language and logic not only have nothing to do with reality but are themselves conventional and variable.

Then arose the question of the status of science. Analytic philosophers had, for whatever reasons, decided that they liked science and so had picked its concepts and methods to analyze. But now they had to ask, as Paul Feyerabend urged them to ask, Why is science special? Why not analyze theology's concepts and methods? Or poetry's? Or witchcraft's?<sup>45</sup> Having abandoned discussion of

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<sup>43</sup> Rorty 1989, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Passmore 1985 (133-4, note 20). See also Christopher Janaway: "One feature uniting many kinds of recent philosophy is an increasing recognition that we are working within the legacy of Kant" (1999, 3).

<sup>45</sup> Feyerabend 1975, 298-299.

“truth” as useless metaphysical speculation, analytic philosophers could not say that science’s concepts were truer or that science’s method was special because it got us closer to truth. The analytic philosophers of the 1950s and 1960s were only able to say that science happened to push their personal value buttons.

So we now ask the question of value: If the basis for the study of science is one’s personal value buttons’ being pushed, what is the status of personal values? On questions of value, by the middle of the century, the Anglo-American tradition had concurred with the Continental. Again, the conclusions reached by the analytic tradition were highly subjectivist and relativist. Accepting the divorce of facts from values that dated back to Hume, most philosophers concluded that expressions of value are neither objective nor subject to reason. Summarizing the state of the profession in the middle part of the century, Brian Medlin wrote that “it is now pretty generally accepted by professional philosophers that ultimate ethical principles must be arbitrary.”<sup>46</sup> Their arbitrariness could be rooted in sheer acts of will, or in social conventions, or, as argued by the leading Logical Positivists, subjective emotional expression.<sup>47</sup>

Having reached these conclusions about knowledge, science, and values, the Anglo-American intellectual world was ready to take seriously Nietzsche and Heidegger.

***First thesis: Postmodernism is the end result of Kantian epistemology***

After this whirlwind tour of 220 years of philosophy, I can now summarize and offer my first hypothesis about the origins of postmodernism:

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<sup>46</sup> Medlin 1957, 111.

<sup>47</sup> E.g., Stevenson 1937.

*Postmodernism is the first ruthlessly consistent statement of the consequences of rejecting reason, those consequences being necessary given the history of epistemology since Kant.*

The key ingredients of postmodernism were laid out by the philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century. The developments in Continental philosophy up to Heidegger provided the positive direction and impetus that postmodernism takes; and the negative developments in Anglo-American philosophy up to the collapse of Logical Positivism left the defenders of reason and science feeling dispirited, directionless, and unable to mount any significant response to the skeptical and relativistic arguments the postmodernists used.<sup>48</sup>

Yet much of twentieth-century philosophy had been piecemeal and unsystematic, especially in the Anglo-American tradition. Postmodernism is the first synthesis of the implications of the major trends. In postmodernism we find metaphysical antirealism, epistemological subjectivity, the placing of feeling at the root of all value issues, the consequent relativism of both knowledge and values, and the consequent devaluing or disvaluing of the scientific enterprise.

Metaphysics and epistemology are at the heart of this account of postmodernism. Despite the postmodernists' billing of themselves as anti-metaphysics and anti-epistemology, their writings focus upon those themes almost exclusively. Heidegger attacks logic and reason to make room for emotion, Foucault reduces knowledge to an expression of social power, Derrida deconstructs language and turns it into a vehicle of aesthetic play, and Rorty chronicles the failures of the realist and objectivist tradition in almost-exclusively metaphysical and epistemological terms.

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<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche predicted the result: "As soon as Kant would begin to exert a popular influence, we should find it reflected in the form of a gnawing and crumbling skepticism and relativism" (in Kaufmann 1975, 123).

From the postmodern anti-realist metaphysics and anti-reason epistemology, the postmodern social consequences follow almost directly. Once we set aside reality and reason, what are we left with to go on? We can, as the conservatives would prefer, simply turn to our group's traditions and follow them. Or we can, as the postmodernists will prefer, turn to our feelings and follow them. If we then ask what our core feelings are, we connect with the answers from the past century's dominant theories of human nature. From Kierkegaard and Heidegger, we learn that our emotional core is a deep sense of dread and guilt. From Marx, we feel a deep sense of alienation, victimization, and rage. From Nietzsche, we discover a deep need for power. From Freud, we uncover the urgings of dark and aggressive sexuality. Rage, power, guilt, lust, and dread constitute the center of the postmodern emotional universe.

Postmodernists split over whether those core feelings are determined biologically or socially, with the social version running as the strong favorite. In either case, however, individuals are not in control of their feelings: their identities are a product of their group memberships, whether economic, sexual, or racial. Since the shaping economic, sexual, or racial experiences or developments vary from group to group, differing groups have no common experiential framework. With no objective standard by which to mediate their different perspectives and feelings, and with no appeal to reason possible, group balkanization and conflict must necessarily result.

Nasty political correctness as a tactic then makes perfect sense. Having rejected reason, we will not expect ourselves or others to behave reasonably. Having put our passions to the fore, we will act and react more crudely and range-of-the-moment. Having lost our sense of ourselves as individuals, we will seek our identities in our groups. Having little in common with different groups, we will see them as competitive enemies. Having abandoned recourse to rational and neutral standards, violent competition will seem

practical. And having abandoned peaceful conflict resolution, prudence will dictate that only the most ruthless will survive.

Postmodernist reactions to the prospects of a brutal post-modern social world then fall into three main categories, depending on whether Foucault's, Derrida's, or Rorty's variant is given primacy. Foucault, following Nietzsche more closely in having reduced knowledge to an expression of social power, urges us to play the brutal power politics game—though contrary to Nietzsche he urges that we play it on behalf of the traditionally disempowered.<sup>49</sup> Derrida, having followed Heidegger more closely and purified him, deconstructs language and retreats into it as a vehicle of aesthetic play, insulating himself from the fray. Rorty, having abandoned objectivity, hopes that we will seek “inter-subjective agreement” among the “members of our own tribe,”<sup>50</sup> and, feeling loyal to his American left-liberal roots, requests that we be nice to each other while doing so.<sup>51</sup> The postmodern options, in short, are to plunge into the fray, or withdraw and insulate oneself from it, or try to ameliorate its excesses.

Postmodernism is thus the end result of the Counter-Enlightenment inaugurated by Kantian epistemology.

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<sup>49</sup> Foucault: “I am simply a Nietzschean, and I try as far as possible, on a certain number of issues, to see with the help of Nietzsche’s texts” (1989, 471).

<sup>50</sup> Rorty 1991, 22-3, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Rorty 1989, 197.

## Chapter Four

# The Climate of Collectivism

### *From postmodern epistemology to postmodern politics*

There is a problem with making epistemology fundamental to any explanation of postmodernism. The problem is the postmodernists' politics.

If a deep skepticism about reason and the consequent subjectivism and relativism were the most important parts of the story of postmodernism, then we would expect to find that postmodernists represent a roughly random distribution of commitments across the political spectrum. If values and politics are primarily a matter of a subjective leap into whatever fits one's preferences, then we should find people making leaps into all sorts of political programs.

This is not what we find in the case of postmodernism. Postmodernists are not individuals who have reached relativistic conclusions about epistemology and then found comfort in a wide variety of political persuasions. Postmodernists are monolithically far Left-wing in their politics.

Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty are all far Left. And so are Jacques Lacan, Stanley Fish, Catharine MacKinnon, Andreas Huyssen, and Frank Lentricchia. Of the major names in the postmodernist movement, there is not a single figure who is not Left-wing in a serious way.

So there is something else going on besides epistemology.

Part of that something else is that postmodernists have taken to heart Fredric Jameson's remark that "everything is 'in the last analysis' political."<sup>1</sup> The spirit of Jameson's remark lies behind the persistent postmodernist charge that epistemology is merely a tool of power, that all claims of objectivity and rationality mask oppressive political agendas. It stands to reason, then, that postmodern appeals to subjectivity and irrationality can also be in the service of political ends. But why?

Another part of that something else is that Leftist thought has dominated political thought among twentieth-century intellectuals, particularly among academic intellectuals. But even given that fact, the dominance of Left thought among postmodernists is still a puzzle—since for most of socialism's intellectual history it has almost always been defended on the modernist grounds of reason and science. Marx's socialism has been the most widespread form of far-Left thought, and "scientific socialism" was the Marxist self-descriptive phrase.<sup>2</sup>

A related puzzle is explaining why postmodernists—particularly among those postmodernists most involved with the practical applications of postmodernist ideas or with putting postmodernist ideas into actual practice in their classrooms and in faculty meetings—are the most likely to be hostile to dissent and debate, the most likely to engage in *ad hominem* argument and name-calling, the most likely to enact "politically correct" authoritarian measures, and the most likely to use anger and rage

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<sup>1</sup> Jameson 1981, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Engels 1875, 123.

as argumentative tactics. Whether it is Stanley Fish calling all opponents of affirmative action bigots and lumping them in with the Ku Klux Klan,<sup>3</sup> or whether it is Andrea Dworkin's male-bashing in the form of calling all heterosexual males rapists,<sup>4</sup> the rhetoric is very often harsh and bitter. So the puzzling question is: Why is it that among the far Left—which has traditionally promoted itself as the only true champion of civility, tolerance, and fair play—that we find those habits least practiced and even denounced?

Evidence, reason, logic, tolerance, and civility were all integral parts of the modernist package of principles. Socialism in its modern form began, in part, by accepting that package.

### ***The argument of the next three chapters***

As modernists, the socialists argued that socialism could be proved by evidence and rational analysis, and that once the evidence was in socialism's moral and economic superiority to capitalism would be clear to anyone with an open mind.

This is significant, because so-conceived socialism committed itself to a series of propositions that could be empirically, rationally, and scientifically scrutinized. The end result of that scrutiny provides another key to explaining postmodernism.

Classical Marxist socialism made four major claims:

1. Capitalism is exploitative: The rich enslave the poor; it is brutally competitive domestically and imperialistic internationally.
2. Socialism, by contrast, is humane and peaceful: People share, are equal, and cooperative.
3. Capitalism is ultimately less productive than socialism: The rich get richer, the poor get poorer; and the ensuing class conflict will cause capitalism's collapse in the end.

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<sup>3</sup> Fish 1994, 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> Dworkin 1987, 123, 126.



4. Socialist economies, by contrast, will be more productive and usher in a new era of prosperity.

These propositions were first enunciated by socialists in the nineteenth century, and repeated often into the twentieth before disaster struck. The disaster was that all four of socialism's claims were refuted both in theory and in practice.

In theory, the free-market economists have won the debate. Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman have shown how markets are efficient, and they have shown, conversely, how socialist top-down command economies necessarily must fail. Distinguished Left-wing economists such as Robert Heilbroner have conceded in print that the debate is over and that the capitalists have won.<sup>5</sup>

In theory, the moral and political debate is more up for grabs, but the leading thesis is that some form of liberalism in the broadest sense is essential to protecting civil rights and civil society in general—and the liveliest debates are about whether a conservative version of liberalism, a libertarian one, or a modified welfarist one is best. Many Leftists are re-packaging themselves as more moderate communitarians, but that repackaging itself shows how far the debate has shifted toward liberalism.

The empirical evidence has been much harder on socialism. Economically, in practice the capitalist nations are increasingly productive and prosperous, with no end in sight. Not only are the rich getting fantastically richer, the poor in those countries are getting richer too. And by direct and brutal contrast, every socialist experiment has ended in dismal economic failure—from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, to North Korea and Vietnam, to Cuba, Ethiopia, and Mozambique.

Morally and politically, in practice every liberal capitalist country has a solid record for being humane, for by and large respecting rights and freedoms, and for making it possible for

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<sup>5</sup> Heilbroner 1990; see also Heilbroner 1993, 163.

people to put together fruitful and meaningful lives. Socialist practice has time and time again proved itself more brutal than the worst dictatorships in history prior to the twentieth century. Each socialist regime has collapsed into dictatorship and begun killing people on a huge scale. Each has produced dissident writers such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Nien Cheng who have documented what those regimes are capable of.

These points are well known, and I dwell upon them in order to project the depth of the crisis that this meant for Left-socialist intellectuals. By the 1950s, the crisis was being felt deeply.

Instead of having collapsed in the Great Depression of the 1930s, as both the collectivist Right and the Left had hoped, the liberal capitalist countries had recovered after World War II and by the 1950s were enjoying peace, liberty, and new levels of prosperity. World War II had wiped out the collectivist Right—the National Socialists and the Fascists—leaving the Left alone in the field against a triumphant and full-of-itself liberal capitalism. Yet while the liberal West's recovery and its rising political and economic prominence were distressing to the far Left intellectuals of the West, hope was still offered by the existence of the Soviet Union, the "noble experiment," and to a lesser extent by communist China.

Even that hope was brutally crushed in 1956. Before a world-wide audience, the Soviets sent tanks into Hungary to stifle demonstrations by students and workers—thus demonstrating just how strong was their commitment to humanity. And, more devastatingly, Nikita Khrushchev acknowledged publicly what many in the West had long charged—that Joseph Stalin's regime had slaughtered tens of millions of human beings, staggering numbers that made the National Socialists' efforts seem amateurish in comparison.

***Responding to socialism's crisis of theory and evidence***

From *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848 to the revelations of 1956 was over a century of theory and evidence. The crisis for the far Left was that the logic and evidence were going against socialism. Put yourselves in the shoes of an intelligent, informed socialist confronted with all this data. How would you react? You have a deep commitment to socialism: You *feel* that socialism is true; you *want* it to be true; upon socialism you have pinned all your dreams of a peaceful and prosperous future society and all your hopes for solving the ills of our current society.

This is a moment of truth for anyone who has experienced the agony of a deeply cherished hypothesis run aground on the rocks of reality. What do you do? Do you abandon your theory and go with the facts—or do you try to find a way to maintain your belief in your theory?

Here, then, is my second hypothesis about post-modernism: *Postmodernism is the academic far Left's epistemological strategy for responding to the crisis caused by the failures of socialism in theory and in practice.*

A historically parallel example may help here. In the 1950s and 60s, the Left faced the same dilemma that religious thinkers faced in the late 1700s. In both cases, the evidence was against them. During the Enlightenment, religion's natural theology arguments were widely seen as being full of holes, and science was rapidly giving naturalistic and opposed explanations for the things that religion had traditionally explained. Religion was in danger of being shut out of intellectual life. By the 1950s and 60s, the Left's arguments for the fruitfulness and decency of socialism were failing in theory and practice, and liberal capitalism was rapidly increasing everyone's standard of living and showing itself respectful of human freedoms. By the late 1700s, religious thinkers had a choice—accept evidence and logic as the ultimate court of appeal and thereby reject their

deeply-cherished religious ideals—or stick by their ideals and attack the whole idea that evidence and logic matter. “I had to deny knowledge,” wrote Kant in the Preface to the first *Critique*, “in order to make room for faith.” “Faith,” wrote Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, “requires the crucifixion of reason”; so he proceeded to crucify reason and glorify the irrational.

The Left thinkers of the 1950s and 60s faced the same choice. As I will argue over the course of the next two chapters, the far Left faced a dilemma. Confronted by the continued flourishing of capitalism and the continued poverty and brutality of socialism, they could either go with the evidence and reject their deeply cherished ideals—or stick by their ideals and attack the whole idea that evidence and logic matter. Some, like Kant and Kierkegaard, decided to limit reason—to crucify it. And for that purpose, Heidegger’s exalting feeling over reason came as a godsend. And so did Kuhn’s theory-laden paradigms and Quine’s pragmatic and internalist account of language and logic.

That the leading postmodern intellectuals—from Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida to Rorty and Fish—came of age in the 1950s and 60s then is not a coincidence.

Postmodernism is born of the marriage of Left politics and skeptical epistemology. As socialist political thought was reaching a crisis in the 1950s, academic epistemology had, in Europe, come to take seriously Nietzsche and Heidegger and, in the Anglo-American world, it had seen the decline of Logical Positivism into Quine and Kuhn. The dominance of subjectivist and relativistic epistemologies in academic philosophy thus provided the academic Left with a new tactic. Confronted by harsh evidence and ruthless logic, the far Left had a reply: That is only logic and evidence; logic and evidence are subjective; you cannot really prove anything; feelings are deeper than logic; and our feelings say socialism.

That is my second hypothesis: Postmodernism is a response to the crisis of faith of the academic far Left. Its epistemology justifies

the leap of faith necessary to continue believing in socialism, and that same epistemology justifies using language not as a vehicle for seeking truth but as a rhetorical weapon in the continuing battle against capitalism.

### ***Back to Rousseau***

The justification of that hypothesis requires an explanation of why the crisis of socialist thought was felt so deeply by the 1950s and why to a significant number of Left intellectuals the postmodern epistemological strategy seemed to be the only one available. The key part of that explanation requires showing why classical liberalism, despite its flourishing culturally, had become a dead issue in the minds of most intellectuals, especially European intellectuals. No matter what troubles the anti-liberal Left and Right ran into, a serious reconsideration of liberalism was not going to happen.

Again, the story has its modern roots in the battle of the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment. This time the battle is over the Enlightenment's individualism and liberalism, best represented by the Lockean, and the anti-individualism and anti-liberalism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his followers.

Rousseau is the most significant figure in the political Counter-Enlightenment. His moral and political philosophy was inspirational to Immanuel Kant, Johann Herder, Johann Fichte, and G. W. F. Hegel, and from them transmitted to the collectivist Right. It was perhaps more inspirational to the collectivist Left: Rousseau's writings were the Bible of the Jacobin leaders of the French Revolution, absorbed by many of the hopeful Russian revolutionaries of the late nineteenth century, and influential upon the more agrarian socialists of the twentieth century in China and Cambodia. In the theoretical world of academic socialism, Rousseau's version of collectivism was eclipsed by Marx's version for most of the

nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. Yet a large part of the explanation of postmodern thought is a shift toward Rousseauian themes by thinkers who were originally inspired by Marx but who are now increasingly disillusioned.

### ***Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment***

The first great frontal assault on the Enlightenment was launched by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau has a well-deserved reputation as the bad boy of eighteenth century French philosophy. In the context of Enlightenment intellectual culture, Rousseau's was a major dissenting voice. He was an admirer of all things Spartan—the Sparta of militaristic and feudal communalism—and a despiser of all things Athenian—the classical Athens of commerce, cosmopolitanism, and the high arts.

Civilization is thoroughly corrupting, Rousseau argued—not only the oppressive feudal system of eighteenth-century France with its decadent and parasitical aristocracy, but also its Enlightenment alternative with its exaltation of reason, property, the arts and sciences. Name a dominant feature of the Enlightenment, and Rousseau was against it.

In his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau started his attack at the foundation of the Enlightenment project: Reason. The *philosophes* were exactly right that reason is the foundation of civilization. Civilization's rational progress, however, is anything but progress, for civilization is achieved at the expense of morality. There is an inverse relationship between cultural and moral development: Culture does generate much learning, luxury, and sophistication—but learning, luxury, and sophistication all cause moral degradation.

The root of our moral degradation is reason, the original sin of humankind.<sup>6</sup> Before their reason was awakened, humans were

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<sup>6</sup> Rousseau 1755, 37.

simple beings, mostly solitary, satisfying their wants easily by gathering from their immediate environment. That happy state was the ideal: “this author should have said that since the state of nature is the state in which the concern for our self-preservation is the least prejudicial to that of others, that state was consequently the most appropriate for peace and the best suited for the human race.”<sup>7</sup>

But by some unexplainable, unfortunate occurrence, reason was awakened<sup>8</sup>; and once awakened it disgorged a Pandora’s Box of problems upon the world, transforming human nature to the point that we can no longer return to our happy, original state. As the *philosophes* were heralding the triumph of reason in the world, Rousseau wanted to demonstrate that “all the subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decay of the species.”<sup>9</sup> Once their reasoning power was awakened, humans realized their primitive condition, and this led them to feel dissatisfied. So they started to make improvements, those improvements culminating most strikingly in the agricultural and metallurgical revolutions. Undeniably, those revolutions improved mankind’s material lot—but that improvement has in fact destroyed the species: “it is iron and wheat that have civilized men and ruined the human race.”<sup>10</sup>

The ruin took many forms. Economically, agriculture and technology led to surplus wealth. Surplus wealth in turn led to the need for property rights.<sup>11</sup> Property, however, made humans competitive and led them to see each other as enemies.

Physically, as humans became wealthier they enjoyed more comforts and luxuries. But those comforts and luxuries caused physical degradation. They began to eat too much food and to eat

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<sup>7</sup> Rousseau 1755, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Rousseau 1755, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Rousseau 1755, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Rousseau 1755, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Rousseau 1755, 44, 52.

decadent food, and thus became less healthy. They came increasingly to use tools and technologies, and thus became physically less strong. What was once a physically hardy species thus became dependent upon doctors and gadgets.<sup>12</sup>

Socially, with luxuries came an awakening of aesthetic standards for beauty, and those standards transformed their sex lives. What was once a straightforward act of copulation became tied to love, and love is messy and exclusive and preferential. Love, accordingly, awakened jealousy, envy, and rivalry<sup>13</sup>—more things that set human beings against each other.

Thus reason led to the development of all of civilization's features—agriculture, technology, property, and aesthetics—and these made mankind soft, lazy, and in economic and social conflict with itself.<sup>14</sup>

But the story gets worse, for the ongoing social conflicts generated a few winners at the top of the social heap and many oppressed losers beneath them. Inequality became a prominent and damning consequence of civilization. Such inequalities are damning because all inequalities “such as being richer, more honored, more powerful” are “privileges enjoyed by some at the expense of others.”<sup>15</sup>

Civilization, accordingly, became a zero-sum game along many social dimensions, the winners gaining and enjoying more and more while the losers suffered and were left increasingly far behind.

But civilization's pathologies became even worse, for the reason that made civilization's inequalities possible also made the better-off uncaring about the suffering of the less fortunate. Reason, according to Rousseau, is opposed to compassion: Reason generates

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<sup>12</sup> Rousseau 1755, 20, 22, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Rousseau 1755, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau 1755, 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> Rousseau 1755, 16.



civilization, which is the ultimate cause of the sufferings of the victims of inequality, but reason also then creates rationales for ignoring that suffering. “Reason is what engenders egocentrism,” wrote Rousseau,

and reflection strengthens it. Reason is what turns man in upon himself. Reason is what separates him from all that troubles him and afflicts him. Philosophy is what isolates him and what moves him to say in secret, at the sight of a suffering man, ‘Perish if you will; I am safe and sound.’<sup>16</sup>

In contemporary civilization, this lack of compassion becomes more than a sin of omission. Rousseau argued that, having succeeded in the competitions of civilized life, the winners now have a vested interest in preserving the system. Civilization’s advocates—especially those who are living at the top of the heap and therefore insulated from the worst of the harms—go out of their way to praise civilization’s advances in technology, art, and science. But these advances themselves and the praise heaped upon them serve only to mask the harms civilization does. Fore-shadowing Herbert Marcuse and Foucault, Rousseau wrote in the essay that made him famous, the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*: “Princes always view with pleasure the spread, among their subjects, of the taste for arts of amusement and superfluities.” Such acquired tastes within a people “are so many chains binding it.” “The sciences, letters, and arts”—far from freeing and elevating mankind—

spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seem to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Rousseau 1755, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Rousseau 1749, 36.

So corrupt, accordingly, is the whole edifice of civilization that no reform is possible. Against the timid moderates who want to achieve the good society in piecemeal fashion, Rousseau called for revolution. "People were continually patching it [the state] up, whereas they should have begun by clearing the air and putting aside all the old materials, as Lycurgus did in Sparta, in order to raise a good edifice later."<sup>18</sup>

### ***Rousseau's collectivism and statism***

Once the corruption is totally swept away, the project of building a moral society can commence. Naturally, the good edifice to be raised must start from a good foundation. The primitive state of nature was good, but unfortunately we cannot return it. Reason, once awakened, cannot be dulled entirely. But neither can we tolerate anything that would lead us back to contemporary advanced civilization. Fortunately, history provides us with good models, for looking back upon most tribal cultures we find that their societies,

maintaining a middle position between the indolence of our primitive state and the petulant activity of our egocentrism, must have been the happiest and most durable epoch. The more one reflects on it, the more one finds that this state was the least subject to upheavals and the best for man.<sup>19</sup>

The best we can do, accordingly, is to try to recreate in modern form a society on that model.

The re-creation must begin from a proper understanding of human nature. Contrary to the claims of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, man is naturally a passionate animal, not a rational one.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rousseau 1755, 58-9.

<sup>19</sup> Rousseau 1755, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau 1755, 14.

Man's deepest passions should set the direction of his life, and reason should always give way before them.

Passions are an appropriate foundation for society, since one of the deepest desires is to believe in religion, and, Rousseau believes, religion is essential to social stability. That desire to believe can and must override all Enlightenment objections. "I believe therefore that the world is governed by a powerful and wise will. I see it or, rather, I sense it."<sup>21</sup> Rousseau's feeling that God exists, however, did not provide him with much detailed information about the nature of God. God "is hidden equally from my senses and from my understanding," so his feeling gave him only the sense that a powerful, intelligent, and good being created the world. The arguments of the philosophers about God not only did not clarify matters, they made things worse: "The more I think about it," Rousseau wrote, "the more I am confused."<sup>22</sup> So he resolved to ignore the philosophers—"suffused with the sense of my inadequacy, I shall never reason about the nature of God"<sup>23</sup>—and to let his feelings guide his religious beliefs, holding that feelings are a more reliable guide than reason. "I took another guide, and I said to myself, 'Let us consult the inner light; it will lead me astray less than they lead me astray.'<sup>24</sup> Rousseau's inner light revealed to him an unshakeable feeling that God's existence is the basis for all explanations, and that feeling was to him immune to revision and counter-argument: "One may very well argue with me about this; but I sense it, and this sentiment that speaks to me is stronger than the reason combating it."<sup>25</sup>

This feeling was not to be merely one of Rousseau's personal whims. At the foundation of all civil societies, Rousseau argued,

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<sup>21</sup> Rousseau 1762a, 276.

<sup>22</sup> Rousseau 1762a, 277.

<sup>23</sup> Rousseau 1762a, 277.

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau 1762a, 269.

<sup>25</sup> Rousseau 1762a, 280.

one finds a religious sanction for what its leaders do. The society's founding leaders may not always genuinely believe in the religious sanctions they invoke, but their invoking them is nonetheless essential. If the people believe that their leaders are acting out the will of the gods, they will obey more freely and "bear with docility the yoke of the public good."<sup>26</sup> Enlightenment reason, by contrast, leads to disbelief; disbelief leads to disobedience; and disobedience leads to anarchy. This is a further reason why, according to Rousseau, "the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and the man who meditates is a depraved animal."<sup>27</sup> Reason, accordingly, is destructive to society, and should be limited and replaced with natural passion.<sup>28</sup>

So important is religion to a society, wrote Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, that the state cannot be indifferent to religious matters. It cannot pursue a policy of toleration for disbelievers, or even view religion as a matter of individual conscience. It absolutely must, therefore, reject the Enlightenment's dangerous notions of religious toleration and the separation of church and state. Further: so fundamentally important is religion that the ultimate penalty is appropriate for disbelievers:

While the state can compel no one to believe it can banish not for impiety, but as an antisocial being, incapable of truly loving the laws and justice, and of sacrificing, if needed, his life to his duty. If, after having publicly

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<sup>26</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 2:7.

<sup>27</sup> Rousseau 1755, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Rousseau extended the limiting of reason to limiting its tools of expression: "Considering the awful disorders printing has already caused in Europe, and judging the future by the progress that this evil makes day by day, one can easily predict that sovereigns will not delay in taking as many pains to banish this terrible art from their States as they once took to establish it" (1749, 61). And following the examples of Cato the Elder and Fabricius, Rousseau urged: "hasten to tear down these amphitheatres, break these marble statues, burn these paintings, chase out these slaves who subjugate you and whose fatal arts corrupt you" (1749, 46).

recognized these dogmas, a person acts as if he does not believe them, he should be put to death.<sup>29</sup>

A society properly founded on natural passion and religion will override the self-centered individualism that reason leads to, making it possible for individuals to form a new, collectivized social organism. When individuals come together to form the new society, “the individual particularity of each contracting party is surrendered to a new moral and collective body which has its own self, life, body, and will.” The will of each individual is no longer that individual’s own, but becomes common or general, and under the direction of the spokesmen for the whole. In moral society, one “coalesces with all, [and] in this each of us puts in common his person and his whole power under the supreme direction of society’s leaders.”<sup>30</sup>

In the new society, the leadership expresses the “general will” and enacts policies that are best for the whole, thus enabling all individuals to achieve their true interests and their true freedom. The requirements of the “general will” absolutely override all other considerations, so a “citizen should render to the state all the services he can as soon as the sovereign demands them.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet there is something about human nature, corrupted as it is now by reason and individualism, that militates and always will militate against the general will. Individuals rarely see their individual wills as being in harmony with the general will; consequently “the private will acts constantly against the general will.”<sup>32</sup> And so to counteract these socially destructive individualistic tendencies, the state is justified in using compulsion: “whoever refuses to obey the general will will be forced to do so by the entire

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<sup>29</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 4:8.

<sup>30</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 1:6.

<sup>31</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 2:4.

<sup>32</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 3:10.

body; this means merely that he will be forced to be free.”<sup>33</sup> The power of the general will over the individual will is total. “The state ... ought to have a universal compulsory force to move and arrange each part in the manner best suited to the whole.”<sup>34</sup> And if the leaders of the state say to the citizen, “‘it is expedient for the state that you should die,’ he should die.”<sup>35</sup>

We thus find in Rousseau an explicitly Counter-Enlightenment set of themes, attacking the Enlightenment’s themes of reason, the arts and sciences, and ethical and political individualism and liberalism. Rousseau was a contemporary of the American revolutionaries of the 1770s, and there is an instructive contrast between the Lockean themes of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness in the Americans’ Declaration of Independence and Rousseau’s social contract oath for his projected constitution for Corsica: “I join myself—body, goods, will and all my powers—to the Corsican nation, granting to her the full ownership of me—myself and all that depends upon me.”<sup>36</sup>

Lockean Enlightenment politics and Rousseauian Counter-Enlightenment politics will lead to opposite practical applications.

### ***Rousseau and the French Revolution***

Rousseau died in 1778 when France was at the height of its Enlightenment. At the time of his death, Rousseau’s writings were well known in France, though he had not exerted the influence that he would when France entered its revolution. It was Rousseau’s followers who prevailed in the French Revolution, especially in its destructive third phase.

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<sup>33</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 1:7.

<sup>34</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 2:4.

<sup>35</sup> Rousseau 1762b, 2:5.

<sup>36</sup> Rousseau 1765, 297, 350. See also 1762b, 1:9.

The revolution had started with the nobility. Spotting the weakness of the French monarchy, the nobles had succeeded in 1789 in forcing a meeting of the Estates-General, an institution that they usually controlled. Some of the nobles had hoped to enhance the power of the nobility at the expense of the monarchy, and some had hoped to institute Enlightenment reforms.

The nobles, however, were unable to form a unified coalition, and they were no match for the vigor of the liberal and radical delegates. Control of events slipped out of the hands of the nobles, and the Revolution entered a second, more liberal phase. The second phase was dominated by broadly Lockean liberals, and it was they who produced the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.

The liberals, however, were in their turn no match for the vigor of the most radical members of the Revolution. As the members of the Girondin and Jacobin parties assumed greater power, the Revolution entered its third phase.

The Jacobin leaders were explicitly disciples of Rousseau. Jean-Paul Marat, who took on a disheveled and un-bathed appearance, explained that he did so in order “to live simply and according to the precepts of Rousseau.” Louis de Saint-Just, perhaps the most bloodthirsty of the Jacobins, made his devotion to Rousseau clear in speeches to the National Convention. And speaking for the most radical of the revolutionaries, Maximilien Robespierre expressed the prevailing adoring opinion of the great man: “Rousseau is the one man who, through the loftiness of his soul and the grandeur of his character, showed himself worthy of the role of teacher of mankind.”

Under the Jacobins, the Revolution became more radical and more violent. Now the spokesmen for the general will, and having at their disposal plenty of the “universal compulsory force” that Rousseau had dreamed about with which to combat recalcitrant private wills, the Jacobins found it expedient that many die. The

guillotine was busy as the radicals ruthlessly killed nobles, priests, and just about anyone whose politics was suspect. "We must not only punish traitors," urged Saint-Just, "but all people who are not enthusiastic." The nation had plunged into a brutal civil war, and in an enormously symbolic act, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were executed in 1793. That only made things worse, and all of France declined into the Reign of Terror.

The Terror ended with the arrest and execution of Robespierre in 1794, but it was too late for France. Its energies were dissipated, the nation was exhausted, and a power vacuum emerged that Napoleon Bonaparte would fill.

The story of the Counter-Enlightenment then shifts to the German states. Among German intellectuals, there had been some early sympathy for the French Revolution. German intellectuals were not ignorant of the Enlightenment in England and France. Several were attracted by Enlightenment themes, and in the mid-1700s Frederick the Great had attracted to Berlin several Enlightenment-minded scientists and other intellectuals. Berlin for a while was a hotbed of French and English influences.

For the most part, however, the Enlightenment had made a few inroads among intellectuals in the German states. Politically and economically, Germany was a set of feudal states. Serfdom would not be abolished until the nineteenth century. The majority of the population was uneducated and agrarian. Most were deeply religious, dominantly Lutheran. Unthinking obedience to God and to one's feudal lord had been ingrained for centuries. This was especially true in Prussia, whose people Gotthold Lessing called "the most servile in Europe."

So among the Germans the reports of the Terror of the French Revolution caused horror: They killed their *king* and *queen*. They hunted down *priests*, cut off their heads, and paraded up and down the streets of Paris with the heads stuck on the ends of pikes.



Yet the lesson most German intellectuals took from the Revolution was *not* that Rousseauian philosophy was the culprit. To most, the culprit was clearly the Enlightenment philosophy. The Enlightenment was anti-feudal, they noted, and the Revolution was a practical demonstration of what that means—the wholesale slaughtering of one’s sovereign lords and ladies. The Enlightenment was anti-religion, they noted, and the Revolution is a practical demonstration of what that means—killing holy men and burning down churches.

But from the German perspective, the situation became worse, for out of the power vacuum in France arose Napoleon.

Napoleon was also provided an opportunity by a weakened feudal Europe. Europe’s hundreds of small dynastic units were no match for Napoleon’s new military tactics and his sheer audacity. Napoleon ran roughshod over old feudal Europe, swept into the German states, defeated the Prussians in 1806, and proceeded to change everything.

From the perspective of the Germans, Napoleon was not only a foreign conqueror, he was a product of the Enlightenment. Where he conquered and ruled, he extended equality before the law, opened government offices to the middle class, and guaranteed private property. On matters of religion, he destroyed the ghettos, gave Jews freedom of religion, and gave them the right to own land and practice all trades. He opened secular public schools, and modernized Europe’s transportation network.

Napoleon outraged many powerful forces in doing so. He abolished guilds. He angered the clergy by abolishing church courts, tithes, monasteries, convents, ecclesiastical states, and he seized much church property. He angered the nobles by abolishing feudal estates and feudal dues, by breaking up large estates, and generally by lessening the power of the nobles over the peasantry. He functioned, in effect from the Enlightenment perspective, as a

benevolent dictator, as one who embraced many of the modern ideals but who used the full force of government to impose them.

His dictatorial impositions went further. He enacted censorship wherever he went, conscripted subjugated peoples to fight foreign battles, and taxed subjugated peoples to finance France.

So now most German intellectuals faced a serious crisis. The Enlightenment, as they saw it, was not merely a foreign disaster across the Rhine—it was a dictatorial presence ruling Germany in the person of Napoleon Bonaparte. How, wondered every German, did Napoleon win? What did the Germans do wrong? What was to be done?

The poet Johann Hölderlin, Hegel's roommate in college, declared: "Kant is the Moses of our nation." For the story of how the now-dead Kant was to lead Germany out of bondage, we return to Königsberg.

### ***Counter-Enlightenment politics: Right and Left collectivism***

After Rousseau, collectivist political thinking divided into Left and Right versions, both versions drawing inspiration from Rousseau. The story of the Left version is the subject of Chapter Five, so my purpose in this chapter is to highlight developments in collectivist Right thinking and to show that in its essentials the collectivist Right was pursuing the same broadly anti-liberal-capitalist themes that the collectivist Left was.

What links the Right and the Left is a core set of themes: anti-individualism, the need for strong government, the view that religion is a state matter (whether to promote or suppress it), the view that education is a process of socialization, ambivalence about science and technology, and strong themes of group conflict, violence, and war. Left and Right have often divided bitterly over which themes have priority and over how they should be applied. Yet for all of their differences, both the collectivist Left and the

collectivist Right have consistently recognized a common enemy: liberal capitalism, with its individualism, its limited government, its separation of church and state, its fairly constant view that education is not primarily a matter of political socialization, and its persistent Whiggish optimism about prospects for peaceful trade and cooperation between members of all nations and groups.

Rousseau, for example, is often seen as being a man of the Left, and he has influenced generations of Left thinkers. But he was also inspirational to Kant, Fichte, and Hegel—all men of the Right. Fichte in turn was used regularly as a model for Right thinkers—but he was also an inspiration for Left socialists such as Friedrich Ebert, president of the Weimar Republic after World War I. Hegel's legacy, as is well known, took both a Right and a Left form.

While the details are messy the broad point is clear: the collectivist Right and the collectivist Left are united in their major goals and in identifying their major opposition. None of these thinkers, for example, ever has a kind word for the politics of John Locke. In the twentieth century, the same trend continued. Scholars debated whether George Sorel is Left or Right; and that makes sense given that he inspired and admired both Lenin and Mussolini. And to give just one more example, Heidegger and the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have much more in common politically than either does with, say, John Stuart Mill. This in turn explains why thinkers from Herbert Marcuse to Alexandre Kojève to Maurice Merleau-Ponty all argued that Marx and Heidegger are compatible, but none ever dreamed of connecting either to Locke or Mill.

The point will be that liberalism did not penetrate deeply into the main lines of political thinking in Germany. As was the case with metaphysics and epistemology, the most vigorous developments in social and political philosophy of the nineteenth and early twentieth century occurred in Germany, and German socio-political philosophy was dominated by Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Nietz-

sche, and Heidegger. By the early twentieth century, accordingly, the dominant issues for most Continental political thinkers were not whether liberal capitalism was a viable option—but rather exactly when it would collapse—and whether Left or Right collectivism had the best claim to being the socialism of the future. The defeat of the collectivist Right in World War II then meant that the Left was on its own to carry the socialist mantle forward. Accordingly, when the Left ran into its own major disasters as the twentieth century progressed, understanding its fundamental commonality with the collectivist Right helps to explain why in its desperation the Left has often adopted “fascistic” tactics.

### ***Kant on collectivism and war***

Of the major figures in German philosophy in the modern era, Kant is perhaps the one most influenced by Enlightenment social thought.

There is a clear intellectual connection between Rousseau and Kant. Biographers often repeat Heinrich Heine’s anecdote about how Kant always took his afternoon walk at a set time, a time so regular that neighbors could set their clocks by his appearance—except on one occasion he was late for his walk because he had been so caught up in reading Rousseau’s *Emile* that he lost track of time. Kant had been raised as a Pietist, a version of Lutheranism that emphasized simplicity and eschewed external decoration. Kant therefore had no pictures or paintings hanging anywhere on the walls of his house—with one exception: over his desk in his study hung a picture of Rousseau.<sup>37</sup> Wrote Kant, “I learned to honor mankind from reading Rousseau.”<sup>38</sup>

Neo-Enlightenment thinkers attack Kant for two things: his skeptical and subjectivist epistemology and his ethic of selfless

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<sup>37</sup> Höffe 1994, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Beiser 1992, 43.

duty. Kant's account of reason divorces it from cognitive contact with reality, thus destroying knowledge; and his account of ethics divorces morality from happiness, thus destroying the purpose of life. As discussed in Chapter Two, Kant's powerful arguments were a mighty blow to the Enlightenment.

Politically, however, Kant is sometimes considered to be a liberal, and in the context of eighteenth-century Prussia there is some truth to that. In the context of Enlightenment liberalism, however, Kant diverged from liberalism in two major respects: his collectivism and his advocacy of war as a means to collectivist ends.

In a 1784 essay, "Idea for a Universal History With Cosmopolitan Intent," Kant asserted that there is a necessary destiny for the human species. Nature has a plan. It is, however, "a hidden plan of nature,"<sup>39</sup> and as such it is one that requires special discernment by philosophers. That destiny is the full development of all of man's natural capacities, especially man's reason.<sup>40</sup>

By "man" here, Kant did not mean the individual. Nature's goal is a collectivist one: the development of the species. Man's capacities, Kant explained, are "to be completely developed only in the species, not in the individual."<sup>41</sup> The individual is merely fodder for nature's goal, as Kant put it in his "Review of Herder": "nature allows us to see nothing else than that it abandons individuals to complete destruction and only maintains the type."<sup>42</sup> And again, in his 1786 "Speculative Beginning of Human History," Kant argued that the "path that for the species leads to *progress* from the worse to the better does not do so for the individual."<sup>43</sup> The development of the individual is in conflict with the development of the species, and only the development of the species counts.

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<sup>39</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 27/36.

<sup>40</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 18/30 and 27/36.

<sup>41</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 18/30.

<sup>42</sup> Kant 1785/1963, 53/37.

<sup>43</sup> Kant 1786/1983, 115/53.

But it is also not the case that the species' development is about happiness or fulfillment. "Nature is utterly unconcerned that man live well."<sup>44</sup> The individual and even all existing individuals collectively now living are merely a stage in a process, and their suffering is of no account in the light of nature's ultimate end. In fact, Kant argued, man should suffer, and deservedly so. Man is a sinful creature, a creature that is inclined to follow its own desires and not the demands of duty. Echoing Rousseau, Kant blamed mankind for having chosen to use reason when our instincts could have served us perfectly well.<sup>45</sup> And now that reason has awakened it has combined with self-interest to pursue all sorts of unnecessary and depraved desires. Thus the source of our vaunted freedom, Kant wrote, is also our original sin: "the history of *freedom* begins with badness, for it is *man's* work."<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, Kant admonished us, "we are a long way from being able to regard ourselves as *moral*."<sup>47</sup> Man is a creature made of "warped wood."<sup>48</sup> Powerful forces are therefore needed in order to attempt to straighten our warped natures.

One of those forces is morality, a morality of strict and uncompromising duty that opposes man's animal inclinations. A moral life is one that no rational person would "wish that it should be longer than it actually is,"<sup>49</sup> but one has a duty to live and develop oneself<sup>50</sup> and thereby the species. Inculcating this morality in man is one of nature's forces.

Another force to straighten the warped wood is political. Man is "*an animal that, if he lives among other members of his species, has need of a master.*" And that is because "his selfish animal

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<sup>44</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 20/31.

<sup>45</sup> Kant 1786/1983, 111/50.

<sup>46</sup> Kant 1786/1983, 115/54.

<sup>47</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 26/36.

<sup>48</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 23/33.

<sup>49</sup> Kant 1786/1983, 122/58.

<sup>50</sup> Kant 1785/1964, 398/65.

propensities induce him to except himself from [moral rules] wherever he can.” Kant then introduced his version of Rousseau’s general will. Politically, man “thus requires a *master* who will break his self-will and force him to obey a universally valid will.”<sup>51</sup>

However, strict duty and political masters are not enough. Nature has devised an additional strategy for bringing the species man to higher development. That strategy is war. As Kant wrote in his “Idea for a Universal History”: “*The means that nature uses to bring about the development of all of man’s capacities is the **antagonism among them in society.***”<sup>52</sup> Thus, conflict, antagonism, and war are good. They destroy many lives, but they are nature’s way of bringing forth the higher development of man’s capacities. “At the stage of culture at which the human race still stands,” Kant stated bluntly in “Speculative Beginning,” “war is an indispensable means for bringing it to a still higher stage.”<sup>53</sup> Peace would be a moral disaster, so we are duty-bound not to shrink from war.<sup>54</sup>

Out of this self-sacrifice of individuals and the war of nations, Kant hoped, the species would become fully developed, and an international and cosmopolitan federation of states would live peacefully and harmoniously, making possible within themselves the complete moral development of their members.<sup>55</sup> Then, as Kant concluded in a 1794 essay entitled “The End of All Things,” men would finally be in a position to prepare themselves for the day of “judgment of forgiveness or damnation by the judge of the world.”<sup>56</sup> This is the hidden plan of nature; it is destined to happen; so we know what we have to look forward to.

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<sup>51</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 23/33, italics in original.

<sup>52</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 20/31.

<sup>53</sup> Kant 1786/1983, 121/58; see also 1795/1983, 363/121.

<sup>54</sup> Kant notes a fundamental opposition between human desire and nature’s goals: “Man wills concord; but nature better knows what is good for the species: she wills discord” (1784/1983, 21/ 32).

<sup>55</sup> Kant 1784/1983, 28/38.

<sup>56</sup> Kant 1794/1983, 328/93.

***Herder on multicultural relativism***

Johann Herder believed that our future will not be so cheery. Sometimes called the “German Rousseau,”<sup>57</sup> Herder had studied philosophy and theology at Königsberg University. Kant was his professor of philosophy; and while at Königsberg Herder also became a disciple of Johann Hamann.

Herder is Kantian in his disdain for the intellect, though unlike the static and rigid Kant he adds a Hamannian activist and emotionalist component “I am not here to think,” Herder wrote, “but to be, feel, live!”<sup>58</sup>

Herder’s distinctiveness lies not in his epistemology but in his analysis of history and the destiny of humankind. What meaning, he asks, can we discern in history? Is there a plan or is it merely a random happening of chance events?

There is a plan.<sup>59</sup> History, Herder argues, is moved by a necessary dynamic development that pushes man progressively toward victory over nature. This necessary development culminates in the achievements of science, arts, and freedom. So far Herder is not original. Christianity held that God’s plan for the world gives a necessary dynamic to the development of history, that history is going somewhere. And the Enlightenment thinkers projected the victory of civilization over the brutish forces of nature.

But the Enlightenment thinkers had posited a universal human nature, and they had held that human reason could develop equally in all cultures. From this they inferred that all cultures eventually could achieve the same degree of progress, and that when that happened humans would eliminate all of the irrational superstitions and prejudices that had driven them apart, and that

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<sup>57</sup> Barnard 1965, 18.

<sup>58</sup> In Berlin 1980, 14.

<sup>59</sup> Herder 1774, 188.



mankind would then achieve a cosmopolitan and peaceful liberal social order.<sup>60</sup>

Not so, says Herder. Instead, each *Volk* is a unique “family writ large.”<sup>61</sup> Each possesses a distinctive culture and is itself an organic community stretching backward and forward in time. Each has its own genius, its own special traits. And, necessarily, these cultures are opposed to each other. As each fulfills its own destiny, its unique developmental path will conflict with other cultures’ developmental paths.

Is this conflict wrong or bad? No. According to Herder, one cannot make such judgments. Judgments of good and bad are defined culturally and internally, in terms of each culture’s own goals and aspirations. Each culture’s standards originate and develop from its particular needs and circumstances, not from a universal set of principles; so, Herder concluded, “let us have no more generalizations about improvement.”<sup>62</sup> Herder thus insisted “on a strictly relativist interpretation of progress and human perfectibility.”<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, each culture can be judged only by its own standards. One cannot judge one culture from the perspective of another; one can only sympathetically immerse oneself in the other’s cultural manifestations and judge them on their own terms.

However, according to Herder, attempting to understand other cultures is not really a good idea. And attempting to incorporate other cultures’ elements into one’s own leads to the decay of one’s own culture: “The moment men start dwelling in wishful dreams of foreign lands from whence they seek hope and salvation they reveal the first symptoms of disease, of flatulence, of unhealthy opulence, of approaching death!”<sup>64</sup> To be vigorous, creative, and alive, Herder

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<sup>60</sup> Herder 1774, 187.

<sup>61</sup> In Barnard 1965, 54.

<sup>62</sup> Herder 1774, 205.

<sup>63</sup> Barnard 1965, 136.

<sup>64</sup> Herder 1774, 187.

argued, one must avoid mixing one's own culture with those of others, and instead steep oneself in one's own culture and absorb it into oneself.

For the Germans, accordingly, given their cultural traditions, attempting to graft Enlightenment branches onto German stock has been and would always be a disaster. "Voltaire's philosophy has spread, but mainly to the detriment of the world."<sup>65</sup> The German is not suited for sophistication, liberalism, science, and so on, and so the German should stick to his local traditions, language, and sentiments. For the German, low culture is better than high culture; being unspoiled by books and learning is best. Scientific knowledge is artificial; instead Germans should be natural and rooted in the soil. For the German, the parable of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden is true: Don't eat of that tree! Live! Don't think! Don't analyze!

Herder did not argue that the German way is the best and that it is justifiable for the Germans to become imperialistic and impose their culture upon others—that step was taken by his followers. He argued simply as a German in favor of the German people and urged them to go their own way, as opposed to following the Enlightenment.

Herder is relevant because of his enormous influence on the nationalist movements that were shortly to take off all over central and eastern Europe. He is also relevant to understanding how far from Enlightenment thinking the German Counter-Enlightenment was. If Kant is partially attracted to Enlightenment themes, Herder rejects those elements of Kant's philosophy. While Herder is broadly Kantian epistemologically, he rejects Kant's universalism: for Herder, how reason shapes and structures is culturally relative. And in contrast to Kant's vision of an ultimately peaceful, cosmopolitan future, Herder projects a future of multicultural conflict. Thus, in the context of the German intellectual debate, one was

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<sup>65</sup> Herder 1769, 95; see also 102.

offered a choice—Kant at the semi-Enlightenment end of the spectrum and Herder at the other.

### ***Fichte on education as socialization***

Johann Fichte was a disciple of Kant. Born in 1762, he studied theology and philosophy at Jena, Wittenberg, and Leipzig. In 1788 he read Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, and that reading changed Fichte's life. He traveled to Königsberg in order to meet Kant, then the ruling philosopher of Germany. But the great man was initially distant, so Fichte worked as a tutor at Königsberg while writing his moral treatise, *Critique of All Revelation*. When it was finished, Fichte dedicated it to Kant. Kant read it, admired it, and urged that it be published. It was published anonymously in 1792, and this made Fichte famous in intellectual circles: It was so Kantian in style and content that it was taken by many to have been written by Kant himself and to be his fourth Critique. Kant disclaimed authorship but praised the young author, thus launching Fichte's academic career.

The major breakthrough, however—the event that launched Fichte permanently onto the German landscape as not only a leading philosopher but also as a cultural leader—came in 1807. A year after Napoleon's defeat of the Prussians, Fichte stepped onto the public stage and delivered his ringing call to arms, his *Addresses to the German Nation*.

In the *Addresses*, Fichte spoke as a philosopher who had descended from abstractions to connect with practical affairs, in order to situate those practical affairs within the context of the most metaphysical.<sup>66</sup> He addressed the defeated Germans, calling for a renewal of their spirit and character. The Germans had lost the

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<sup>66</sup> Fichte once said to Madame de Staël: "Grasp my metaphysics, Madame; you will then understand my ethics."

physical battle, Fichte argued, but now more was at stake: the real battle now was a battle of character.

Why had Germany come under the dominion of Napoleon? Fichte granted that many factors were responsible, most of them having to do with the infiltration of softening, Enlightenment beliefs—"all the evils which have now brought us to ruin are of foreign origin"<sup>67</sup>—and that many reforms were needed in the military, religion, and the administration of government.

But the fundamental problem was clear: the educational system had failed Germany. Only with a total revision of the method of educating children could Germany hope to become immune from the Napoleons of the future. "In a word, it is a total change of the existing system of education that I propose as the sole means of preserving the existence of the German nation."<sup>68</sup> In Fichte's educational philosophy, themes from Rousseau, Hamann, Kant, and Schleiermacher are integrated into a package that would be influential for more than one hundred years.

In the *Addresses*, there is no question in Fichte's mind about what abstract system is the right one. With Kant, "the problem has been completely solved among us, and philosophy has been perfected."<sup>69</sup> But Kant's philosophy had not yet been applied systematically to the education of children.

Fichte started by looking back to see how Germany got into its current sorry state. Germany used to be great. In the Middle Ages, "the German burghers were the civilized people," and "this period is the only one in German history in which this nation is famous and brilliant." What was great about the burghers was their "spirit of piety, of honour, of modesty, and of the sense of community." They were great because they were not individualistic. "Seldom does the name of an individual stand out or distinguish itself, for

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<sup>67</sup> Fichte 1807, 84.

<sup>68</sup> Fichte 1807, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Fichte 1807, 101.

they were all of like mind and alike in sacrifice for the common weal.”<sup>70</sup>

Fichte was, however, not a conservative apologist for the good old days. In the context of feudal Germany, Fichte was a reformer who believed that it was the corrupt upper classes that had ruined Germany: “its bloom [was] destroyed by the avarice and tyranny of princes.”<sup>71</sup> The Germans had become further corrupted by the modern world, which led to their impotence in the face of Napoleon. What about the modern world, essentially, caused the corruption? *Self-seeking*: “self-seeking has destroyed itself by its own complete development,” and “[a] people can be completely corrupted, *i.e.*, self-seeking—for self-seeking is the root of all other corruption.”<sup>72</sup>

And this, echoing Rousseau, was because men became rational, under the guise of Enlightenment. This undermined religion and its moral force. “The enlightenment of the understanding, with its purely material calculations, was the force which destroyed the connection established by religion between some future life and the present.” Consequently, government became liberal and morally lax: “the weakness of governments” frequently allowed “neglect of duty to go unpunished.”<sup>73</sup>

So now the German has sold his soul, lost his true self, his identity. “It follows, then, that the means of salvation which I promise to indicate consists in the fashioning of an entirely new self, which may have existed before perhaps in individuals as an exception, but never as a universal and national self, and in the education of the nation.” Echoing Rousseau again: “By means of the new education we want to mould the Germans into a corporate

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<sup>70</sup> Fichte 1807, 104-105.

<sup>71</sup> Fichte 1807, pp. 104-5.

<sup>72</sup> Fichte 1807, 8-9.

<sup>73</sup> Fichte 1807, 11.

body, which shall be stimulated and animated in all its individual members by the same interest.”<sup>74</sup>

To start with, education must be egalitarian and universal, unlike previous education, which was feudal and elitist: “So there is nothing left for us but just to apply the new system to every German without exception, so that it is not the education of a single class, but the education of the nation.” Such education will aid in the creation of a classless society: “All distinctions of classes ... will be completely removed and vanish. In this way there will grow up among us, not popular education, but real German national education.”<sup>75</sup>

Real education must start by getting to the source of human nature. Education must exert “an influence penetrating to the roots of vital impulse and action.” Here was a great failing of traditional education, for it had relied upon and appealed to the student’s free will. “I should reply that that very recognition of, and reliance upon, free will in the pupil is the first mistake of the old system.” Compulsion, not freedom, is best for students:

On the other hand, the new education must consist essentially in this, that it completely destroys freedom of will in the soil which it undertakes to cultivate, and produces on the contrary strict necessity in the decisions of the will, the opposite being impossible. Such a will can henceforth be relied upon with confidence and certainty.<sup>76</sup>

Unfortunately, it is difficult to do this under contemporary living arrangements, in which children go to school and then return to corrupting influences in their homes and their neighborhoods at the end of the day. “It is essential,” Fichte then urged, “that from the very beginning the pupil should be continuously and completely under the influence of this education, and should be

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<sup>74</sup> Fichte 1807, 12-13, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Fichte 1807, 15.

<sup>76</sup> Fichte 1807, 14, 20.

separated altogether from the community, and kept from all contact with it.”<sup>77</sup>

Once the children are separated, educators can turn their attention to internal matters. In his essay on education, Kant had of course argued that “above all things, obedience is an essential feature in the character of a child, especially of a school boy or girl.”<sup>78</sup> However, Fichte pointed out, children are children and as such they do not naturally impose duties upon themselves. So the school’s authorities must firmly impose the duties upon them:

[T]he legislation should consequently maintain a high standard of severity, and should prohibit the doing of many things. Such prohibitions, which simply must exist and on which the existence of the community depends, are to be enforced in case of necessity by fear of immediate punishment, and this penal law must be administered absolutely without indulgence or exception.<sup>79</sup>

One of the duties to be inculcated is the obligation of the student who is more able to help the more needy students. Yet “he is to expect neither reward for it, for under this system of government all are quite equal in regard to work and pleasure, nor even praise, for the attitude of mind prevailing in the community is that it is just everyone’s duty to act thus.” Anticipating Marx, Fichte believed that the school should be a microcosm of what the ideal society would be like: “Under this system of government, therefore, the acquirement of greater skill and the effort spent therein will result only in fresh effort and work, and it will be the very pupil who is abler than the rest who must often watch while the others sleep, and reflect while others play.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Fichte 1807, 31.

<sup>78</sup> Kant 1960, 84.

<sup>79</sup> Fichte 1807, 33.

<sup>80</sup> Fichte 1807, 34-5.

More broadly, the new education will eliminate all self interest and inculcate the pure love of duty for its own sake that Rousseau and Kant had prized:

in place of that love of self, with which nothing for our good can be connected any longer, we must set up and establish in the hearts of all those whom we wish to reckon among our nation that other kind of love, which is concerned directly with the good, simply as such and for its own sake.<sup>81</sup>

If the system is successful, its fruit will be as follows: “Its pupil goes forth at the proper time as a fixed and unchangeable machine.”<sup>82</sup>

But this moral education is not enough. Drawing upon Hamann and Schleiermacher, Fichte next turned to religion.

The pupil of this education is not merely a member of human society here on this earth and for the short span of life which is permitted to him. He is also, and is undoubtedly acknowledged by education to be, a link in the eternal chain of spiritual life in a higher social order. A training which has undertaken to include the whole of his being should undoubtedly lead him to a knowledge of this higher order also.<sup>83</sup>

Despite being seen as soft on religion by the Lutheran orthodoxy, Fichte argued that education must also be intensely religious. “Under proper guidance,” the student will “find at the end that nothing really exists but life, the spiritual life which lives in thought, and that everything else does not really exist, but only appears to exist.” He will find that “Only in immediate contact with God and the direct emanation of his life from him will he find life, light, and happiness, but in any separation from that immediate

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<sup>81</sup> Fichte 1807, 23.

<sup>82</sup> Fichte 1807, 36.

<sup>83</sup> Fichte 1807, 37.



contact, death, darkness, and misery.” “Education to true religion is, therefore, the final task of the new education.”<sup>84</sup>

So far Fichte’s program of education includes the communal separation of children, severe authoritarian top-down training, strict moral duty and selflessness, and total religious immersion. Not quite the Enlightenment model of liberal education.

But Fichte’s program did not end there. For now we add the importance of ethnicity. Only the German is capable of true education. The German is the best that the world has to offer and is the hope for the future progress of mankind. The German “alone, above all other European nations, [has] the capacity of responding to such an education.”<sup>85</sup> But as goes Germany, so goes the rest of Europe and, ultimately, all of humankind. Either the Germans will respond to Fichte’s call and reform themselves—or they will sink into oblivion. “But, as Germany sinks, the rest of Europe is seen to sink with it.”<sup>86</sup>

Thus Fichte, with his passionate style and force of personality, spurred the Germans to action. The Germans listened admiringly and with approval. In 1810, three years after the delivery of his *Addresses*, Fichte was appointed dean of the philosophy faculty at the newly-founded University of Berlin. (Schleiermacher was appointed head of the faculty of theology.) In the following year Fichte became rector of the whole university, and so was in a position to put his educational program into practice.

Nor was Fichte a flash in the pan. One spark appears over a century later in 1919, in Friedrich Ebert’s speech at the opening of the National Assembly at Weimar. Germany had once again been defeated by foreign powers, and the nation was demoralized, resentful, and starting over. Elected first president of the German

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<sup>84</sup> Fichte 1807, 37, 38.

<sup>85</sup> Fichte 1807, 52.

<sup>86</sup> Fichte 1807, 105.

Republic in 1919, Ebert made a point in his opening address of stressing the relevance of Fichte to Germany's situation:

In this way we will set to work, our great aim before us: to maintain the right of the German nation, to lay the foundation in Germany for a strong democracy, and to bring it to achievement with the true social spirit and in the socialistic way. Thus shall we realize that which Fichte has given to the German nation as its task.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Hegel on worshipping the state***

While a student at Tübingen, Hegel's favorite reading had been Rousseau. "The principle of freedom dawned on the world in Rousseau, and gave infinite strength to man."<sup>88</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, Hegel was also engaged deeply with the latest developments of Kantian and Fichtean metaphysics and epistemology and their implications for social and political thought.

The political battle lines were clearly drawn for Hegel: If Rousseau's account of human freedom is the correct one, then the Enlightenment account of freedom must be a fraud. Disappointed by the outcome of the Revolution in France, where it seemed like the Rousseauians had had their world-historical chance, Hegel also had nothing but disdain for England, then arguably the most developed nation of the Enlightenment: "of institutions characterized by real freedom there are nowhere fewer than in England." The so-called liberalism of the so-called Enlightenment nations actually represented an "incredible deficiency" of rights and freedom. Only by updating the Rousseauian model dialectically and applying it to the German context could we find "real freedom."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In Fichte 1807, xxii.

<sup>88</sup> Hegel, in Rousseau 1755, xv.

<sup>89</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 454; see also 1821, §236.

So what is real freedom to Hegel?

"It must further be understood that all the worth which the human being possesses—all spiritual reality, he possesses only through the State."<sup>90</sup>

In the broader context of Hegel's philosophy, human history is governed by the necessary working out of the Absolute. The Absolute—or God, or Universal Reason, or the Divine Idea—is the actual substance of the universe, and its developmental processes are everything that is. "God governs the world; the actual working of his government—the carrying out of his plan—is the History of the World."<sup>91</sup>

The State, to the extent that it participates in the Absolute, is God's instrument for achieving his purposes. "The State," accordingly, "is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth."<sup>92</sup>

Given that the individual's ultimate purpose in life should be to achieve union with ultimate reality, it follows that the "state in and by itself is the ethical whole, the actualization of freedom."<sup>93</sup> The consequence of this, morally, is that the individual is of less significance than the state. The individual's empirical, day-to-day interests are of a lower moral order than the state's universal, world-historical interests. The state has as its final end the self-realization of the Absolute, and "this final end has supreme right against the individual, whose supreme duty is to be a member of the state."<sup>94</sup> Duty, as we have learned from Kant and Fichte, always trumps personal interests and inclinations.

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<sup>90</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 35-36.

<sup>92</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 39; also 1821, Add., 152, para. 258; p. 279.

<sup>93</sup> Hegel 1821, Add., 152, para. 258; p. 279.

<sup>94</sup> Hegel 1821, §258.

Yet mere membership as a matter of duty is not enough for Hegel, given the grandeur of the state's divine historical purpose: "One must worship the state as a terrestrial divinity."<sup>95</sup>

In such worship, Hegel believed, we find our real freedom. For ultimately, we individuals are but aspects of the Absolute Spirit, and in so relating to it we are relating to ourselves. "For Law is the objectivity of Spirit; volition in its true form. Only that will which obeys law, is free; for it obeys itself—it is independent and so free."<sup>96</sup> Freedom is thus the individual's absolute submission to and worship of the state.

There is of course the problem of explaining all of this to the average individual. The average individual, in the course of living day-to-day life, often finds that the laws and other manifestations of the state do not seem like real freedom. In most cases, Hegel stated, that is because the average person is ignorant of what true freedom is,<sup>97</sup> and no amount of explaining the higher dialectic to that person will make the laws seem like less of an infringement upon freedom.

Yet it is also true, Hegel granted, that in many cases the individual's freedoms and interests will genuinely be set aside, overridden, and even smashed. One reason for this is that the state's general principles are *universal* and *necessary*, and so they cannot be expected to apply perfectly to the *particular* and *contingent*. As Hegel explained, "*universal* law is not designed for

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<sup>95</sup> Hegel 1821, §272. Otto Braun, age 19, a volunteer who died in WW I, wrote in a letter to his parents: "My inmost yearning, my purest, though most secret flame, my deepest faith and my highest hope—they are still the same as ever, and they all bear one name: the State. One day to build the state like a temple, rising up pure and strong, resting in its own weight, severe and sublime, but also serene like the gods and with bright halls glistening in the dancing brilliance of the sun—this, at bottom, is the end and goal of my aspirations" (in H. Kuhn 1963, 313).

<sup>96</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 39.

<sup>97</sup> Hegel 1821, §301.

the units of the mass. These as such may, in fact, find their interests decidedly thrust into the background.”<sup>98</sup>

But the problem is not merely one of applying the universal to the particular. Individuals must recognize that, from the moral perspective, they are not ends in themselves; they are tools for the achievement of higher goals.

But though we might tolerate the idea that individuals, their desires and the gratification of them, are thus sacrificed, and their happiness given up to the empire of chance, to which it belongs; and that as a general rule, individuals come under the category of means to an ulterior end.<sup>99</sup>

And again, just in case we have missed Hegel’s point: “A single person, I need hardly say, is something subordinate, and as such he must dedicate himself to the ethical whole.” And again echoing Rousseau: “Hence, if the state claims life, the individual must surrender it.”<sup>100</sup>

Individual life is surrendered rather a lot when very special human beings come along to really shake things up and move God’s plan for the world forward. “World-historical individuals,” as Hegel called them, are those who, usually without knowing so themselves, are agents of the Absolute’s development. Such individuals are energetic and focused, and they are able to amass power and direct social forces in such a way as to achieve something of historical significance. Their achievements, however, exact a high human cost.

A World-historical individual is not so unwise as to indulge a variety of wishes to divide his regards. He is devoted to the One Aim, regardless of all else. It is even possible that such men may treat other great, even sacred

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<sup>98</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 35.

<sup>99</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 33.

<sup>100</sup> Hegel 1821, Add., 45, para. 70; p. 241.

interests, inconsiderately; conduct which is indeed obnoxious to moral reprehension. But so mighty a form must trample down many an innocent flower—crush to pieces many an object in its path.<sup>101</sup>

The innocent flowers should not object to their destruction. The World-historical individual is acting for the best interests of the whole. In that special individual the state is embodied, and the state is the future of the collective. Even while being destroyed, the innocent flower has worth only through—and so should glory in—his participation in that larger future.

Anticipating Nietzsche, Hegel argued that neither should the innocent flowers raise merely moral objections against the activities of the World-historical individuals. “For the History of the World occupies a higher ground than that on which morality has properly its position.” The needs of historical development are of higher standing than those of morality, and so “the conscience of individuals” should not be an obstacle to the achievement of historical destinies.<sup>102</sup> The trampling of morality is regrettable, but “looked at from this point, moral claims that are irrelevant, must not be brought into collision with world-historical deeds and their accomplishment.”<sup>103</sup>

### ***From Hegel to the twentieth century***

One of Auguste Comte’s students studied for a while in Germany and attended Hegel’s lectures. Reporting back to Comte about how Hegel’s doctrines compared to Comte’s socialist ones, the student wrote excitedly that “the identity of results exists even in the

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<sup>101</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 32.

<sup>102</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 66-67.

<sup>103</sup> Hegel 1830-31, 67.

practical principles, as Hegel is a defender of the governments, that is to say, an enemy of the liberals.”<sup>104</sup>

In the nineteenth century the question of the true meaning of socialism was a live issue among collectivists of all stripes. Kant, Herder, Fichte, and Hegel were dominant mainstream voices. Yet clearly none was a conservative. Conservatives of the nineteenth century favored returning to or re-invigorating feudal institutions. Our four figures, by contrast, all favored significant reforms and a jettisoning of traditional feudalism. Yet none was an Enlightenment liberal. Enlightenment liberals were individualistic, the center of their political and economic gravity tending toward limited governments and free markets. Our four figures, by contrast, voiced themes of strong collectivism in ethics and politics with calls for individuals to sacrifice for society, whether society was defined as the species, the ethnic group, or the state. We find in the case of Kant a call for individuals to be willing to do their duty to sacrifice for the species; we find in the case of Herder a call for individuals to find their identity in their ethnicity; we find in the case of Fichte a call for education to be process of total socialization; and we find in the case of Hegel a call for total government to which the individual will surrender everything. For a school of thinkers who advocated total socialization, “socialism” seemed an appropriate label. Accordingly, many thinkers on the collectivist Right thought of themselves as true socialists.

Yet “socialism” was also being used as the label for Left collectivists, so there was a lively debate between the Left and many on the Right over who had the most right to call themselves “socialist.”

The debate was not merely semantics. Both Right and Left were anti-individualist; both advocated government management of the most important aspects of society; both divided human society into groups which they took to be fundamental to individuals’

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<sup>104</sup> In Hayek 1952, 193.

identities; both pitted those groups against each other in inescapable conflict; both favored war and violent revolution to bring about the ideal society. And both sides hated the liberals.

### ***Right versus Left collectivism in the twentieth century***

The great events of the early twentieth century served as intellectual touchstones in the battle between the Left and the Right for the soul of the socialist.

World War I pitted East against West in the century's first great conflict of incompatible social systems. Leading German intellectuals on the political Right were clear about what they took the onset of war to signify. The war would destroy the decadent liberal spirit, the bland spirit of shopkeepers and traders, and make way for the ascent of social idealism.

Johann Plenge, for example, one of the outstanding authorities on both Hegel and Marx, was also a man of the political Right. His landmark book *Hegel and Marx* reintroduced scholars to the importance of understanding Hegel to understanding Marx.<sup>105</sup> For Plenge, liberalism was a corrupt system, and so socialism had to become the social system of the future. Plenge also believed that socialism would come first to Germany.

Because in the sphere of ideas Germany was the most convinced exponent of all socialist dreams, and in the sphere of reality she was the most powerful architect of the most highly organized economic system.—In us is the twentieth century.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Lenin agreed with Plenge: "It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later, none of the Marxists has understood Marx!"

<sup>106</sup> In Hayek 1944, 188.



The Great War, accordingly, was to be celebrated as the catalyst for bringing that future into existence. The war economy that had been created in 1914 in Germany, wrote Plenge, “is the first realization of a socialist society and its spirit the first active, and not merely demanding, appearance of a socialist spirit. The needs of the war have established the socialist idea in German economic life.”<sup>107</sup>

Thus, Germany’s defeat in World War I was devastating to the collectivist Right. Moeller van den Bruck, unquestionably a man of the German Right and an implacable foe of Marxism, summarized the defeat thus: “We have lost the war against the West. Socialism has lost it against Liberalism”<sup>108</sup>

The crushing loss of the war and the psychological defeatism that came with it in Germany contributed to the meteoric success of Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. Spengler was another man of the Right. In *Decline*, written by 1914 but not published until 1918, Spengler offered a pessimistic combination of Herder and Nietzsche, voicing themes of cultural conflict and decline, arguing that the long, slow victory of liberalism in the West was the clearest indication that Western culture was, as all cultures eventually did, slipping into softness, flaccidity, and ultimately insignificance. All of the markers of Western civilization, Spengler argued, from democratic government to capitalism to the developments of technology were symptoms of decay. “The frightful form of soulless, purely mechanical capitalism, which attempts to master all activities and stifles every free independent impulse and all individuality” had prevailed, and virtually nothing could be done about it.<sup>109</sup>

Ludwig Wittgenstein was thunderstruck by his reading of Spengler. Martin Heidegger was moved profoundly. *The Decline of*

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<sup>107</sup> In Hayek 1944, 188-189.

<sup>108</sup> In Hayek 1944, 196.

<sup>109</sup> In Craig 1978, 487.

*the West* catapulted Spengler into the front ranks of German public intellectuals.

Immediately following the success of *Decline*, Spengler brought forth his *Prussianism and Socialism* (1920). Turning from cultural history to political theory, Spengler hoped to wrest the label “socialist” away from the Marxists<sup>110</sup> and to demonstrate that socialism required a national and organic focus. Agreeing with the Marxists, Spengler argued that the ideal state required “the organization of production and communication by the State; everybody to be a servant of the State.” And agreeing with the Marxists and against the soft liberals, Spengler argued that “Socialism means power, power, and more power.”<sup>111</sup> But against the Marxists, who were too rationalistic and too enamored of technology, Spengler argued that real socialism would be organic and rooted in the natural rhythms of life. Marxism, he believed, shared responsibility with capitalism for generating the artificial and materialistic world of the West. “All things organic are dying in the grip of organization,” Spengler wrote later in *Man and Technics*, echoing Rousseau:

An artificial world is permeating and poisoning the natural. The Civilization itself has become a machine that does, or tries to do, everything in mechanical fashion. We think only in horse-power now; we cannot look at a waterfall without mentally turning it into electric power; we cannot survey a countryside full of pasturing cattle without thinking of its exploitation as a source of meat-supply; we cannot look at the beautiful old handiwork of an unspoiled primitive people without wishing to replace it by a modern technical process.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Spengler 1920, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Spengler 1920, 130.

<sup>112</sup> Spengler 1931, 94.

We cannot recapture our lost connectedness, Spengler believed, so it is too late for socialism. But like the heroes of old, we should face up to our destiny stoically and with no illusions. “Optimism is *cowardice*.” All that we can do, as beings of honor in a world of decline, is stick to our duty:

Our duty is to hold on to the lost position, without hope, without rescue, like that Roman soldier whose bones were found in front of a door in Pompeii, who, during the eruption of Vesuvius, died at his post because they forgot to relieve him. That is greatness.<sup>113</sup>

While Spengler was pessimistic, other Right thinkers still saw a chance for true socialism. Ernst Jünger, who had been inspired by Spengler, inspired some of those Right thinkers. Jünger had been wounded three times in the Great War, but he had returned home determined to renew the fight against the decadent West. The war had been a loss—but a loss that could be transcended. We are, wrote Jünger, “a new generation, a race that has been hardened and inwardly transformed by all the darting flames and sledgehammer blows of the greatest war in history.”<sup>114</sup>

Another Right thinker who still believed that socialism could come to be was Werner Sombart (1863-1941), best known as an outstanding sociologist and fiery critic of liberal capitalism. A good Marxist for much of his career, Sombart had moved toward the Right early in the twentieth century. To Sombart, that did not involve abandoning socialism but rather strengthening it. It was absolutely essential, Sombart argued, “to free Socialism from the Marxian system.”<sup>115</sup> Doing so would make it possible to forge a better form of socialism by focusing it nationally; and by rejecting the pretense of being able to “‘prove’ the ‘necessity’ of Socialism by means of ‘scientific’ arguments,” socialism would then regain its

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<sup>113</sup> Spengler 1931, 104, italics in original.

<sup>114</sup> In Herman 1997, 243.

<sup>115</sup> Sombart 1909, 90.

“power of creating new ideals and the possibility of intense feeling.”<sup>116</sup> A new nationalistic focus and rejuvenation of socialism’s idealistic feelings would, he thought, better enable socialists to combat the true enemy, liberal capitalism. Sombart’s next major work, *Merchants and Heroes* (1915), continued his attacks on liberal capitalism by contrasting two opposed types of social being, one decadent and the other noble; and Sombart’s attack on that primary target continued through 1928 when, agreeing in essence with Spengler and Moeller, he said of the socialist ideal:

This thought is destined to preserve mankind from a danger which is much greater than that of bureaucratization, and that is the danger of succumbing to mammonism, to the profit devil, to material interest mongering.<sup>117</sup>

*“Liberalism,”* wrote Moeller, *“is the Death of Nations.”*<sup>118</sup> So socialism *had* to be able to prevail against it. Yet it had to be the correct kind of socialism—and the correct kind of socialism was not Marxist. Marxist internationalism, the Right thinkers from Spengler to Sombart to Moeller argued, ended up being a false or illusory version of socialism. There is no universal culture, so there is no universal set of interests and no universal form that socialism can take. Socialism must be national—it must be rooted in each culture’s distinctive historical context. “Every people has its own socialism,” wrote Moeller, and so “international socialism does not exist.”<sup>119</sup>

And in a remark that was prescient of the coming decade, Moeller wrote:

Socialism begins where Marxism ends. German socialism is called to play a part in the spiritual and intellectual history of mankind by purging itself of every trace of

<sup>116</sup> Sombart 1909, 91.

<sup>117</sup> In Ringer 1969, 235; see also Spengler 1920, 130.

<sup>118</sup> Moeller 1923, 77; italics in original.

<sup>119</sup> Moeller 1923, 73, 74.

liberalism. ... This New Socialism must be the foundation of Germany's Third Empire.<sup>120</sup>

### ***The Rise of National Socialism: Who are the real socialists?***

The rise of National Socialism to political prominence during the 1920s brought the abstract debate to particular focus, as the National Socialists, the Communists, and the Social Democrats all argued variations on the same themes and competed for the votes of the same constituencies.

The socialist Social Democrats and the Communists had split over whether socialism would be achieved by evolution or revolution. Hard feelings also existed between the two parties over the Spartacist Revolt of 1919, in which the Communists had risen up violently against an elected socialist regime. Thus the Social Democrats—in point of theory and in order to attract votes—regularly argued that there was no essential difference between the Communists and the National Socialists: both favored violence rather than peaceful and democratic procedures.

The Communists often returned the favor, arguing that the Social Democrats and the National Socialists had both in various ways sold out to capitalism. Ernst Thälmann, for example, in a speech to the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany, argued that the Social Democrats and National Socialists were ideological twins.<sup>121</sup> The Social Democrats were willing to compromise with other parties and share

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<sup>120</sup> Moeller 1923, 76. Adolf Hitler met Moeller in the early 1920s at the June-Club in Berlin, where Hitler gave a talk to a group of conservative intellectuals. After the talk, Hitler said directly to Moeller: "You can create the spiritual framework for Germany's reconstruction. Otto Strasser whose advice I rate highly says that you are the Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the German revolution. A born thinker. I am a street fighter. Join us! If you can become the Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the New Germany, I will be its Napoleon. Let us work together!" (in Lauryssens 1999, 94).

<sup>121</sup> Thälmann 1932.

power with them; only endless bickering and vacillation could result from that, which would serve only to maintain the capitalist *status quo*. The National Socialists, of course, were on the political Right, so by definition they had to be in the pockets of the capitalists.

The National Socialists recognized that they were on the Right and that the Social Democrats and the Communists were on the Left. But they found little practical difficulty wooing voters away from both parties by emphasizing the socialist elements of National Socialism. And they did not find that the theoretical goals of the three parties were that far apart. Hitler, for example, declared that “basically National Socialism and Marxism are the same.”<sup>122</sup> And Josef Goebbels, who had a Ph.D. in philology and perhaps a better claim to understand the theoretical issues, argued the same point.

Goebbels’s social thinking had been influenced strongly by Spengler and by his reading of the major Left socialists. He represented a strong voice within the National Socialist Party for its economically socialist planks. Goebbels’s hatred of capitalism was legendary, as was his hatred of money. Money, he wrote, is “the source of all evil. It’s as if Mammon were the embodiment of the principle of evil in the world. I hate money from the deepest depths of my soul.”<sup>123</sup> Only socialism could oppose the corruption of liberalism and capitalism. “Liberalism means: I believe in Mammon,” wrote Goebbels in his 1929 *Michael*, a novel that went through seventeen editions by 1942. “Socialism means: I believe in work.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> In Pipes 1999, 220.

<sup>123</sup> In Reuth 1990 33-34, 51.

<sup>124</sup> Goebbels 1929, 110. Goebbels prefaced his doctoral dissertation with a quotation from Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*: “Science and Reason have, from the beginning of time, played a secondary and subordinate part in the life of nations; so it will be till the end of time. Nations are built up and moved by another force that sways and dominates them, the origin of which is unknown and inexplicable: that force is the force of an insatiable desire to go on to the end, though at the same time it denies that end.” Goebbels’s *Michael* is semi-autobiographical, and Goebbels gave to his

Thus Goebbels had often been more than willing to make speeches and write conciliatory essays to the Communists, asking them to recognize that the National Socialists' and Communists' major goals of overthrowing capitalism and achieving socialism were the same—and that the only significant difference between the two was that the Communists believed that socialism could be achieved at the international level, while the National Socialists believed that it could and should occur at the national level.<sup>125</sup> The differences between National Socialism and Communism boiled down to a choice between the dictatorship of the *Volk* and the dictatorship of the *proletariat*.<sup>126</sup>

In this intellectual and cultural context, it is understandable that voters who favored the Social Democrats in one election often voted for the Communists or the National Socialists in the next, often switching allegiance again in the next election.

It is also understandable that in such a context the National Socialists would score their first big successes among the university students. “Students in brown shirts and swastika armbands were a normal sight in classes well before 1932.”<sup>127</sup> Raised in an intellectual culture in which Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Spengler

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hero his conception of the ideal fate: “Michael/Goebbels the ‘Christ-socialist,’ sacrifices himself out of love for humanity” (Reuth 1990, 47).

<sup>125</sup> E.g., Goebbels 1925.

<sup>126</sup> The same dilemma of choosing between national and international socialism was a factor in the political thinking of Benito Mussolini and Mao Zedong. Mussolini had been an orthodox Marxist until his middle 30s, at which point he decided that socialism would have much more practical success in Italy if its policies were pitched in nationalist terms. Mao was one of the original members of the Communist Party in China, formed in 1921; but from 1923 to 1927 he was also a member of the Nationalist Party—partly because of theoretical affinity and partly because he and other Communist Party members were following orders from Moscow (Spence 1999, 62-63). In Germany, the dilemma was captured perfectly in the title of Knickerbocker's best-seller of the early 1930s: *Germany—Fascist or Soviet?* (Arthur Koestler, in Crossman 1949, 22).

<sup>127</sup> Herman 1997, 251.

were the dominant voices, National Socialism seemed to many to be a moral ideal, just as it did to many of their professors, who had been schooled in the same works.<sup>128</sup> The students of the 1920s and early 1930s saw themselves as rebelling against a corrupt system imposed upon them by the foreign, liberal capitalist West; they saw themselves as rebelling against their parents' generation, which had failed during the Great War and after; they saw themselves as rebelling against the capitalism that dislocated the worker, that did not give the worker a fair share, and that had caused the Depression; and they saw themselves as idealistically promoting the liberation of the worker and the German spirit.<sup>129</sup>

Speaking of the many bright and talented students from the West who went to Germany to study, Friedrich Hayek has remarked: "Many a university teacher during the 1930's has seen English and American students return from the Continent uncertain whether they were communists or Nazis and certain only that they hated Western liberal civilization."<sup>130</sup>

Western liberal civilization, however, survived both the Great Depression and World War II, emerging stronger than it had been before. During the war and its aftermath, the National Socialists and the collectivist Right were wiped out physically and discredited morally and intellectually. The new battle lines were simplified and starkly clear: liberal capitalism versus Left socialism.

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<sup>128</sup> For example, Professor Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's politically Right views are a combination of themes from Hegel, Nietzsche, Spengler, Sombart, and Moeller. Heidegger's contribution is to weave those political themes into his sophisticated and more fundamental metaphysics and epistemology. See especially Heidegger 1947, 1949, and 1953.

<sup>129</sup> "The old ones don't even want to understand that we young people even exist. They defend their power to the last. But one day they will be defeated after all. Youth finally must be victorious. We young ones, we shall attack. The attacker is always stronger than the defender. If we free ourselves, we can also liberate the whole working class. And the liberated working class will release the Fatherland from its chains" (Goebbels 1929, 111).

<sup>130</sup> Hayek 1944, 34.



## Chapter Five

# The Crisis of Socialism

### *Marxism and waiting for Godot*

First formulated in the mid-nineteenth century, classical Marxist socialism made two related pairs of claims, one pair economic and one pair moral. Economically, it argued that capitalism was driven by a logic of competitive exploitation that would cause its eventual collapse; socialism's communal form of production, by contrast, would prove to be economically superior. Morally, it argued, capitalism was evil both because of the self-interested motives of those engaged in capitalist competition and because of the exploitation and alienation that competition caused; socialism, by contrast, would be based on selfless sacrifice and communal sharing.

The initial hopes of Marxist socialists centered on capitalism's internal economic contradictions. The contradictions, they thought, would manifest themselves in increasing class conflict. As the competition for resources heated up, the capitalists' exploitation of the proletariat would necessarily increase. As the exploitation

increased, the proletariat would come to realize its alienation and oppression. At some point, the exploited proletariat would decide that it was not going to take it any more and revolution would ensue. So the strategy of the Marxist intellectuals was to wait and mount a lookout for signs that capitalism's contradictions were leading logically and inexorably to revolution.

They waited a long time. By the early part of the twentieth century, after several failed predictions of imminent revolution, not only was it becoming embarrassing to make further predictions, it was beginning to seem that capitalism was developing in a direction opposite to the way that Marxism said it should be developing.

### ***Three failed predictions***

Marxism was and is a class analysis, pitting economic classes against each other in a zero-sum competition. In that competition, the stronger parties would win each successive round of competition, forcing the weaker parties into more desperate straits. Successive rounds of capitalist competition would also pit the stronger parties against each other, yielding more winners and losers, until capitalism generated an economic social structure characterized by a few capitalists at the top and in control of the society's economic resources while the rest of society was pushed into poverty. Even capitalism's nascent middle class would not remain stable, for the logic of zero-sum competition would squeeze a few of the middle class into the top capitalist class and the rest into the proletariat.

This class analysis yielded three definite predictions. First, it predicted that the proletariat would both increase as a percentage of the population and become poorer: as capitalist competition progressed, more and more people would be forced to sell their labor; and as the supply of those selling their labor increased, the wages they could demand would necessarily decrease. Second, it

predicted that the middle class would decrease to a very small percentage of the population: zero-sum competition means there are winners and losers, and while a few would consistently be winners and thus become rich capitalists, most would lose at some point and be forced into the proletariat. Third, it predicted that the capitalists would also decrease as a percentage of the population: zero-sum competition also applies to competition among the capitalists, generating a few consistent winners in control of everything while the rest would be forced down the economic ladder.

Yet that was not how it worked out. By the early twentieth century it seemed that all three of the predictions failed to characterize the development of the capitalist countries. The class of manual laborers had both declined as a percentage of the population and become relatively better off. And the middle class had grown substantially both as a percentage of the population and in wealth, as had the upper class.

Marxist socialism thus faced a set of theoretical problems: Why had the predictions not come to pass? Even more pressing was the practical problem of impatience: If the proletarian masses were the material of revolution, why were they not revolting? The exploitation and alienation *had* to be there—despite surface appearances—and it had to be being felt by capitalism's victims, the proletariat. So what was to be done about the decidedly non-revolutionary working class? After decades of waiting hopefully and pouncing on any sign of worker dissatisfaction and unrest, the plain fact was that the proletariat was not going to revolt any time soon.

Consequently, the waiting strategy needed to be rethought.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Sombart, a Marxist early in his career, was among the first to rethink: "It had to be admitted in the end that Marx had made mistakes on many points of importance" (1896, 87).

**Chart 5.1: Marxism on the Logic of Capitalism**  
**"The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer"**

<b><i>Class</i></b>	<b>Working</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Upper</b>
<b><i>Initial Status</i></b>	Weak, poor	Comfortable but unstable	Powerful, rich
<b><i>Initial Result</i></b>	Exploited	Fall into working class or climb to upper class	Exploiting, Ruthless
<b><i>Prediction for the Future</i></b>	Population percentage increases; Workers poor and revolutionary	Population percentage decreases to zero	Population percentage decreases
<b><i>Actual Results</i></b>	Population percentage decreases; Workers comfortable/complacent	Population percentage increases	Population percentage increases

***Socialism needs an aristocracy***

Many theorists had the same thought. Among the earliest were the Fabians in England, led by Beatrice and Sidney Webb and given name-recognition by George Bernard Shaw. With typical English politeness, the Fabians had decided to abandon all that unpleasant talk of revolution and to pursue socialism by evolution—by meetings, discussions, pamphlets, and voting. Yet the Fabians also decided early to abandon the strategy of waiting for the proletariat

to change society from the bottom-up. That approach, they argued, requires much too much confidence in the powers of the ordinary working man. As Beatrice Webb put it in her memoirs, “we have little faith in the ‘average sensual man’, we do not believe that he can do much more than describe his grievances, we do not think he can prescribe the remedies.”<sup>2</sup> For both the prescribed remedies and the initiation of measures to enact them, strong leadership by an elite was essential.

In Russia before the revolution of 1917, Lenin had also modified Marxist theory in the same direction in order to make it applicable to the Russian context. Russians certainly had a lot of grievances, but those suffering most were not doing much about them, seeming to accept stolidly that such was their fated lot in life. And it was hard to blame capitalism for their grievances, given that Russia was still a stronghold of feudalism. Lenin did have an explanation for why the proletariat in the capitalist nations of the West were not revolting under their yoke of oppression and alienation—the Western capitalists had cleverly exported that misery to the poorer, undeveloped nations<sup>3</sup>—but that was not going to help matters in Russia. According to classical Marxism, waiting for socialism to come to Russia meant waiting for capitalism to come to Russia, for capitalism then to develop an industrial proletariat, for the proletariat then to achieve a collective class consciousness and then revolt against the oppressor. That would take a maddeningly long time. So Marx’s theory had to be altered. Socialism in Russia could not wait to develop out of mature capitalism. The revolution would have to take Russia directly from feudalism to socialism. But without capitalism’s organized proletariat, the transition would require an elite who would, through force of will and political violence, effect a “revolution from above”

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<sup>2</sup> Webb 1948, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Lenin 1916.

and then impose socialism on everyone in a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>4</sup>

In China, similar conclusions were reached by Mao Zedong in the 1920s. Mao had been inspired by the results of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917—Russia, Mao then wrote, was now “the number one civilized country in the world”<sup>5</sup>—but he was also unimpressed with the results of his and other communists’ efforts to educate and organize the Chinese peasantry. So Mao had also decided that socialism would have to arise directly out of feudalism. Compared to Russia, China had even less mass political consciousness. Consequently, Mao believed that while the peasantry had a role to play in making the revolution happen, a strong, elite leadership was essential.<sup>6</sup> Mao introduced two other variations that Lenin did not. The classical Marxist vision of socialism included a developed industrial and technological economy, one that would come about and be maintained by the forces of (dialectical) logic. Mao de-emphasized technology and rationality: Chinese socialism would be more agrarian and low-tech, and it would be brought about less by logic and reason than by sheer, unpredictable will and assertion.

Returning to the European context of the 1920s, the need for strong leadership was confirmed to most radicals by the impotence of the German Social Democrats. Then the leading socialist party in the world and in control of Germany’s government for most of the decade, the Social Democrats proved incapable of accomplishing anything. To Georg Lukács and to Max Horkheimer and the early thinkers of the Frankfurt School, this also pointed up the need for a modification of classical Marxist theory.<sup>7</sup> Left to their own devices,

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<sup>4</sup> Lenin 1917, 177-78; Lenin 1902. See also Service (2000, 98) for Pëtr Tkachëv’s influence on Lenin on these points. Also Lenin: “The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only trade union consciousness.”

<sup>5</sup> In Spence 1999, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Spence 1999, 17-19, 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> Lukács 1923; Horkheimer 1927.

the proletariat and their spokesmen would simply wallow in futility. Not only was the Social Democratic leadership too wishy-washy and compromising, its voting constituencies among the working classes were themselves clueless about their real needs and their real but masked state of oppression.

The lesson that the leftest of the Left radicals drew was: So much for democracy. So much for the grass-roots, bottom-up approach, and so much for appealing to the masses and waiting for them to do anything. What socialism needs is *leadership*, leadership that will diagnose capitalism's problems clearly, set remedies, and act decisively and ruthlessly to achieve socialism—along the way telling the masses what they need to hear and what to do and when.

Ironically, then, by the 1930s large segments of the radical Left had come to agree with what national socialists and fascists had long argued: that socialism needs an aristocracy. Granted—the far Right and much of the far Left now agreed—socialism must be *for* the people. But it cannot be *by* the people. The people must be told what they need and how to get it; and for both the direction and impetus must come from an elite.

Thus, the Soviet Union came to be the great hope for socialism. With Joseph Stalin now running Russia on precisely that elitist model, the Soviet Union seemed the answer to most Left socialists' prayers. The failed predictions of classical Marxist socialism could be set aside and forgotten: the appropriate theoretical and practical adjustments had been made, and the future looked bright for socialism.

### ***Good news for socialism: depression and war***

Almost better than the example of the Soviet Union was the arrival of long-hoped-for economic trouble in the capitalist West. With the coming of the Great Crash in 1929 and the ensuing Depression, it

had to be that at long last capitalism's internal contradictions were manifesting themselves. Utilized productive capacity plunged, unemployment skyrocketed, tension among the classes increased dramatically, and as the months stretched into years no recovery was in sight.

All socialists were quick to see the Depression as a great opportunity. Surely anyone could see that this must be the end of the road for liberal capitalism. Even the less perspicacious working classes—especially since they were bearing the brunt of the pain—had to be able to see that. All that the socialists had to do was get their act together, and, led by an intransigent cadre of leaders, give tottering capitalism the shove it needed to topple it into the dustbin of history.<sup>8</sup>

It did not work out that way for the Left socialists. In both Germany and Italy the national socialists proved better at using the Depression to their advantage, somehow continuing to delude the proletariat about their real needs and stealing votes from the Left socialists.

As the world headed into war in the late 1930s, even the onset of hostilities brought hope to the Left. The war effort on the part of the liberal capitalist nations had to be their last, desperate hope to salvage something. There was also the strong possibility that if the war lasted the liberals and National Socialists would kill each other

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<sup>8</sup> In "The Depression and the Intellectuals," Sidney Hook (1988, Chapter 11) discusses these prevailing reactions among the American far Left. See also American Leftist James Burnham who saw the West's responses to the Depression and the rise of National Socialism as signs of its fundamental weakness: "In truth, the *bourgeoisie* itself has in large measure lost confidence in its own ideologies. The words begin to have a hollow sound in the most sympathetic capitalist ears. ... What was Munich and the whole policy of appeasement but a recognition of bourgeois impotence? The head of the British government's traveling to the feet of the Austrian housepainter was the fitting symbol of the capitalists' loss of faith in themselves" (Burnham 1941, 36). The Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 then made perfect sense: The joining of the two socialisms would, Burnham believed, "drive death wounds into capitalism."



off, or at the very least seriously weaken each other, leaving the field open for Left socialism—under the leadership of the Soviet Union—to sweep the world.

Again it did not work out that way. The war wrought enormous destruction on both sides, but the pickings were slim for the Left socialists. Physically and psychologically, Germany was devastated at the end of the war. Ideologically, the collectivist Right was defeated, demoralized, and appropriately demonized. But in the West, in spite of their losses and war-weariness, the liberal capitalist nations were physically mobilized and psychologically jubilant. The capitalist nations made the transition from war to peace relatively smoothly, and they saw their victory as not only a physical but a moral triumph for liberalism, democracy, and capitalism.

From the perspective of the Left, then, the defeat of the collectivist Right was a mixed blessing: a hated enemy was gone, but the Left was alone in the field against a victorious and vigorous liberal capitalist West.

### ***Bad news: liberal capitalism rebounds***

By the 1950s, the liberal nations had, damnably, recovered from the depression and the war and were, even worse, flourishing under capitalism.

That was extremely disappointing to the Left, but it was not necessarily hopeless. Lenin's theory of imperialism had explained that the effects of capitalist exploitation would not be found in the powerful and rich nations since those nations simply exported those costs to the poorer and weaker developing nations. So perhaps hope for revolution could be found in the developing capitalist nations. But over time that hope fizzled. The exported oppression was not to be found in those nations either. Nations that adopted capitalism in varying degrees were not suffering from their

trade with the richer nations. Instead, the trade was mutually beneficial and, from humble beginnings, those nations that adopted capitalist measures rose first to comfort and then to wealth.<sup>9</sup> Just as a teenager typically starts working at low-tech, labor-intensive, low-paying jobs, and then acquires skills and so is promoted to positions that are higher-tech, information-intensive, and higher-paying, the developing capitalist nations followed the same pattern. And in the most developed nations, overall wealth was rising and poverty was decreasing yet further. What were once luxuries were becoming standard fare, and the working classes were enjoying stable employment, their television sets, the latest fashions, and their vacations across the country in their new cars.

In the 1950s, accordingly, the radical Left turned its attention and hopes even more strongly to the Soviet Union, looking for it to outstrip the capitalist West in being both an exemplar of moral idealism and a paragon of economic production.

Those hopes were soon to be dashed cruelly. While the economic data were mixed and the propaganda was heavy, the Soviet Union was experiencing chronic difficulties in providing basic consumer items and feeding its people. Some productive successes had been achieved by directing vast amounts of resources to the military and heavy industries. Yet in providing for its people's basic needs, the Soviet Union was not only not progressing—in many areas its production had declined to levels below those of the pre-1917, pre-communist-revolution era. In the 1950s, contemporary data from both Soviet and American sources painted much the same picture:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Reynolds 1996 for a useful summary.

<sup>10</sup> "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," 1990, 1009.

**Chart 5.2: Total Livestock in the Soviet Union (000,000)**

	<b>Cows</b>	<b>Cattle (incl. cows)</b>	<b>Hogs</b>	<b>Sheep and Goats</b>	<b>Horses</b>
<b>1916</b>	28.8	58.4	23.0	96.3	38.2
<b>1928</b>	33.2	66.8	27.7	114.6	36.1
<b>1941</b>	27.8	54.5	27.5	91.6	21.0
<b>1950</b>	4.6	58.1	22.2	93.6	12.7
<b>1951</b>	24.3	57.1	24.4	99.0	13.8
<b>1952</b>	24.9	58.8	27.1	107.6	14.7
<b>1953</b>	24.3	56.6	28.5	109.9	15.3

Source: Report of Khrushchev to the Plenary Session of the Central Committee, Sept. 3, 1953, *Pravda*, September 15, 1953, and *Vestnik Statistiki*, No. 5 (May 1961).

**Chart 5.3: Gross Physical Output for Selected Food Items\***

	<b>Grain</b>	<b>Potatoes</b>	<b>Vegetables</b>	<b>Milk</b>	<b>Meat (dr. weight)</b>	<b>Eggs</b>
<b>1940</b>	83.0	75.9	13.7	33.64	4.69	12.21
<b>1950</b>	81.4	88.6	9.3	33.31	4.87	11.70
<b>1951</b>	78.9	59.6	9.0	36.15	4.67	13.25
<b>1952</b>	92.0	68.4	11.0	35.70	5.17	14.4
<b>1953</b>	82.5	72.6	11.4	36.47	5.82	16.06

\* All values in millions of tons, except for eggs which are given in billions of units.  
Source: Joint Economic Committee (86<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess.), *Comparisons of the United States and Soviet Economies* 1959.

Data were sparse and subject to blinkered interpretations, but by the mid-1950s, a decade after the end of the war, the bloom was off the red rose of hope for even the most ardent of the Soviet fellow-travelers.

The rose was crushed in 1956.

***Worse news: Khrushchev's revelations and Hungary***

Socialists have generally been willing to grant that possibly, just possibly, capitalist economic production would outstrip socialist production. But no socialist has ever been willing to grant that capitalism can hold a candle to socialism *morally*.<sup>11</sup> Socialism is driven more than anything else by an ethic of altruism, by a conviction that morality is about selflessness, being willing to put others' needs before one's own, and, when necessary, being willing to sacrifice oneself for others, especially those others who are weaker and needier. Thus, to a socialist, any socialist nation has to be morally superior to any capitalist nation—socialist leaders are by definition concerned primarily about the needs of the citizens and are sensitively responsive to their expressions of concern, their grievances, and, when there are troubles, to their plights.

The year 1956 dealt two blows to that faith. The second blow came late in the year, in October, with the bloody suppression of a revolt in the Soviet-satellite state of Hungary. Strong dissatisfaction with chronic economic troubles and with being under the thumb of Moscow led to demonstrations and outbreaks of physical resistance to authority by Hungarian workers, students, and others. The Soviet response was swift and brutal: the tanks and the troops were sent in, demonstrators and their organizers were killed and executed, and the revolt was suppressed. The lesson to the Hungarians was administered before a world-wide audience: Dissent is not allowed; shut up, put up with it, and obey.

The first blow, however, delivered in February of 1956, was the one that had the most devastating impact on the future of Left

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<sup>11</sup> "But no one has ever denied that capitalism ... is a system of unnecessary servitude, replete with irrationalities and ripe for destruction. Still less has anyone defended capitalism by claiming that a system of this sort might after all be good or desirable, and it is doubtful that any moral philosophy which could support such a claim would deserve serious consideration" (Wood, 1972, 282).

socialism. In a “secret speech” to the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev made a sensational revelation of the crimes of Stalin’s era. In the name of the future of socialism, Stalin had had millions of his own citizens tortured, subjected to inhuman deprivations, executed, or sent to die in Siberian labor camps. What had been dismissed as capitalist propaganda was now revealed as true by the leader of the socialist world: The flagship socialist nation was guilty of horrors on an unimaginable scale.

Khrushchev’s shocking revelations caused a moral crisis among the socialist Left. Could it be true? Or, hopefully, could it be that Khrushchev was exaggerating or lying to score political points? Or, more sinisterly, had the leader of the socialist world become a stooge for the C.I.A., that sneaky agent of capitalist imperialism? But—if Khrushchev’s revelations were even partially true, then how could such horrors have happened under socialism? Is it possible that there is some flaw in socialism itself? No, of course not. And then of course—what about those gloating capitalists, hatefully saying “I told you so”?<sup>12</sup>

Schisms developed immediately within far Left circles over the proper response to the revelations—was the Soviet Union not the socialist ideal, or was Khrushchev a betrayer of the cause? Some extreme true believers took the position that Khrushchev was a traitor—and that in any case anything Stalin had done was no reflection upon socialism. That line became harder to maintain as time went on and more revelations about life in the Soviet Union came forth, confirming in gritty detail what Khrushchev had said. Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, first published in the West in 1973, was the most widely read and condemnatory. Solzhenitsyn’s book drew upon extensive research and Solzhenitsyn’s own first hand experience of eight years’ imprisonment in

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<sup>12</sup> Radosh (2001, 56) discusses the varied reactions among the American far Left to Khrushchev’s revelations and the Soviet suppression in Hungary.

the labor camps for the crime of having written in 1945 a letter critical of Stalin's regime.

As it became impossible to believe in the morality of the Soviet Union, a shrinking contingent of true believers shifted their devotions, first to communist China under Mao. But then came revelations of even worse horrors in China in the 1960s—including 30 million deaths between 1959 and 1961. Then Cuba was the great hope, and then Vietnam, then Cambodia, then Albania for awhile in the late 1970s, and then Nicaragua in the 1980s. But the data and the disappointments piled up, all dealing a solid and devastating blow to socialism's ability to claim a moral sanction.<sup>13</sup>

One such set of summary data is reproduced below in the form of a table comparing liberal democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian governments in terms of one measure of morality: the number of their own citizens those governments have killed.

**Chart 5.4: Deaths from Democide\* Compared to Deaths from International War, 1900-1987**

	<b>Democratic</b>	<b>Authoritarian</b>	<b>Totalitarian</b>
<b><i>Killed by Own Government</i></b>	2 million	29 million	138 million <sup>a</sup>
<b><i>Killed by International War</i></b>	4.4 million	15.3 million	14.4 million

\* "Democide" is defined as "killing of one's own people."

a. Communist governments account for 110 million of these deaths.

Source: Rummel 1994.

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<sup>13</sup> Though not to all true believers. E.g., Brian Sweezy on the essential truth of Marx's doctrine, despite the twentieth century and the Soviet Union's collapse: "As far as the global capitalist system is concerned, its internal contradictions will hardly be affected one way or another ... these contradictions, as in the past, continue to multiply and intensify, with all indications pointing to the maturing of one or more serious crises in the not-so-distant future" (Sweezy, 1990, 278).

Included in the Totalitarian/Killed by Own Government cell are the 10 to 12 million human beings killed by the German National Socialists in the period 1933-1945. Subtracting that number from 138 million, along with subtracting a few million killed by miscellaneous totalitarian regimes, means that over 110 million human beings were killed by the governments of nations inspired by Left, primarily Marxist, socialism.<sup>14</sup>

The true believers aside, few far Left socialists waited until after the 1950s to see what further damning data would come forth. In France, for example, most French intellectuals had joined the Communist Party in the 1950s, including Michel Foucault, or had become at least very strong sympathizers, as did Jacques Derrida. Foucault became dissatisfied with the self-stultification that Party membership required: "Being obliged to stand behind a fact that was totally beyond credibility ... was part of that exercise of the 'dissolution of the self,' of the quest for a way to be 'other'."<sup>15</sup> And so, as Derrida reports, many began to drift away:

For many of us, a certain (and I emphasize *certain*) end of communist Marxism did not await the recent collapse of the USSR and everything that depends on it throughout the world. All that started—all that was even *déjà vu*, indubitably—at the beginning of the '50s.<sup>16</sup>

The crises of the 1950s were enough for most Left intellectuals worldwide to recognize that the case for socialism was in serious trouble economically and morally. And they realized that making the case for socialism was being made doubly difficult by the fact that the capitalist countries were doing well economically and, for the most part, going in the right direction morally. It is hard to

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<sup>14</sup> See also Courtois et al. 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault in Miller 1993, 58. See also by contrast Crossman (1949, 6) on the psychological *appeal* to many converts of Communism's demand for spiritual and material self-sacrifice.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida 1994, 14.

argue with prosperity, and it is hard to make stick any qualms one has about capitalism's moral status when confronted with the revelations about the horrible and very real failings of socialism in practice.

Some Left intellectuals retreated into despair—"The Millenium Has Been Cancelled," wrote socialist historian Edward Hyams, ending on a note of resignation.<sup>17</sup> But, for many theoreticians of the far Left, the crisis meant only that more radical responses to capitalism were needed.

### ***Responding to the crisis: change socialism's ethical standard***

What was once a monolithic Marxist Left proceeded to split into numerous camps. All of the camps recognized, though, that if the fight against capitalism were to be carried on, the first order of business was to distance socialism from the Soviet Union. Just as the disaster of National Socialism in Germany was not socialism, the disaster of Communism in the Soviet Union was not socialism. In fact, there were no real socialist societies anywhere, so pointing fingers of moral condemnation was simply meaningless.

With no real socialist states to uphold as positive examples of socialist practice, the Left's new strategies focused almost exclusively upon critiquing the liberal capitalist nations.

The first major new strategy required altering the ethical standard by which capitalism was attacked. A traditional criticism of capitalism had been that it causes poverty: Except for the very few rich at the top of the social heap, capitalism drives most people into bare subsistence. Capitalism was therefore immoral, for the basic moral test of a social system is its ability to provide for its people's basic economic needs. The ethical standard used in criticizing capitalism was, accordingly, Marx's slogan in *Critique of the Gotha Program*: "From each according to his ability, to each

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<sup>17</sup> Hyams 1973, 263.



according to his need.”<sup>18</sup> Satisfying need was thus the fundamental criterion of morality.

Yet come the 1950s it was hard to argue that capitalism fails to satisfy its people’s needs. In fact, a big part of the problem seemed to be that capitalism had satisfied its people’s needs so well that the people had become fat and complacent and not at all revolutionary. So a moral standard that made satisfying needs primary was now useless in a critique of capitalism.

### ***From need to equality***

A new ethical standard was therefore necessary. With great fanfare, then, much of the Left changed its official ethical standard from *need* to *equality*. No longer was the primary criticism of capitalism to be that it failed to satisfy people’s needs. The primary criticism was to be that its people did not get an equal share.

The German Social Democrats took the lead in developing the new strategy. As the party most directly descended from Marx himself and still the leading socialist party in the Western world, the Social Democrats made major changes to their Basic Program at a Special Party Congress at Bad Godesberg in November of 1959. The most significant of the changes emphasized equality. The “Godesberg Program” recast the party from being a party of the defenseless and impoverished worker to being a party of the people at large. Since the worker seemed to be doing well enough under capitalism, the focus had to shift to different capitalist pathologies—the many inequalities across various social dimensions. One dimension singled out for special attention was the unequal sizes of business enterprises. Some businesses are much bigger than others, giving them an unfair advantage over their smaller competitors. So equalizing the competitive playing field became the new goal. No longer would the Social Democrats condemn all private businesses

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<sup>18</sup> Marx 1875, 531.

as rapacious and call for their outright socialization. Rather they would push for cutting bigger businesses down to size and for the strengthening small and middle sized businesses. In other words, achieving equality had supplanted satisfying basic needs as the revised standard by which to evaluate capitalism.

A variation on this strategy was implicit in a new definition of “poverty” that the Left began to offer in the early 1960s: the poverty that capitalism causes is not *absolute* but *relative*. Popularized in the United States by Michael Harrington and others,<sup>19</sup> the new argument abandoned the claim that capitalism would generate a physically malnourished and therefore revolutionary proletariat—capitalism did not cause such *absolute* poverty. Rather the proletariat would become revolutionary because, while their basic *physical* needs were being met, they saw that some others in society had *relatively* much more than they did. Feeling excluded and without real opportunities to achieve the good life the rich were enjoying, the proletariat would experience *psychological* oppression and thus be driven to desperate measures.

Another variation on this strategy emerged as the formerly-monolithic Marxist socialist movement splintered in response to the crisis of socialism. Abandoning the traditional economic class analysis’s implication that effort should be focused upon achieving a universal class consciousness, Left thinkers and activists focused on narrower sub-divisions of the human species, concentrating their efforts on the special issues of women and of racial and ethnic minorities. Broadly Marxist themes of conflict and oppression carried over into the new splinter groups’ analyses, but again the dominant theme was equality. As with the economic proletariat, it was hard to deny that women and racial and ethnic minority groups had made significant gains in the liberal capitalist nations. So again the criticism of capitalism could not be that it drove those groups to outright poverty or slavery or some other form of

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<sup>19</sup> Harrington 1962; 1970, 355.

oppression. Instead the criticism focused on the lack of equality between groups—not, for example, that women were being forced into poverty, but rather that as a group they had been held back from achieving economic equality with men.

Common to all of these variations was a new emphasis on the principle of equality and a de-emphasis on the principle of need. In effect, in changing the ethical standard from need to equality, all of these new varieties of Left-socialism had resolved to quote Marx less and to quote Rousseau more.

### ***From wealth is good to wealth is bad***

A second strategic change in Left strategy involved a more audacious change of ethical standards. Traditionally, Marxist socialism had supposed that providing adequately for human needs was a basic test of a social system's morality. The achievement of wealth, accordingly, was a good thing since wealth brought with it better nutrition, housing, healthcare, and leisure time. And so capitalism was held to be evil because Marxists believed that it denied most of its population the ability to enjoy the fruits of wealth.

But as it became clear that capitalism is very good at producing the wealth and delivering the fruits—and that socialism is very bad at it—two new variations on Left thought turned this argument on its head and began to condemn capitalism precisely for being so good at producing wealth.

One variation of this argument appeared in the increasingly popular writings of Herbert Marcuse. Soon to be the leading philosopher of the New Left, Marcuse was best known for bringing the views of the Frankfurt School to prominence in the English-speaking world, especially in North America. Trained in philosophy in Germany, Marcuse had been an assistant to Heidegger from 1928 to 1933, and in his metaphysics and epistemology

Marcuse was mining the same Hegelian vein that Heidegger was. Politically, though, Marcuse was deeply engaged with Marxism and concerned with adapting Marxism to the unforeseen resilience of capitalism in resisting revolution.

Following Marx, Marcuse believed that the historical purpose of the proletariat was to be a revolutionary class. Its task was to overthrow capitalism. But that presupposed that capitalism would drive the proletariat into economic misery, which capitalism had failed to do. Instead, capitalism had produced great amounts of wealth and—here is the innovation—capitalism had used that wealth to oppress the proletariat. By making the members of the proletariat wealthy enough to become comfortable, capitalism had created a captive class: The proletariat had become locked into the capitalist system, dependent upon its goodies, and enslaved by the goal of climbing the economic ladder and to “the aggressive performances of ‘earning a living’.”<sup>20</sup> Not only was this a veiled form of oppression, Marcuse argued, the proletariat had become distracted from its historical task by the comforts and gadgets of capitalism. Capitalism’s producing so much wealth, therefore, is bad: It is in direct defiance of the moral imperative of historical progress toward socialism. It would be much better if the proletariat were in economic misery under capitalism, for then they would realize their oppression and then be psychologically primed to perform their historical mission.<sup>21</sup>

The second variation was seen in the Left turn that rising concern with environmental issues took. As the Marxist movement splintered and mutated into new forms, Left intellectuals and activists began to look for new ways to attack capitalism. Environmental issues, alongside women’s and minorities’ issues, came to be seen as a new weapon in the arsenal against capitalism

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<sup>20</sup> Marcuse 1969, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Other contributions of the Frankfurt School to the new directions in socialist strategy are discussed below. See pages 159-ff.

Traditional environmental philosophy had not been in principle in conflict with capitalism. It had held that a clean, sustainable, and beautiful environment was good because living in such an environment made human life healthier, wealthier, and more enjoyable. Human beings, acting to their advantage, change their environments to make them more productive, cleaner, and more attractive. In the short-run, there are often costs and trade-offs between economic growth and environmental cleanliness. But, the argument ran, in the middle- and long-run a healthy economy is compatible with a healthy environment. As human beings become richer, they have more disposable income with which to make their environments cleaner and more beautiful.

The new impetus in environmental thinking, however, brought the Marxist concepts of exploitation and alienation to bear upon environmental issues. As the stronger party, humans necessarily exploit harmfully the weaker parties—the other species and the non-organic environment itself. Consequently, as capitalist society develops, the result of the exploitation is a biological form of alienation: humans alienate themselves from the environment by despoiling it and making it unlivable, and non-human species are alienated by being driven to extinction.

On this analysis, the conflict between economic production and environmental health, then, is not merely in the short-run; it is fundamental and inescapable. The production of wealth itself is in mortal conflict with environmental health. And capitalism, since it is so good at producing wealth, must therefore be the environment's number one enemy.

Wealth, therefore, was no longer good. Living simply, avoiding producing or consuming as much as possible, was the new ideal.

The impetus of this new strategy, captured perfectly in the title of Rudolf Bahro's *From Red to Green*, integrated with the new emphasis on equality over need. In Marxism, humankind's technological mastery of nature was a presupposition of socialism.

Marxism was a humanism in the sense of putting human values at the core of its value framework and assuming that the environment is there for human beings to use and enjoy to their own ends. But, egalitarian critics began to argue more forcefully, just as males' putting their interests highest led them to subjugate women, and just as whites' putting their interests highest led them to subjugate all other races, humans' putting their interests highest had led to the subjugation of the other species and the environment as a whole.

The proposed solution then was the radical moral equality of all species. We must recognize not only that productivity and wealth are evil, but also that all species from bacteria to wood lice to aardvarks to humans are equal in moral value. "Deep ecology," as radical egalitarianism applied to environmental philosophy came to be called, thus rejected the humanistic elements of Marxism, and substituted explicitly Heidegger's anti-humanist value framework.<sup>22</sup>

In effect, by rejecting high-tech socialism and substituting a vision of low-tech, egalitarian socialism, this new Left strategy also resolved to quote Marx less and to quote Rousseau more.

### ***Responding to the crisis: change socialism's epistemology***

While some on the Left modified their ethics, others set to revising Marxist psychology and epistemology. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s there had been some early suggestions that Marxism was too rationalistic, too logical and deterministic. In the 1920s, Mao had urged that will and assertion of the peasants and especially of the leaders counted for more than passively waiting for the material conditions of revolution to work themselves out deterministically. In the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci had rejected the belief that the Depression would necessarily spell the doom of capitalism, and he had argued that finishing capitalism off would require the creative

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<sup>22</sup> Heidegger 1947, 1949.

initiative of the masses. That creative initiative, Gamsi argued, was however neither rational nor inexorable but rather subjective and unpredictable. And early Frankfurt School theorizing had suggested that Marxism was too wedded to reason, that reason led to major social pathologies, and that less rational psychological forces had to be incorporated into any successful social theory.

Those voices were mostly ignored for two decades, swept aside by the dominant voices of classical Marxist theory, the Depression and World War II, and by the conviction that the Soviet Union was showing the world the true path.

By the 1950s, however, two developments began to merge, one epistemological and one political-economic. In the world of academic epistemology, both European and Anglo-American theorists were reaching skeptical and pessimistic conclusions about the powers of reason: Heidegger was ascendant on the Continent and Logical Positivism was reaching its dead end in the Anglo-American world. And in both theoretical and practical politics and economics, the failure of Marxism to develop according to the logic of its traditional theory was reaching a crisis. The merging of these two developments yielded the surging to prominence of non-rational and irrationalist Left socialisms.

The symptoms were many. One was manifest in the splintering of the monolithic Marxist movement into many sub-movements emphasizing the socialism of sex, race, and ethnic identity. Such movements abandoned the universalistic conceptions of human interests implicit in seeking a collective consciousness of the international proletariat. The international proletariat is a highly abstract concept. The universality of all human interests is a very sweeping generalization. Both abstraction and generalization require a strong confidence in the power of reason, and by the 1950s that confidence in reason had evaporated.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Chapter Three above.

The loss of confidence in reason implied, as a matter of practical politics, that the intellectuals now had even less confidence in the average person's capacity for abstract reasoning. It is hard enough for a trained intellectual to conceive, as classical Marxism requires, of all of humankind as ultimately members of a universal class sharing the same universal interests. But—the more epistemologically-modest theorists of the 1950s begin to ask—can we really expect the masses to abstract to the view that we are all brothers and sisters under the skin? Can the masses conceive of themselves as a harmonious international class? The intellectual capacity of the masses is much more limited, so appealing to and mobilizing the masses requires speaking to them about what matters to them and on a level that they can grasp. What the masses can understand and what they do get fired up about are their sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious identities. Both epistemological modesty and effective communication strategy, then, dictated a move from universalism to multiculturalism.<sup>24</sup>

In effect, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, significant portions of the Left came to agree with the collectivist Right on yet another

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<sup>24</sup> For example, British Marxist Ralph Miliband: "Marx and later Marxists [were] far too optimistic in relying on the class location of wage earners to produce a 'class consciousness' that would obliterate all divisions among them. This quite clearly greatly underestimated the strength of these divisions; and it also failed to take account of what might be called an epistemic dimension, meaning that it is a great deal *easier* to attribute social ills to Jews, black people, immigrants, other ethnic or religious groups than to a social system and to the men who run it and who are of the same nationality, ethnicity, or religion. To acquire *this* class consciousness requires a mental leap which many people in the working class (and beyond) have performed, but which many other people, subject to intense obfuscations, have not ... [C]lass location produces a consciousness which is much more complex and wayward than Marxism assumed; for it leads to reactionary positions as well as progressive ones ..." (in Panitch ed., 1995, 19).

See also Rorty: "our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as 'one of us,' where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race" (1989, 191).



issue: Forget internationalism, universalism, and cosmopolitanism; focus on smaller groups formed on the basis of ethnic, racial, or other identities.

Another symptom of the rejection of reason was the wild rise in popularity of Mao and China among the younger radicals. Not as committed to the Soviet Union as the older generation of Leftists was, many in the younger generation turned enthusiastically to Chinese Communism in practice and Maoist Marxism in theory. Mao's *Little Red Book* was read widely on college campuses and increasingly studied by revolutionaries-in-training. From it they absorbed Mao's lessons of making revolution through sheer political and ideological will, of not waiting for material conditions to develop of themselves, of being pragmatic and opportunistic and willing to use ambiguous rhetoric and even cruelty—and, above all, of being constantly and militantly activist even to the point of wildness and irrationality. Make the revolution *somehow* and *anyhow!*

In effect, this strain of Left thought came to agree with what the collectivist Right had long argued: that human beings are not fundamentally rational—that in politics it is the irrational passions that must be appealed to and utilized.

The lessons of Maoism integrated with the lessons of the pre-eminent philosopher of the New Left, Herbert Marcuse.

***Marcuse and the Frankfurt School: Marx plus Freud, or oppression plus repression***

Marcuse had long labored in the trenches of academic philosophy and social theory before coming to fame in America in the 1960s. He studied philosophy at Freiburg under Husserl and Heidegger, later becoming an assistant to both. His first major publication was

an attempt to synthesize Heideggerian phenomenology with Marxism.<sup>25</sup>

His powerful allegiance to Marxism combined with his Heideggerian distrust of Marxism's rationalistic elements led Marcuse to join forces with the nascent Frankfurt School of social thought. The Frankfurt School was a loose association of mostly German intellectuals centered at the Institute for Social Research, led from 1930 on by Max Horkheimer.

Horkheimer had also been trained in philosophy, having completed his doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of Kant in 1923. From that work Horkheimer moved directly to concerns with social psychology and practical politics. In the late 1920s, while Marcuse was working on his theoretical integration of Marx and Heidegger, Horkheimer was reaching some pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of practical political change.

Setting before himself the question of why the German proletariat were not revolting, Horkheimer offered a breakdown of the politically relevant units, arguing that each was incapable of achieving anything significant.<sup>26</sup> Naturally enough, Horkheimer began his analysis with the working classes, dividing them into the employed and the unemployed. The employed, he noted, are not too badly off and seem content enough. It is the unemployed who are in the worst shape. Their situation is also getting worse, for as the mechanization of production increases, unemployment also increases. But the unemployed are also the least educated class and the least organized, and that has made it impossible to raise their class consciousness. A clear sign of this is that they waver between voting for the Communists, who are blindly following Moscow, and the National Socialists who are, well, a bunch of Nazis. The only other socialist party is the Social Democrats, but they are much too pragmatic and reformist to be effective.

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<sup>25</sup> Marcuse 1928.

<sup>26</sup> Horkheimer 1927, 316-18.

So, Horkheimer concluded, the situation is hopeless for socialism. The employed are too comfortable, the unemployed are too scatterbrained, the social democrats are too wishy-washy, the communists are too obediently following authority, and the National Socialists are un-discussable.

As way out of the morass, the Frankfurt School's members began to explore the idea of adding a more sophisticated social psychology to Marxism's economic and historical logic. Traditional Marxism emphasized the inexorable laws of economic development and de-emphasized the contribution of human actors. Given that those Marxist laws seemed rather more exorable in their non-development, the Frankfurt School suggested that history is as much made by human actors, and especially by how those human actors understand themselves psychologically and their existential situation. Incorporating a better social psychology into Marxism would hopefully explain why the revolution had not happened and suggest what would be necessary to make it happen.

For sophisticated social psychology the Frankfurt School turned to Sigmund Freud. Applying his own psychoanalytic theories to social philosophy, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) argued that civilization is an unstable, surface phenomenon based upon the repression of instinctual energies. Bio-psychologically, human agents are a bundle of aggressive and conflicted instincts, those instincts constantly pressing for immediate satisfaction. Their constant immediate satisfaction, though, would make social living impossible, so the forces of civilization have evolved by incrementally suppressing instincts and forcing their expression into polite, orderly, and rational forms. Civilization is thus an artificial construct overlaying a seething mass of irrational energies in the id. The battle between the id and civilization is ongoing and occasionally brutal. To the extent that the id wins, society tends toward conflict and chaos; and to the extent that society wins, the id is forced into repression. Repression, however, merely forces the

id's energies underground psychologically, where those energies are unconsciously displaced and often forced into irrational channels. That displaced energy, Freud explained, must discharge itself eventually, and often it does so by bursting out neurotically—in the form of hysterias, obsessions, and phobias.<sup>27</sup>

The task of the psychoanalyst, then, is to trace the neurosis back through its irrational, unconscious channels to its origin. Patients, however, often interfere with this process: they resist the exposure of unconscious and irrational elements in their psyches and they cling to the conscious forms of civilized and rational behavior that they have learned. So the psychoanalyst must find a way to bypass those surface, blocking behaviors, and to strip away the conscious veneer of civility to probe the seething id below. Here, Freud suggested, the use of non-rational psychological mechanisms becomes essential—dreams, hypnosis, free-association, slips of the tongue. Such manifestations of irrationality are often clues to the underlying reality, for they slip past the patient's conscious defense mechanisms. The well-trained psychoanalyst, accordingly, is the one who is able to spot the truth in the irrational.

To the Frankfurt School, Freud offered a psychology admirably suited to diagnosing the pathologies of capitalism. Capitalism, we know from Marx, is definitely based on exploitative competition. But modern capitalist society is taking a technocratic form, directing its conflictual energies toward creating machines and corporate bureaucracies. Those machines and bureaucracies do provide for the average member of the bourgeoisie an artificial world of order, control, and creature comforts—but at a very high cost: capitalism's people are increasingly distant from nature, decreasingly spontaneous and creative, increasingly unaware that they are being controlled by the machines and the bureaucracies, both physically and psychologically, and increasingly unaware that the apparently

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<sup>27</sup> Freud 1930, esp. Ch. 3.

comfortable world they live in is a mask for an underlying realm of brutal conflict and competition.<sup>28</sup>

The Frankfurt School portrait of capitalism, Marcuse explained, is what we find realized most extremely in the most advanced capitalist nation, the United States.

Consider Joe Sixpack. Joe works as a low-level technician for a television-manufacturing company, part of a huge telecommunications conglomerate. Whether he has a job tomorrow depends on Wall Street speculators and the decisions of a corporate headquarters in another state. But Joe does not realize that: he simply goes to work each morning with a slight sense of distaste, pulls the levers and pushes the buttons as he is told to do by the machine and the boss, mass-producing televisions until it is time to go home. On the way home he picks up a six-pack of beer—another mass-market product of capitalist commodification—and after supper with the family he plops down in front of the television, feeling the narcotic effect of the beer kicking in while the sit-coms and commercials tell him that life is great and who could ask for anything more. Tomorrow is another day.

Joe Sixpack is a product. He is a constructed part of an oppressive and dysfunctional competitive system—but one that is overlain with the veneer of peace and comfort.<sup>29</sup> He is unaware of the gap between the appearance of comfort and the reality of oppression, unaware that he is a cog in an artificial technological system—unaware because the fruits of capitalism that he produces and thinks he enjoys consuming are sapping his vital instincts and making him physically and psychologically inert.

Thus Marcuse had an explanation for the new generation of revolutionaries-in-training for why capitalism in the 1950s and early 1960s seemed to be peaceful, tolerant, and progressive—when, as every good socialist knew, it could not really be—and for

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<sup>28</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, xiv-xv.

<sup>29</sup> Marcuse 1969, 13-15.

why the workers were so disappointingly un-revolutionary. Capitalism does not merely *oppress* the masses existentially, it also *represses* them psychologically.

It gets worse, for to the extent that Joe can even think about his situation, he hears his world described in terms of “freedom,” “democracy,” “progress”—words that have only a faint glimmer of meaning to him, and that have been crafted and fed to him by capitalism’s apologists to keep him from thinking too deeply about his real existence. Joe is a “one-dimensional man” trapped in a “totalitarian universe of technological rationality,”<sup>30</sup> oblivious to the second and real dimension of human existence wherein true freedom, democracy, and progress lie.<sup>31</sup>

Capitalism’s having achieved this cynical state of development, in which its oppression is masked by pious hypocrisies about liberty and progress, is made even more cynical by its being able to neutralize and even co-opt all dissent and criticism. Having created a monolithic technocracy—the machines and the bureaucracies and the mass man and the self-serving ideology—capitalism can pretend to be open to criticism by allowing some radical intellectuals to dissent. In the name of “tolerance,” “open-mindedness,” and “free speech,” a few lonely voices will be permitted to raise object-

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<sup>30</sup> Marcuse 1964, 123.

<sup>31</sup> Marcuse is thus halfway between Rousseau and Foucault. Rousseau (1749): “Princes always view with pleasure the spread among their subjects of a taste for the arts. ... The sciences, letters and arts ... cover with garlands of flowers the iron chains that bind them, stifle in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they seem to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized people.” Foucault: “What is fascinating about prisons is that, for once, power doesn’t hide or mask itself; it reveals itself as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is cynical and at the same time pure and entirely ‘justified,’ because its practice can be totally formulated within the framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil, or order over disorder” (1977b, 210). Also: “If I had known the Frankfurt School at the right time, I would have been spared a lot of work” (Foucault 1989, 353).

ions and challenges to the capitalist behemoth.<sup>32</sup> But everyone knows full well that nothing come of the criticisms. Worse still, the appearance of having been open and tolerant will serve only to reinforce capitalism's control. Capitalist tolerance, then, is not real tolerance: it is "Repressive Tolerance."<sup>33</sup>

So was Horkheimer's early pessimism right? Was the lesson thirty years later still the same—that the prospect for socialism is totally hopeless? If capitalism's control extends even to co-opting the dissent of its strongest critics, what weapons are left to the revolutionary?

If there is a chance for socialism, then more extreme tactics will be necessary.

Freudian psychology again gives us the key. As with the repression of the id's energies by the forces of civilization, capitalism's suppression of the original human energies cannot be totally successful. Freud had explained that the id's repressed energies will occasionally burst out in irrational, neurotic forms, threatening the stability and security of civilization. The Frankfurt School taught us that capitalism's orderly technocracy has repressed much of humanity, driving much of its energy underground—but that repressed energy is still there, and potentially it can burst out.

Thus, Marcuse concluded, capitalism's repression of human nature may be socialism's salvation. Capitalism's rational technocracy suppresses human nature to the point that it bursts out in irrationalisms—in violence, criminality, racism, and all of society's other pathologies. But by encouraging those irrationalisms the new revolutionaries can destroy the system. So the first task of the revolutionary is to seek out those individuals and energies on the margins of society: the outcast, the disorderly, and the forbidden—anyone and anything that capitalism's power structure has not yet

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<sup>32</sup> Marcuse 1965, 94-96.

<sup>33</sup> The title of Marcuse's influential 1965 essay.

succeeded in commodifying and dominating totally. All such marginalized and outcast elements will be “irrational,” “immoral,” and even “criminal,” especially by capitalist definition, but that is precisely what the revolutionary needs. Any such outcast element could “break through the false consciousness [and] provide the Archimedean point for a larger emancipation.”<sup>34</sup>

Marcuse looked especially to the marginalized and outcast Left intellectual *leadership*—especially those trained in critical theory.<sup>35</sup> Given the pervasiveness of capitalism’s domination, the revolutionary vanguard can come only from those outcast intellectuals—especially among the younger students<sup>36</sup>—those who are able to “link liberation with the dissolution of ordinary and orderly perception”<sup>37</sup> and who thereby can see through the appearance of peace to the reality of oppression, who have retained enough of their humanity not to have been turned into Joe Sixpack—and above all who have the will and the energy to do anything it takes, even to the point of being “militantly intolerant and disobedient,”<sup>38</sup> to shock the capitalist power structure into revealing its true nature, thus toppling and smashing the system to pieces, leaving the way open for a renewal of humanity through socialism.

Marcuse’s reign as the pre-eminent philosopher of the New Left signaled a strong turn towards irrationality and violence among younger Leftists. “Marx, Marcuse, and Mao” became the new trinity and the slogan to rally under. As was proclaimed on a banner of students involved in closing the University of Rome: *Marx is the prophet, Marcuse is his interpreter, and Mao is the sword.*

Many in the new generation listened attentively and sharpened their swords.

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<sup>34</sup> Marcuse 1965, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Marcuse 1969, 89.

<sup>36</sup> Marcuse 1969, ix-x, 59.

<sup>37</sup> Marcuse 1969, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Marcuse 1965, 123.



### ***The rise and fall of Left terrorism***

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, five crucial elements coalesced and turned elements of the far Left into a movement committed to revolutionary violence.

- Epistemologically, the prevailing academic and intellectual climate was either anti-reason, ineffectual in defending reason, or saw reason as irrelevant to practical matters. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kuhn spoke the new language of thought. Reason is out, the intellectuals were teaching, and what matters above all is *will*, authentic *passion*, and non-rational *commitment*.
- Practically, after a century of waiting for the revolution, impatience had peaked. Among the younger generation especially, there was a dominant bent toward activism and away from academic theorizing. Theoreticians still had an audience, but theory had not amounted to much—what was needed was *decisive action now*.
- Morally, there was the extreme disappointment at the failure of the classical socialist ideal. The great ideal of Marxism had failed to materialize. The purity of Marxist theory had been subjected to necessary but defiling revisions. The noble experiment in the Soviet Union had been revealed to be a horrible fraud and a crime. As a response to these crushing and humiliating blows, *rage* at the failure and *betrayal* of a utopian dream was widespread.
- Psychologically, in addition to the rage of disappointment there was the supreme insult of seeing the hated enemy flourishing. Capitalism was enjoying itself, prospering, and even smirking at socialism's discomforts and disorientation. In the face of such insults, there was the desire to do nothing more than to smash the enemy, to see it hurt, bleeding, *destroyed*.
- Politically, there was the justification of irrational violence in the theories of the Frankfurt School as applied by Marcuse. The

righteous revolutionary knows that the masses are oppressed but held captive by the veil of capitalist false consciousness. The revolutionary knows that it will take individuals with special insight, special individuals immune to the corruptions of capitalism, special individuals able to gaze right through its veil of repressive tolerance, absolutely rejecting compromise and willing to *do anything* to rip away the veil and expose the seething horrors below.

The rise of Left terrorism in the 1960s was one consequence.

### **Chart 5.5: Left Terrorist Groups' Founding Dates**

Weathermen (USA)	1960
United Red Army (Japan)	1960s
Black Panthers (USA)	1960s
SWAPO (South West Africa)	1960s
ALN (Brazil)	1960s
Tupamaros (Uruguay)	1962 (active after 1968)
FLQ (Canada)	1963
PLO (Middle East)	1964
Montoneros (Argentina)	1960s
ERP (Argentina)	1960s
Red Brigade (Italy)	1968
PFLP (Middle East)	1968
DPFLP (Middle East)	1968
Red Army Faction, or Baader-Meinhof (Germany)	1970
Black September (Middle East)	1970
SLA (USA)	Early 1970s

Source: Guelke 1995.

The founding dates of some of these terrorists groups are obscure. All however, were explicitly Marxist socialist and none had existed prior to 1960. Some of the groups also had strong nationalistic overtones. Not included in the chart, however, are terrorist groups that had begun earlier for primarily nationalist or religious reasons but in the 1960s came to incorporate Marxism into their theories and manifestos.

In addition to the five factors listed above, several particular events served as triggers in causing the upsurge in violence. Among the far Left, the death of Che Guevara in 1967 and the failure of the 1968 student demonstrations in most Western nations—and especially of the student revolts in France—contributed to the anger and disappointment. Several of the terrorist manifestos published after 1968 make explicit mention of those events, as well as reflecting the broader themes of irrational will, exploitation, commodification, rage, and the need simply to do *something*. For example, Pierre Victor—then the leader of the French Maoists with whom Michel Foucault was associated—hearkened back to the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror and declared the following in the pages of *La Cause du peuple*, the Maoist newspaper:

To overthrow the authority of the bourgeois class, the humiliated population has reason to institute a brief period of terror and to assault bodily a handful of contemptible, hateful individuals. It is difficult to attack the authority of a class without a few heads belonging to members of this class being paraded on the end of a stake.<sup>39</sup>

Other terrorists cast their nets more broadly. Before her death, Ulrike Meinhof made very clear the broad purpose of the Red Army Faction she and Andreas Baader founded in Germany: “The anti-imperialist struggle, if it is to be more than mere chatter, means annihilation, destruction, the shattering of the imperialist power system—political, economic and military.” She also made clear the

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<sup>39</sup> In Miller 1993, 232.

broader historical context within which she thought terrorism was necessary, the more specific events that had served as triggers, and gave an assessment of the likelihood of their success:

Nauseated by the proliferation of the conditions they found in the system, the total commercialization and absolute mendacity in all areas of the superstructure, deeply disappointed by the actions of the student movement and the Extraparliamentary Opposition, they thought it essential to spread the idea of armed struggle. Not because they were so blind as to believe they could keep that initiative going until the revolution triumphed in Germany, not because they imagined they could not be shot or arrested. Not because they so misjudged the situation as to think the masses would simply rise at such a signal. It was a matter of salvaging, historically, the whole state of understanding attained by the movement of 1967/1968; it was a case of not letting the struggle fall apart again.<sup>40</sup>

The rise of Left terrorism in nations other than those controlled by explicitly Marxist governments was a striking feature of the 1960s and early 1970s. Combined with the broader turn of the Left to non-rationalism, irrationalism, and physical activism, the terrorist movement made that era the most confrontational and bloody in the history of the Left socialist movements of those nations.

But the liberal capitalists were not entirely soft and complacent, and by the mid-1970s their police and military forces had defeated the terrorists, killing some, imprisoning many, driving others underground more or less permanently.

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<sup>40</sup> In Guelke 1995, 93, 97.

***From the collapse of the New Left to postmodernism***

With the collapse of the New Left, the socialist movement was dispirited and in disarray. No one was waiting expectantly for socialism to materialize. No one thought it could be achieved by appealing to the electorate. No one was in a position to mount a coup. And those willing to use violence were dead, in jail, or underground.

What then was to be the next step for socialism? In 1974, Herbert Marcuse was asked whether he thought the New Left was history. He replied: "I don't think it's dead, and it will resurrect in the universities."

With hindsight we can identify those who came to prominence as the leaders of the postmodern movement: Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty. But we can now ask, Why those four?

For all four the personal and the professional are tightly linked, so a few biographical details are relevant.

Foucault was born in 1926. He studied philosophy and psychology, receiving degrees from the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne. He was a member of the French Communist Party from 1950 to 1953, but left over differences that eventually led him to declare himself a Maoist in 1968.<sup>41</sup>

Lyotard was born in 1924. Before turning to professional philosophy he spent twelve years doing theoretical and practical work for the radical Left group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. He finished his formal training in philosophy in 1958.

Derrida was born in 1930. He began his formal study of philosophy in 1952 at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he studied under Foucault. He associated closely with a group

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<sup>41</sup> The dates of Foucault's membership in the French Communist Party overlap with the 1948-1953 dates of Pol Pot's membership in the French Communist Party.

focused around *Tel Quel*, a far Left journal, and while sympathetic to the French Communist Party he did not go so far as to join.

Rorty was born in 1931. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale in 1956. Not as far Left politically as the other three, Rorty is a strong social democrat who cites Socialist Party candidate and union leader A. Philip Randolph, for whom his parents worked for a time, as one of his great heroes.

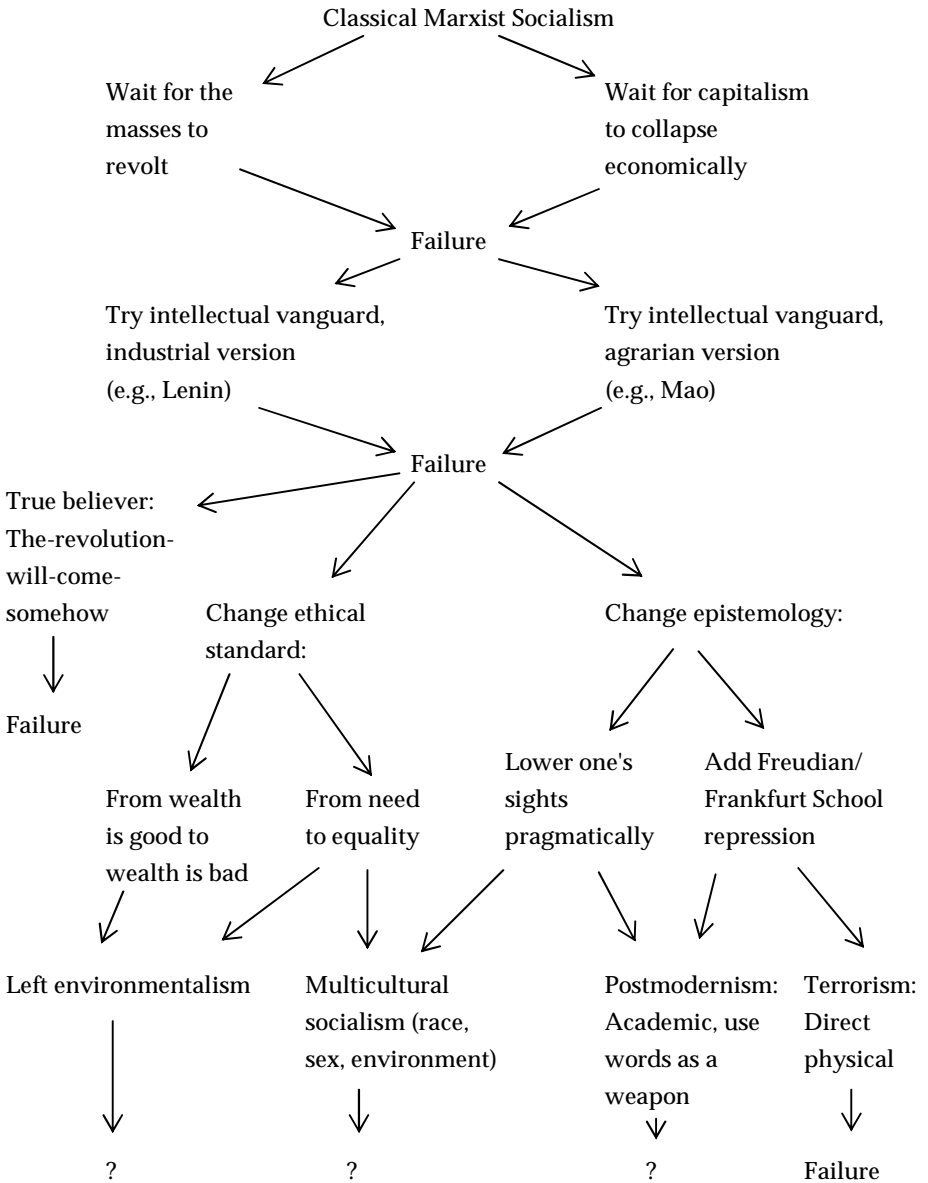
All four of these postmodernists were born within a seven-year span. All were well trained in philosophy at the best schools. All entered their academic careers in the 1950s. All were strongly committed to Left politics. All were well aware of the history of socialist theory and practice. All lived through the crises of socialism of the 1950s and 1960s. And come the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, all four had high standing in their professional academic disciplines and high standing among the intellectual Left.

Accordingly, in the 1970s, as the far Left collapsed once again, it turned to those best able to think strategically, those best able to situate the Left historically and politically, and those most up to speed on the latest trends in epistemology and the state of knowledge. Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and Rorty proved themselves by those criteria. Accordingly, it was those four who signaled the new direction for the academic Left.

If one is an *academic* foe of capitalism, then one's weapons and tactics are not those of the politician, the activist, the revolutionary, or the terrorist. Academics' only possible weapons are words. And if one's epistemology tells one that words are not about truth or reality or in any way cognitive, then in the battle against capitalism words can be only a *rhetorical* weapon.

The next question, then, is how postmodern epistemology comes to be integrated with postmodern politics.

**Chart 5.6: The Evolution of Socialist Strategies  
(Or: From Marx to the Neo-Rousseauians)**







## Chapter Six

# Postmodern Strategy

### *Connecting epistemology to politics*

We are now in a position to address the question posed at the end of Chapter One: Why has a leading segment of the political Left adopted skeptical and relativist epistemological strategies?

Language is the center of postmodern epistemology. Moderns and postmoderns differ not only about *content* when arguing particular issues in philosophy, literature, and law; they also differ in the *methods* by which they employ language. Epistemology drives those differences.

Epistemology asks two questions about language: What is language's connection to reality, and what is its connection to action? Epistemological questions about language are a subset of epistemological questions about consciousness in general: What is consciousness's connection to reality, and what is its connection to action? Moderns and postmoderns have radically different answers to those questions.

For the modern realists, consciousness is both *cognitive* and *functional*, and those two traits are integrated. The primary purpose of consciousness is to be aware of reality. The complementary purpose of consciousness is to use its awareness of reality as a guide to acting in that reality.

For the postmodern antirealists, by contrast, consciousness is *functional*—but it is *not* cognitive, so its functionality has nothing to do with cognition. Two key concepts in the postmodern lexicon, “unmasking” and “rhetoric,” illustrate the significance of the differences.

### ***Unmasking and rhetoric***

To the modernist, the “mask” metaphor is a recognition of the fact that words are not always to be taken literally or as directly stating a fact—that people can use language elliptically, metaphorically, or to state falsehoods, that language can be textured with layers of meaning, and that it can be used to cover hypocrisies or to rationalize. Accordingly, unmasking means interpreting or investigating to get to a literal meaning or fact of the matter. The process of unmasking is cognitive, guided by objective standards, with the purpose of coming to an awareness of reality.

For the postmodernist, by contrast, interpretation and investigation never terminate with reality. Language connects only with more language, never with a non-linguistic reality. In Jacques Derrida’s words, “[t]he fact of language is probably the only fact ultimately to resist all parenthization.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, we cannot get outside of language. Language is an “internal,” self-referential system, and there is no way to get “external” to it—although even to speak of “internal” and “external” is also meaningless on postmodern grounds. There is no non-linguistic standard to which to relate language, so there can be no standard by which to

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida 1978, 37.

distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical, the true and the false. Deconstruction is therefore in principle an unending process. Unmasking does not even terminate in “subjective” beliefs and interests, for “subjective” contrasts to “objective,” and that too is a distinction that postmodernism denies. A “subject’s beliefs and interests” are themselves socio-linguistic constructions, so unmasking one piece of language to reveal an underlying subjective interest is only to reveal more language. And that language in turn can be unmasked to reveal more language, and so on. Language is masks all the way down.

At any given time, however, a subject is a particular construction with a particular set of beliefs and interests, and the subject uses language to express and further those beliefs and interests. Language is thus functional, and this brings us to rhetoric.

For the modernist, the functionality of language is complementary to its being cognitive. An individual observes reality perceptually, forms conceptual beliefs about reality on the basis of those perceptions, and then acts in reality on the basis of those perceptual and conceptual cognitive states. Some of those actions in the world are social interactions, and in some of those social interactions language assumes a communicatory function. In communicating with each other, individuals narrate, argue, or otherwise attempt to pass on their cognitive beliefs about the world. Rhetoric, then, is an aspect of language’s communicatory function, referring to those methods of using language that aid in the effectiveness of cognition during linguistic communication.

For the postmodernist, language cannot be cognitive because it does not connect to reality, whether to an external nature or an underlying self. Language is not about being aware of the world, or about distinguishing the true from the false, or even about argument in the traditional sense of validity, soundness, and probability. Accordingly, postmodernism recasts the nature of rhetoric: Rhetoric is persuasion in the absence of cognition.

Richard Rorty makes this point clear in his essay, “The Contingency of Language.” The failure of the realist position, Rorty argues, has shown that “the world does not tell us what language games to play” and that “human languages are human creations.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose of language is therefore not to argue in an attempt to prove or disprove anything. Accordingly, Rorty concludes, that is not what he is doing when he uses language to try to persuade us of his version of “solidarity.”

Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics.<sup>3</sup>

The language here is of “attractiveness” in the absence of cognition, truth, or argument.

By temperament and in the content of his politics, Rorty is the least extreme of the leading postmodernists. This is apparent in the kind of language he uses in his political discourse. Language is a tool of social interaction, and one’s model of social interaction dictates what kind of tool language is used as. Rorty sees a great deal of pain and suffering in the world and much conflict between groups, so language is to him primarily a tool of conflict resolution. To that end, his language pushes “empathy,” “sensitivity,” and “toleration”—although he also suggests that those virtues may apply only within the range of our “ethnocentric” predicament: “we must, in practice, privilege our own group,” he writes, which implies that “there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously.”<sup>4</sup>

Most other postmodernists, however, see the conflicts between groups as more brutal and our prospects for empathy as more

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<sup>2</sup> Rorty 1989, 6, 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Rorty 1989, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty 1991, 29.

severely limited than does Rorty. Using language as a tool of conflict *resolution* is therefore not on their horizon. In a conflict that cannot reach peaceful resolution, the kind of tool that one wants is a *weapon*. And so given the conflict models of social relations that dominate postmodern discourse, it makes perfect sense that to most postmodernists language is primarily a weapon.

This explains the harsh nature of much postmodern rhetoric. The regular deployments of *ad hominem*, the setting up of straw men, and the regular attempts to silence opposing voices are all logical consequences of the postmodern epistemology of language. Stanley Fish, as noted in Chapter Four, calls all opponents of racial preferences bigots and lumps them in with the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>5</sup> Andrea Dworkin calls all heterosexual males rapists<sup>6</sup> and repeatedly labels “Amerika” a fascist state.<sup>7</sup> With such rhetoric, truth or falsity is not the issue: what matters primarily is the language’s *effectiveness*.

If we now add to the postmodern epistemology of language the far Left politics of the leading postmodernists and their firsthand awareness of the crises of socialist thought and practice, then the verbal weaponry has to become explosive.

### ***When theory clashes with fact***

In the past two centuries, many strategies have been pursued by socialists the world over. Socialists have tried waiting for the masses to achieve socialism from the bottom up, and they have tried imposing socialism from the top down. They have tried to achieve it by evolution and by revolution. They have tried versions of socialism that emphasize industrialization, and they have tried those that are agrarian. They have waited for capitalism to collapse

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<sup>5</sup> Fish 1994, 68-69.

<sup>6</sup> Dworkin 1987, 123, 126.

<sup>7</sup> Dworkin 1987, 123, 126, 47.

by itself, and when that did not happen they have tried to destroy capitalism by peaceful means. And when that did not work some tried to destroy it by terrorism.

But capitalism continues to do well and socialism has been a disaster. In modern times there have been over two centuries of socialist theory and practice, and the preponderance of logic and evidence has gone against socialism.

There is accordingly a choice about what lesson to learn from history.

If one is interested in *truth*, then one's *rational* response to a failing theory is as follows:

- One breaks the theory down to its constituent premises.
- One questions its premises vigorously and checks the logic that integrates them.
- One seeks out alternatives to the most questionable premises.
- One accepts moral responsibility for any bad consequences of putting the false theory into practice.

This is not what we find in postmodern reflections on contemporary politics. Truth and rationality are subjected to attack, and the prevailing attitude about moral responsibility is again best stated by Rorty: "I think that a good Left is a party that always thinks about the future and doesn't care much about our past sins."<sup>8</sup>

### ***Kierkegaardian postmodernism***

In Chapter Four, I sketched one postmodern response to the problems of theory and evidence for socialism. For an intelligent, informed socialist confronted with the data of history, a crisis of belief has to occur. Socialism is to many a powerful vision of the beautiful society, one that envisages an ideal social world that will

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<sup>8</sup> Rorty 1998.

transcend all the ills of our current one. Any such deeply held vision comes to form part of the very identity of the believer, and any threat to the vision has to be experienced as a threat to the believer.

From the historical experience of other visions that have run into crises of theory and evidence, we know that there can be a powerful temptation to block out theoretical and evidentiary problems and simply to will oneself into continuing to believe. Religion, for example, has provided many such instances. “Ten thousand difficulties,” wrote Cardinal Newman, “do not make one doubt.”<sup>9</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky made the point more starkly, in a letter to a woman benefactor: “If anyone had written to me that the truth was outside of Christ, I would rather remain with Christ than with the truth.”<sup>10</sup> We also know from historical experience that sophisticated epistemological strategies can be developed precisely for the purpose of attacking the reason and logic that have caused problems for the vision. Such were part of the explicit motivations of Kant’s first *Critique*, Schleiermacher’s *On Religion*, and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*.

Why not for the far Left? The modern histories of religion and socialism exhibit striking parallels in development.

- Both religion and socialism started with a comprehensive vision that they believed to be true but not based on reason (various prophets; Rousseau).
- Both visions were then challenged by visions based on rational epistemologies (early naturalist critics of religion; early liberal critics of socialism).

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<sup>9</sup> Newman, *Position of My Mind Since 1845*.

<sup>10</sup> With his unparalleled capacity for confession, Rousseau generalized this point to all philosophers: “Each knows well that his system is no better founded than the others. But he maintains it because it is his. There is not a single one of them who, if he came to know the true and the false, would not prefer the lie he has found to the truth discovered by another” (1762a, 268-269).

- Both religion and socialism responded by saying that they could satisfy the criteria of reason (natural theology; scientific socialism).
- Both religion and socialism then ran into serious problems of logic and evidence (Hume's attacks on natural theology; Mises's and Hayek's attacks on socialist calculation).
- Both then responded in turn by attacking reality and reason (Kant and Kierkegaard; postmodernists).

By the end of the eighteenth century, religious thinkers had available to them Kant's sophisticated epistemology. Kant told them that reason was cut off from reality, and so many abandoned natural theology and gratefully used his epistemology to defend religion. By the middle of the twentieth century, Left thinkers had available to them sophisticated theories of epistemology and language that told them that truth is impossible—that evidence is theory-laden—that empirical evidence never adds up to proof—that logical proof is merely theoretical—that reason is artificial and dehumanizing—and that one's feelings and passions are better guides than reason.

The prevailing skeptical and irrationalist epistemologies in academic philosophy thus provided the Left with a new strategy for responding to its crisis. *Any* attack on socialism in *any* form could be brushed aside, and the desire to believe in it reaffirmed. Those who adopted this strategy could always tell themselves that they were simply functioning as Kuhn said the scientists themselves function—by bracketing the anomalies, setting them aside, and then going with their feelings.

On this hypothesis, then, postmodernism is a symptom of the far Left's crisis of faith. Postmodernism is a result of using skeptical epistemology to justify the personal leap of faith necessary to continue believing in socialism.

On this hypothesis, the prevalence of skeptical and irrationalist epistemologies in the middle of the twentieth century alone is not a



sufficient explanation of postmodernism. A dead end of skepticism and irrationalism does not predict to what uses skepticism and irrationalism will be put. A desperate person or movement can appeal to those epistemologies as a defense mechanism, but who or what movement is desperate depends on other factors. In this case, socialism is the movement in trouble. But socialism's troubles alone are not a sufficient explanation either. Unless the epistemological groundwork is laid, any movement that appeals to skeptical and irrationalist arguments will simply be laughed out of court. Therefore, it is a combination of the two factors—widespread skepticism about reason and socialism's being in crisis—that is necessary to give rise to postmodernism.

Yet this Kierkegaardian explanation of postmodernism is incomplete as an account of postmodern strategy. For Left thinkers who are crushed by the failings of socialism, the Kierkegaardian option provides the justification needed for continuing to believe in socialism as a matter of personal faith. But for those who still want to carry on the battle against capitalism, the new epistemologies make other strategies possible.

### ***Reversing Thrasymachus***

So far my argument accounts for postmodernism's subjectivism and relativism, its Left-wing politics, and the need to connect the two.

If this explanation is correct, then postmodernism is what I call *Reverse Thrasymacheanism*, alluding to the sophist Thrasymachus of Plato's *Republic*. Some postmodernists see part of their project as rehabilitating the Sophists, and this makes perfect sense.

One could, after doing some philosophy, come to be a true believer in subjectivism and relativism. Accordingly, one could come to believe that reason is derivative, that will and desire rule, that society is a battle of competing wills, that words are merely

tools in the power struggle for dominance, and that all is fair in love and war.

That is the position the Sophists argued 2400 years ago. The only difference, then, between the Sophists and the postmodernists is whose side they are on. Thrasymachus was representative of the second and cruder generation of Sophists, marshalling subjectivist and relativistic arguments in support of the political claim that justice is the interest of the stronger. The postmodernists—coming after two millennia of Christianity and two centuries of socialist theory—simply reverse that claim: Subjectivism and relativism are true, except that the postmodernists are on the side of the weaker and historically-oppressed groups. Justice, contrary to Thrasymachus, is the interest of the weaker.<sup>11</sup>

The connection to the Sophists moves postmodern strategy away from religious faith and toward *realpolitik*. The Sophists taught rhetoric not as a means of advancing truth and knowledge but as a means of winning debates in the rough-and-tumble world of day-to-day politics. Day-to-day politics is not a place where faithfully blinding oneself to the data leads to practical success. Rather it requires an openness to new realities and the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Extending that flexibility to include not being concerned for truth or consistency in argument can and often has been seen as part of a strategy for achieving political success. Here it is useful to recall Lentricchia: Postmodern-

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<sup>11</sup> Placing pain and suffering at the center of morality is a recurring theme among the leading postmodernists. Lyotard, expressing agreement with Foucault, states that one has to “bear witness” to the “dissonance,” especially that of others (Lyotard 1988, xiii, 140-141). Rorty believes that “solidarity” is achieved by the “imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people” (Rorty 1989).

ism “seeks not to find the foundation and the conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Using contradictory discourses as a political strategy***

In postmodern discourse, truth is rejected explicitly and consistency can be a rare phenomenon. Consider the following pairs of claims.

- On the one hand, all truth is relative; on the other hand, postmodernism tells it like it really is.
- On the one hand, all cultures are equally deserving of respect; on the other, Western culture is uniquely destructive and bad.
- Values are subjective—but sexism and racism are really evil.
- Technology is bad and destructive—and it is unfair that some people have more technology than others.
- Tolerance is good and dominance is bad—but when postmodernists come to power, political correctness follows.

There is a common pattern here: Subjectivism and relativism in one breath, dogmatic absolutism in the next. Postmodernists are well aware of the contradictions—especially since their opponents relish pointing them out at every opportunity. And of course a postmodernist can respond dismissively by citing Hegel—“Those are merely Aristotelian logical contradictions”—but it is one thing to *say* that and quite another to *sustain* Hegelian contradictions psychologically.

The pattern therefore raises the question of which side of the contradiction is deepest for postmodernism. Is it that postmodernists really are committed to relativism, but occasionally lapse into absolutism? Or are the absolutist commitments deepest and the relativism a rhetorical cover?

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<sup>12</sup> Lentricchia 1983, 12.

Consider three more examples, this time of clashes between postmodernist theory and historical fact.

- Postmodernists say that the West is deeply racist, but they know very well that the West ended slavery for the first time ever, and that it is only in places where Western ideas have made inroads that racist ideas are on the defensive.
- They say that the West is deeply sexist, but they know very well that Western women were the first to get the vote, contractual rights, and the opportunities that most women in the world are still without.
- They say that Western capitalist countries are cruel to their poorer members, subjugating them and getting rich off them, but they know very well that the poor in the West are far richer than the poor anywhere else, both in terms of material assets and the opportunities to improve their condition.

In explaining the contradiction between the relativism and the absolutist politics, there are three possibilities.

1. The first possibility is that the relativism is primary and the absolutist politics are secondary. *Qua* philosophers, the postmodernists push relativism, but *qua* particular individuals they happen to believe a particular version of absolutist politics.
2. The second possibility is that the absolutist politics are primary, while the relativism is a rhetorical strategy that is used to advance that politics.
3. The third possibility is that both the relativism and the absolutism coexist in postmodernism, but the contradictions between them simply do not matter psychologically to those who hold them.

The first option can be ruled out as a possibility. Subjectivism and its consequent relativism cannot be primary to postmodernism because of the uniformity of the politics of postmodernism. If

subjectivity and relativism were primary, then postmodernists would be adopting political positions across the spectrum, and that simply is not happening. Postmodernism is therefore first a political movement, and a brand of politics that has only lately come to relativism.

### ***Machiavellian postmodernism***

So let us try the second option, that postmodernism is first about politics and only secondly about relativistic epistemology. Fredric Jameson's oft-quoted line—"everything is 'in the last analysis' political"<sup>13</sup>—should then be given a strongly Machiavellian twist as a statement of a willingness to use any weapon—rhetorical, epistemological, political—to achieve political ends. Then, strikingly, postmodernism turns out *not* to be relativistic at all. Relativism becomes part of a rhetorical political strategy, some Machiavellian *realpolitik* employed to throw the opposition off track.

On this hypothesis, postmodernists need not believe much of what they say. The word games and much of the use of anger and rage that are characteristic of much of their style can be a matter—not of using words to state things that they think are true—but rather of using words as weapons against an enemy that they still hope to destroy.

Here it is useful to recall Derrida: "deconstruction never had meaning or interest, at least in my eyes, than as a radicalization, that is to say, also *within the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jameson 1981, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida 1995; Lilla, 1998, 40. This interpretation fits also with Mark Lilla's assessment of the relationship between politics and philosophy among the post-World War II generation of French intellectuals: "The history of French philosophy in the three decades following the Second World War can be summed up in a phrase: politics dictated and philosophy wrote" (Lilla 2001, 161).

***Machiavellian rhetorical discourses***

Suppose that you are arguing about politics with a fellow student or professor. You cannot believe it, but you seem to be losing the debate. All of your argumentative gambits are blocked, and you keep getting backed into corners. Feeling trapped, you then find yourself saying, “Well, it’s all just a matter of opinion; it’s merely semantics.”

What is the purpose in this context of appealing to opinion and semantic relativism? The purpose is to get your opponent off your back and to get some breathing space. If your opponent accepts that the debate is a matter of opinion or semantics, then your losing the argument does not matter: nobody is right or wrong. But if your opponent does *not* accept that everything is a matter of opinion, then his attention is diverted away from the subject matter at hand—namely, politics—and into epistemology. For now he has to show why everything is not merely semantics, and that will take him awhile. Meanwhile, you have successfully diverted him. And if it looks like he is doing a good job on the semantics argument, then you can throw in—“Well, what about perceptual illusions?”

In adopting this rhetorical strategy, do you really have to believe that everything is a matter of opinion or merely semantics? No, you do not. You can believe absolutely that you are right about the politics; and you can know that all you want to do is to use words to get the guy off your back in a way that makes it seem like you have not lost the argument.

This rhetorical strategy also works at the level of intellectual movements. Foucault has identified the strategy explicitly and clearly: “Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault 1978, 101-102.

***Deconstruction as an educational strategy***

Here is an example. Kate Ellis is a radical gender feminist. Ellis, as she writes in *Socialist Review*, believes that sexism is evil, that affirmative action is good, that capitalism and sexism go hand in hand, and that achieving equality between the sexes requires an overthrow of existing society. But she finds that she has a problem when she tries to teach these themes to her students. She finds that they think like liberal capitalists—they think in terms of equality of opportunity, in terms of simply removing artificial barriers and judging everyone by the same standards, and they think that by personal effort and ambition they can overcome most obstacles and achieve success in life.<sup>16</sup> But this means that her students have bought into the whole liberal capitalist framework that Ellis thinks is dead wrong. So, Ellis writes, she will enlist deconstruction as a weapon against those old-fashioned Enlightenment beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

If she can first undermine her students' belief in the superiority of capitalist values and of the idea that people make or break themselves, then their core values will be de-stabilized.<sup>18</sup> Pushing relativism, she finds, helps achieve this. And once their Enlightenment beliefs are hollowed out by relativistic arguments, she can fill the void with the correct Left political principles.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ellis 1989, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Ellis 1989, 40, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis 1989, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Ellis is thus a disciple of both John Dewey and Herbert Marcuse: education is a Deweyan process of "social reconstruction," but a reconstruction that requires first a Marcusean deconstruction. Dewey: "I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction" (Dewey 1897, 16). Marcuse: "Reason [in the Hegelian sense] signifies the 'absolute annihilation' of the common-sense world. For, as we have already said, the struggle against common sense is the beginning of speculative thinking, and the loss of everyday security is the origin of philosophy" (Marcuse 1954, 48).

A familiar analogy may help here. On this hypothesis, postmodernists are no more relativistic than creationists are in their battles against evolutionary theory. Postmodernists, wearing their multiculturalist garb and saying that all cultures are equal, are like those creationists who say that all they want is equal time for evolutionism and creationism. Creationists will sometimes argue that creationism and evolutionism are equally scientific, or equally religious, and that they should therefore be treated equally and given equal time. Do creationists really believe that? Is equal time all that they want? Of course not. Creationists are fundamentally opposed to evolution—they are convinced that it is wrong and evil, and if they were in power they would suppress it. However, as a short-term tactic, as long as they are on the losing side of the intellectual debate, they will push intellectual egalitarianism and argue that nobody really knows the absolute truth. The same strategy holds for the Machiavellian postmodernists—they say they want equal respect for all cultures, but what they really want in the long run is to suppress the liberal capitalist one.

The Machiavellian interpretation also explains the use that postmodernists sometimes make of science. Einstein's Relativity Theory, quantum mechanics, chaos mathematics, and Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem will all be cited regularly as proving that everything is relative, that nothing can be known, that everything is chaos. At best, in postmodernist writings, one will read dubious interpretations of the data, but more commonly the person involved does not have a clear idea of what the theorem in question is or how it is proved.

This is especially clear in the infamous case of physicist Alan Sokal and the far-Left journal *Social Text*. Sokal published an article in *Social Text* in which he argued that science had discredited the Enlightenment view of an objective, knowable reality, and that the latest results from quantum physics supported far Left politics.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sokal 1996.



Sokal announced simultaneously in *Lingua Franca* that the article was a parody of postmodern criticism of science. The shocked reaction of the editors and defenders of *Social Text* was not to argue that they thought the physics presented in the article is true or even a legitimate interpretation. Instead the editors were deeply embarrassed and at the same time suggested piously that it was Sokal who had violated the sacred bonds of academic honesty and integrity. It was clear, however, that the editors did not know much about the physics and that the article had been published because of the political mileage they could get out of it.<sup>21</sup>

The Machiavellian interpretation also explains why relativistic arguments are arrayed only against the Western great books canon. If one's deepest goals are political, one always has a major obstacle to deal with—the powerful books written by brilliant minds on the other side of the debate. In literature, there is a huge body of novels, plays, epic poems, and not much of it supports socialism. Much of it presents compelling analyses of the human condition from opposed perspectives. In American law, there is the Constitution and the whole body of common law precedent, and very little of that supports socialism. Consequently, if you are a Left-wing graduate student or professor in literature or law and you are confronted with the Western legal or literary canon, you have two choices. You can take on the opposing traditions, have your students read the great books and the great decisions, and argue with them in your classes. That is very hard work and also very risky—your students might come to agree with the wrong side. Or you can find a way to dismiss the whole tradition, so that you can teach only books that fit your politics. If you are looking for shortcuts, or if you have a sneaking suspicion that the right side might not fare well in the debate, then deconstruction is seductive. Deconstruction allows you

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<sup>21</sup> In Koertge 1998, Sokal discusses reactions to the *Social Text* hoax. Also included in that volume are many useful studies of postmodernists' misuse of science and the history of science. See also Gross and Levitt 1997.

to dismiss whole literary and legal traditions as built upon sexist or racist or otherwise exploitative assumptions. It provides a justification for setting them aside.

However, in order to use this strategy, do you really have to believe that Shakespeare was a misogynist, that Hawthorne was a secret Puritan, or that Melville was a technological imperialist? No. Deconstruction can simply be employed as a rhetorical method for ridding oneself of an obstacle.

On this Machiavellian hypothesis, then, postmodernism is not a leap of faith for the academic Left, but instead a clear-eyed political strategy that uses relativism but does not believe it.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Ressentiment postmodernism***

A psychologically darker streak runs through postmodernism, one that none of the above explanations has so far captured. The above explain postmodernism as a response to extreme skepticism, as a faith-response to the crisis of a political vision, or as an unscrupulous political strategy. Those explanations connect the epistemology and the politics of postmodernism, and they resolve the tension between the relativist and absolutist elements of postmodernism. In the “Kantian” explanation of postmodernism, the tension is resolved by making the skepticism primary and the political commitments secondary and accidentally associated. In the “Kierkegaardian” and “Machiavellian” explanations, the tension is resolved by making the political commitments primary and the use of relativistic epistemology a matter of rationalization or political rhetorical strategy.

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<sup>22</sup> This Machiavellian interpretation of deconstructionist strategy complements Marcuse’s advocacy of a double-standard in applying toleration: “Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the Left” (1969, 109).

The final option is *not to resolve the tension*. Contradiction is a psychological form of destruction, but contradictions sometimes do not matter psychologically to those who live them, because for them ultimately *nothing* matters.

Nihilism is close to the surface in the postmodern intellectual movement in a historically unprecedented way.

In the modern world, Left-wing thought has been one of the major breeding grounds for destruction and nihilism. From the Reign of Terror to Lenin and Stalin, to Mao and Pol Pot, to the upsurge of terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s, the far Left has exhibited repeatedly a willingness to use violence to achieve political ends and exhibited extreme frustration and rage when it has failed. The Left has also included many fellow-travelers from the same political and psychological universe, but without political power at their disposal. Herbert Marcuse, with his explicit call to use philosophy to achieve the “‘absolute annihilation’ of the common sense world,”<sup>23</sup> was only a recent and unusually explicit voice. It is that history of Left thought and practice that more moderate Left voices such as Michael Harrington’s took pains to warn us about. Reflecting on that history, Harrington wrote, “I want to avoid that absolutist view of socialism that makes it so transcendent that true believers are driven to a totalitarian rage in the effort to create a perfect order.”<sup>24</sup>

From totalitarian rage to nihilism is a short step. As Nietzsche noted in *Daybreak*:

When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do they exclaim angrily, “May the whole world perish!” This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose implication is “If I cannot have *something*, no one can have *anything*, no one is to *be* anything!”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marcuse 1954, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Harrington 1970, 345.

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, Section 304.

### ***Nietzschean Ressentiment***

Nietzsche, paradoxically, is one of the great postmodernist heroes. They cite him for his perspectivalism in epistemology, for his use of the enigmatic and loosely-structured aphoristic form instead of the more scientific treatise form, and for his psychological acuteness in diagnosing decay and hypocrisy. I want to use Nietzsche against the postmodernists for a change.

Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* is close to the English "resentment," but with a more curdled bitterness, more seething and poisoned and bottled up for a long time. Nietzsche uses *ressentiment* in the context of developing his famous account of master and slave morality in *Beyond Good and Evil* and more systematically in *Genealogy of Morals*. Master morality is the morality of the vigorous, life-loving strong. It is the morality of those who love adventure, who delight in creativity and in their own sense of purposefulness and assertiveness. Slave morality is the morality of the weak, the humble, those who feel victimized and afraid to venture forth into the big bad world. Weaklings are chronically passive, mostly because they are afraid of the strong. As a result, the weak feel frustrated: they cannot get what they want out of life. They become envious of the strong, and they also secretly start to hate themselves for being so cowardly and weak. But no one can live thinking he or she is hateful. And so the weak invent a rationalization—a rationalization that tells them they are the good and the moral *because* they are weak, humble, and passive. Patience is a virtue, they say, and so is humility, and so is obedience, and so is being on the side of the weak and the downtrodden. And of course the opposites of those things are evil—aggressiveness is evil, and so is pride, and so is independence, and so is being physically and materially successful.

But of course it is a rationalization, and a smart weakling is never quite going to convince himself of it. That will do damage inside. Meanwhile, the strong will be laughing at him. And that will do damage inside. And the strong and the rich will be carrying on getting stronger and richer and enjoying life. And seeing that will do damage inside. Eventually the smart weakling will feel such a combination of self-loathing and envy of his enemies that he will need to lash out. He will feel the urge to hurt, in any way he can, his hated enemy. But of course he cannot risk direct physical confrontation—he is a weakling. His only weapons are words. And so, Nietzsche argued, the weakling becomes extremely clever with words.<sup>26</sup>

In our time, the world created by the Enlightenment is strong, active, and exuberant. For a while in the past century, socialists could believe the revolution was coming, that woe would come to them that are rich, and that blessed would be the poor. But that hope has been dashed cruelly. Capitalism now seems like a case of “twice two makes four,” and like Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* it is easy to see that the most intelligent socialists would just hate that fact. Socialism is the historical loser, and if socialists know that, they will hate that fact, they will hate the winners for having won, and they will hate themselves for having picked the losing side. Hate as a chronic condition leads to the urge to destroy.

Yet political failure is too limited as an explanation for the range of nihilistic themes found in postmodernism. Postmodern thinkers hold that not just politics has failed—*everything* has failed. Being, as Hegel and Heidegger taught us, really has come to nothing. Postmodernism then, in its most extreme forms, is about driving that point home and making the nothing reign.

Clearly, I am flirting with *ad hominem* here, so I will let the postmodernists speak for themselves.

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<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1:10.

### ***Foucault and Derrida on the end of man***

In his "Introduction" to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault speaks at one point in the first person. Speaking autobiographically about his motivations for writing, Foucault speaks of his desire to erase himself: "I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face."<sup>27</sup>

Foucault extends his desire for effacement to the entire human species. At the end of *The Order of Things*, for example, he speaks almost longingly about the coming erasure of mankind: Man is "an invention of recent date" that will soon "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."<sup>28</sup> God is dead, wrote Hegel and Nietzsche. Man too will be dead, Foucault hopes.<sup>29</sup>

Derrida too recognizes the kind of world that postmodernism is bringing about and declares his intention not to be among those who let their queasiness get the better of them. Postmodernists, he writes, are those who do not

turn their eyes away when faced by the as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity.<sup>30</sup>

The bringing forth of monsters is one postmodern view of the creative process, one that heralds the end of mankind. Other postmodernists stress the ugliness of postmodern creation, at the same

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<sup>27</sup> Foucault 1969, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault 1966, 387; see also 1989, 67.

<sup>29</sup> See also John Gray, who argues that we must accept our "postmodern perspective of plural and provisional perspectives lacking any rational or transcendental ground or unifying world view" (1995, 153), and later connects this to an explicit call for human destruction: "Homo rapines [sic] is only one of very many species, and not obviously worth preserving" (2002).

<sup>30</sup> Derrida 1978, 293.

time suggesting that mankind is simply beside the point. Kate Ellis notes, for example, “the characteristically apolitical pessimism of most postmodernism, by which creation is simply a form of defecation.”<sup>31</sup>

Monsters and waste products were core themes in the world of art in the twentieth century, and there is an instructive parallel between developments in the world of art in the first half of the century and developments in the rest of the humanities in the second half of the century. With Marcel Duchamp the world of art got to postmodernism before the rest of the intellectual world.

Asked to submit something for display by the Society of Independent Artists in New York, Duchamp sent a urinal. Duchamp of course knew the history of art. He knew what had been achieved—how over the centuries art had been a powerful vehicle that called upon the highest development of the human creative vision and demanded exacting technical skill; and he knew that art had an awesome power to exalt the senses, the intellects, and the passions of those who experience it. Duchamp reflected on the history of art and decided to make a statement. The artist is a not great creator—Duchamp went shopping at a plumbing store. The artwork is not a special object—it was mass-produced in a factory. The experience of art is not exciting and ennobling—at best it is puzzling and mostly leaves one with a sense of distaste. But over and above that, Duchamp did not select just any ready-made object to display. In selecting the urinal, his message was clear: Art is something you piss on.

Dada’s themes are about meaninglessness, but its works and manifestos are meaningful philosophical statements in the context in which they are presented. *Kunst ist Scheisse* (Art is shit) was, fittingly, the motto of the Dada movement. Duchamp’s urinal was the fitting symbol. Everything is waste to be flushed away.

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<sup>31</sup> Ellis 1989, 46.

On this hypothesis, then, postmodernism is a generalization on Dada's nihilism. Not only is art shit, everything is.

Postmodern thinkers inherit an intellectual tradition that has seen the defeat of all of its major hopes. The Counter-Enlightenment was from the beginning suspicious of the Enlightenment's naturalism, its reason, its optimistic view of human potential, its individualism in ethics and politics, and its science and technology. For those opposed to the Enlightenment, the modern world has offered no comfort. The advocates of the Enlightenment said that science was to be the replacement for religion, but science has offered the specters of entropy and relativity. Science was to be the glory of mankind, but it has taught us that man evolved, red in tooth and claw, from the ooze. Science was to make the world a technological paradise, but it has generated nuclear bombs and super-bacilli. And the confidence in the power of reason that underlies it all has, from the postmodernists' perspective, been revealed to be a fraud. The thought of nuclear weapons in the clutches of an irrational, grasping animal is frightening.

While the neo-Enlightenment thinkers have come to terms with the modern world, from the postmodern perspective the universe has been metaphysically and epistemologically shattered. We can not turn to God or to nature, and we cannot trust reason or mankind.

But there was always socialism. As bad as the philosophical universe became in metaphysics, epistemology, and the study of human nature, there was still the vision of an ethical and political order that would transcend everything and create the beautiful collectivist society.

The failure of Left politics to achieve that vision was merely the last straw. To the postmodern mind, the cruel lessons of the modern world are that reality is inaccessible, that nothing can be known, that human potential is nothing, and that ethical and political ideals



have come to nothing. The psychological response to the loss of everything is anger and despair.

But the postmodern thinkers also find themselves surrounded by an Enlightenment world that does not understand. The postmodernists find themselves confronting a world dominated by liberalism and capitalism, by science and technology, by people who still believe in reality, in reason, and in the greatness of human potential. The world that they said was impossible and destructive has both come to be and is flourishing. The heirs of the Enlightenment are running the world, and they have marginalized the postmodernists to the academy. *Ressentiment* is then added to anger and despair.

Some retreat into quietism, and some retreat to a private world of aesthetic play and self-creation. Others, however, lash out with the intent to destroy. But again postmodernism's only weapons are words.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Ressentiment strategy***

The twentieth-century art world again gives prescient examples. Duchamp's urinal sent the message *Piss on you*, and his later works put that general attitude into practice. His version of the *Mona Lisa* was a clear example: a reproduction of Leonardo's masterpiece with a cartoonish moustache added. That too made a statement: Here is a magnificent achievement that I cannot hope to equal, so instead I will deface it and turn it into a joke. Robert Rauschenberg took Duchamp a step further. Feeling that he was standing in the shadow of Willem de Kooning's achievements, he asked for one of

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<sup>32</sup> Here Foucault takes a cue from André Breton's surrealist use of language as the "antimatter" of the world: "The profound incompatibility between Marxists and existentialists of the Sartrean type on the one hand and Breton on the other comes no doubt that for Marx or Sartre writing is part of the world, whereas for Breton a book, a sentence, a word—those things alone constitute the antimatter of the world and can compensate for the whole universe" (1989, 12).

de Kooning's paintings—which he then obliterated and then painted over. That made a statement: I cannot be special unless I destroy your achievement first.

Deconstruction is a literary version of Duchamp and Rauschenberg. Deconstruction theory says that no work has meaning. Any apparent meaning can be transformed into its opposite, into nothing, or revealed to be a mask for something distasteful. The postmodern movement contains many people who like the idea of deconstructing other people's creative work. Deconstruction has the effect of leveling all meaning and value. If a text can mean anything, then it means nothing more than anything else—no texts are then great. If a text is a cover for something fraudulent, then doubt about everything apparently great creeps in.

That deconstructive techniques are arrayed primarily against works that do not square with postmodern commitments then makes sense.

The strategy is not new. If you hate someone and want to hurt him, then hit him where it counts. Do you want to hurt a man who loves his children and hates child molesters? Drop hints and spread rumors that he is fond of child pornography. Do you want to hurt a woman who takes pride in her independence? Spread the word that she married the man she did because he is wealthy. The truth or falsity of the rumors does not matter, and whether those you tell believe you does not really matter. What matters is that you score a direct, damaging hit to someone's psyche. You know that those accusations and rumors will cause tremors, even if they come to nothing. You get the wonderfully dark glow inside of knowing that you did it. And the rumors might just come to something after all.

The best portrait of this psychology comes from that very dead, very white European male: William Shakespeare, in his *Othello*. Iago just hated Othello, but he could not hope to defeat him in open confrontation. How then could he destroy him? Iago's strategy was to attack him where it would hurt most—through Othello's passion

for Desdemona. Iago hinted indirectly that she had been sleeping around, he spread subtle lies and innuendo about her faithfulness, he succeeded in raising a doubt in Othello's mind about the most beautiful thing in his life, and he let that doubt work like a slow poison.

Like the postmodernists, Iago's only weapons were words. The only difference is that the postmodernists are not so subtle about their intended targets.

The contemporary Enlightenment world prides itself on its commitment to equality and justice, its open-mindedness, its making opportunity available to all, and its achievements in science and technology. The Enlightenment world is proud, confident, and knows it is the wave of the future. This is unbearable to someone who is invested totally in an opposed and failed outlook. That pride is what such a person wants to destroy. The best target to attack is the Enlightenment's sense of its own moral worth. Attack it as sexist and racist, intolerantly dogmatic, and cruelly exploitative. Undermine its confidence in its reason, its science and technology. The words do not even have to be true or consistent to do the necessary damage.

And like Iago, postmodernism does not have to get the girl in the end. Destroying Othello is enough.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Again Nietzsche captures the psychology presciently: "When would they [the men of *ressentiment*] achieve the ultimate, subtlest, sublimest triumph of revenge? Undoubtedly if they succeeded in *poisoning the consciences* of the fortunate with their own misery, with all misery, so that one day the fortunate began to be ashamed of their good fortune and perhaps said one to another: 'it is disgraceful to be fortunate: *there is too much misery!*' But no greater or more calamitous misunderstanding is possible than for the happy, well-constituted, powerful in soul and body, to begin to doubt their *right to happiness* in this fashion" (*Genealogy of Morals*, 3:14).

***Post-postmodernism***

Showing that a movement leads to nihilism is an important part of understanding it, as is showing how a failing and nihilistic movement can still be dangerous. Tracing postmodernism's roots back to Rousseau, Kant, and Marx explains how all of its elements came to be woven together. Yet identifying postmodernism's roots and connecting them to contemporary bad consequences does not refute postmodernism.

What is still needed is a refutation of those historical premises, and an identification and defense of the alternatives to them. The Enlightenment was based on premises opposite to those of postmodernism, but while the Enlightenment was able to create a magnificent world on the basis of those premises, it articulated and defended them only incompletely. That weakness is the sole source of postmodernism's power against it. Completing the articulation and defense of those premises is therefore essential to maintaining the forward progress of the Enlightenment vision and shielding it against postmodern strategies.

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Tracing postmodernism from its roots in Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant to their development in thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty, philosopher Stephen Hicks provides a provocative account of why postmodernism has been the most vigorous intellectual movement of the late 20th century.

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*Explaining Postmodernism* is extremely valuable for understanding postmodernism from a standpoint outside of and critical of it. Perhaps the most important value of the work is Professor Hicks's analytical skill in isolating the essential theses of postmodern writers, in summarizing the historical background, and in tracing the lines of development that led to postmodernism. In addition to clear expositions of Hegel, Heidegger, and other thinkers, the book has what I think is a brilliant analysis of the pathways by which skeptical questions that Enlightenment thinkers asked led to the nihilism of Derrida and Foucault.

—David Kelley, *Executive Director, The Objectivist Center*



Stephen Hicks is Professor of Philosophy at Rockford College, Illinois. A native of Toronto, Canada, he received his Ph.D. from Indiana University. He is co-editor of *Readings for Logical Analysis* (W.W. Norton & Co.) and has published widely in academic journals and other publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Baltimore Sun*.

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