

A YOUNG PERSON'S GUIDE TO POSMODERNISM

four essays

by

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1. Consistency as a capitalist trick: Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment**

The authors of this book begin immediately by assuming an air of intellectual and moral superiority. They seem to know in the introduction what a “truly human condition” is and therefore complain that instead of entering into such a condition, mankind is sinking into a new kind of barbarism. The problem to them would seem to be that “the great discoveries of applied science are paid for with a diminution of theoretical awareness” i.e. not enough people are majoring in philosophy. They proclaim that bourgeois civilization has collapsed and that thought has “unavoidably” (they also know the causes of things) become a commodity. For the purpose of analyzing this sorry state of affairs they claim they have to “deny any allegiance to current linguistic and conceptual conventions,” i.e. don't have to submit to any rules of logic or consistency, because these are, after all, part of the problem (5-6).

In spite, or perhaps because, of their declaration of independence from any criteria of truth, they do assert, that they are going to investigate the “self destruction of the Enlightenment” (7). They believe that the Enlightenment, in its search for social freedom, contains the seed of its own destruction. It's just too practical, too utilitarian, not sufficiently metaphysical, and, in the process, the Enlightenment turns practicality into a metaphysical absolute. The authors of this book take it upon themselves to show us the way out of this dilemma.

They expand on their idea in the first chapter, where Francis Bacon emerges as one of the principal villains. He it was who started this mania for facts, for technology, for the abandonment of metaphysics, in short, for the Enlightenment, and now “the latest logic denounces the spoken words of language, holding them to be false coins better replaced by neutral counters” (15). The authors are referring here to their philosophical enemies, the logical positivists, to whom they return repeatedly and specifically as the work proceeds. To the authors, “the Enlightenment is totalitarian” (16). Why? Because it banishes myths, it alienates men from nature and replaces it with an abstraction that it calls nature. It would seem, therefore, at this point, as if the authors are condemning a movement which began in the seventeenth century and which they claim has continued to the present day. But as we read on, we discover that they are not merely talking about a recent historical period to which they assign that name, because they seem to identify the term Enlightenment with any sort of abstraction. “Language,” they say, “expresses the contradiction that something is itself and at one and the same time something other than itself.” This development was “already far advanced in the Homeric epic and extends into positive science” (26-27). In other words, the authors are trying to save us from everything that men did ever since the anthropoid in *2001: A Space Odyssey* clobbered his enemy with a bone.

In their diatribe against this broadly conceived Enlightenment, the authors rail incessantly and interminably against what they perceive as the social injustice that proceeds from its worship of brute facts. In other words, they castigate the tendency of some societies to rationalize social injustices by principles of practical necessity. This, they feel, dehumanizes men and turns them into objects. That is, of course, pure Marxist analysis of the bourgeois ideology.

* Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung, Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam, 1947): All citations and translations are from this edition.

But the authors of this book go way beyond Marx. It is not simply the ideological propaganda of a society that they denounce as reflections of a class structure. It is elementary logic itself, as we see when they revolt against “the principle that of two contradictory propositions only one can be true and the other false,” (44) which confirms their claim that they don’t have to submit to any rules of logical consistency.

Writing this book as they did in Santa Monica, California in 1944, the authors did not have the Stanley Kubrick *Space Odyssey* to cite as an example, so they found themselves obliged to go back to the original Homeric epic for their first digression and to the Marquis de Sade for their second. They need not have done so. The points they make in these two digressions are repetitive and trite. Odysseus is the “prototype of the first bourgeois individual,” (58) and, at the other end of time, the Marquis de Sade systematized sex.

It is, of course, impossible to argue against individuals who will not submit themselves to any rule of consistency, and this work quite rightly inaugurates the postmodern movement, with all of its elitism, anti-intellectualism, and vicarious radicalism. Here are people who feel they can say or write anything, because anyone who accuses them of contradiction or factual error is just part of the oppressive self-deluded power structure of the Enlightenment and capitalism. Here are people who decry the logical positivists for trying to clean up language, themselves condemn language because it expresses the contradiction that something can be itself and something other than itself, and then have the gall to proclaim that Odysseus is not only Odysseus but also the prototype of the first bourgeois individual! When such people, or their disciples, manage to gain control of academic departments and presses, as they have done all over the world in recent years, they can pretty much banish all efforts at thinking from the university environment. They simply contribute to a double standard, by which one group of people use their intelligence to develop the technology while another sits in their ivory towers decrying it, until such time as they wake up to find their department replaced by a CD Rom.

It is also extremely obvious that if one were to subject Horkheimer and Adorno to the most elementary principles of common logic all their diatribes boil down to a tantrum.

To begin with, if indeed, mankind went off on the wrong tangent from the moment that the first primitive man began employing technology, what is it that Horkheimer and Adorno suggest? That we go back to hunting and food gathering with our hands? How can we possibly manage to undo a million years of human development?

Secondly, it is not at all clear if, even before the first primitive man discovered technology, he was any more in touch with his humanity than any modern man is today. The myth that the primitive is closer to nature than the civilized man began with Rousseau, and it is curious that Horkheimer and Adorno give him no credit for it---although Deririda later does---but, in any event, there is no proof for it, and even Lévi-Strauss later admits that primitive men have the same thinking capacities as modern ones. The notion of the primitive man constantly conscious of his relationship to the natural world is as much of an absurdity as the modern man constantly thinking about the Hegelian dialectic. It is the figment of a philosophy professor’s imagination and a confirmation of the old maxim that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Oh to be living in the Neanderthal instead of Silicon Valley! But it is no less

possible, I would suggest, to have a mystical moment on a New York subway as on a tropical island.

Thirdly there is this question: if just using language constitutes a false step which brought mankind to its present corruption, if the myths of Homeric Greeks were already the prototypes of bourgeois propaganda, what could be more artificial than the abstraction by Horkheimer and Adorno of the term “Enlightenment”? The “Enlightenment” is not a thing. It is not a metaphysical unit with a dialectic attached. It is not some magical force of nature which requires a shaman to exorcise it (although this book is in many respects an attempt to exorcise the Enlightenment by heaping insults upon it). Of course, Horkheimer and Adorno would cry out, “How dare you ask us for consistency? When you use abstractions you use them in the service of bourgeois Enlightenment values, when we use abstractions we use them in the service of saving humanity!” Who can answer that?

If we want to find a dialectic of the Enlightenment, we would be much better served to look for it in Carl Becker’s wonderful book, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, first published in 1932. Basing his study on *specific* individuals rather than on a wholesale condemnation of the Enlightenment, Becker showed how the *philosophes* were perfectly conscious of the *limitations* of their rationalism, how frustrated they were by the problem of evil, and how, in the face of these dilemmas, they sought to find further assurances by appealing to history, to sentiment, and to posterity. Becker has since been battered around by Peter Gay and a whole school of Neo-Whiggish historians who do not seem to be able to reconcile profundity with wit, but he is still the place to go for a dialectic of the Enlightenment.

Not to be unkind, but Horkheimer and Adorno betray all the symptoms of the expatriate syndrome. They began as enthusiastic supporters of a movement (Marxism) whose abstract dialectic simply did not pan out. On the contrary, it brought to life its worst nightmare, National Socialism. Horrified, Horkheimer and Adorno end up in Santa Monica, a haven of tranquillity (even in wartime), prosperity, and innocence, where the inhabitants stroll up and down the pier in infuriating oblivion to German idealistic philosophy. So what is wrong with the world? It doesn’t seem to work according to any of the paradigms envisaged by Horkheimer and Adorno. Who is to blame? Is it possible that Horkheimer and Adorno are a couple of over-ambitious philosophers who have, unlike the logical positivists, tried to go way beyond the capacities of the human mind and paid the price of their presumption? That can’t be. So they take out their frustration against the Enlightenment .

2. Writing as Masturbation: Derrida's *Of Grammatology* *

Derrida introduces his book with three quotes, which he claims prove that all writing is *ethnocentric* and immediately proceeds to the additional claim that, for reasons which are at the same time “enigmatic” and “essential” (2), this ethnocentrism is the most powerful thing on the planet. He further specifies that this is a *historical* phenomenon---part of a *historical-metaphysical epoch*---and provides the “structural possibility” for philosophy and science (12-14). Derrida's first proposition is questionable, because his three quotes in no way prove that their authors were ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism is the belief that a certain people are at the center of the universe. None of these quotes express such a belief, and even if they did, this still cannot make the case for all writing. But if Derrida's first proposition is questionable, his second proposition, to the effect that what he identifies with ethnocentrism is necessarily the most powerful thing on the planet, is preposterous. Gravity may be the most powerful thing on the planet, natural selection may be the most powerful thing on the planet, nuclear power may be the most powerful thing on the planet, but writing? On the basis of these assertions, the author then presents himself as the discoverer of a new science called “grammatology” which is going to liberate us from this power, BUT, he refuses to define this science, or to describe its method...he merely warns us that he is going to be outrageous.

Derrida is conscious of one problem, however, namely that people *speak* before they *write*. Thus he devotes his first chapter (Pt. I, Ch. I) to trying to bridge this gap. He does this by trying to bludgeon the reader into accepting the notion that in the course of the last historical-metaphysical epoch---some twenty centuries---- language has been necessarily overcome by writing.. In the process, he agrees with Aristotle that words are signs and with Saussure (1857-1913) that signs contain both .a *signifiant* “signifier”. i.e. a sound, and a *signifié* “signified”, i.e. an idea; so that writing constitutes one more step in the direction of abstraction, being the “signified of the signified” . But Derrida supplements these propositions with his own thesis that there is more to writing than signs, signifiers, signified, and signified of the signified. Writing, to Derrida takes on a life of its own. It is a “game”, (16) and Derrida promises that he is going to expose the “structure” (18) and “implicit metaphysics” (20) behind it. The goal of grammatology, therefore, is the “deconstruction” of all significations, (21) ,

But if Derrida has promised the deconstruction of all significations, one might inquire of him how he deconstruct the signs “necessity”, “structure” or “implicit metaphysics”? It is at this juncture and perhaps for this purpose that he begins to intone the name of Heidegger, a German existentialist philosopher and onetime Nazi sympathizer. Building upon foundations laid by Nietzsche, who proclaimed the death of God (and of all metaphysical or natural universal standards) in favor of the individual creative will, Heidegger, by a neat little trick of semantics, attributed to the *will* the creation of all metaphysical standards. The will creates its own metaphysics. All the Germans need to do is to proclaim themselves to be the master race, and if they succeed in exterminating all others, this establishes the *essence* of a master race.. Derrida applies this fanatical principle to writing. Writing creates its own “necessity,” “structure” and “implicit metaphysics”. He then hits us with five more terms: “presence” (23), which seems to be when you simply pound your chest, “exteriority” (24), which is what you contact the moment you start speaking, “referent”, which is the “thing” to which you are referring,

* Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967). All citations and translations are from this edition.

“difference” (26) which is that all powerful extra added *je ne sais quoi* between signifier and signified, and “text”, which is a “tissue of signs”. If one keeps these terms and their definitions in mind, one can begin to build up one’s own basic Derridaian dictionary.

In his next chapter (Pt. I, Ch. II) Derrida is still embarrassed by the same problem, namely how to displace the “science” of linguistics, which is something of a competitor of his grammatology. Thus he continues his verbal barrage. Writing is the “original sin” (53), which has taken over language by a process of “violence” and “usurpation”. He keeps calling upon the name of Saussure so much that he is obliged to point out that Saussure has not seen the full implications of his own “discourse” (64). For example, Saussure did not fully realize that the signifiers i.e. the sounds of the words, also get lost in the shuffle. Thus: “The signified face does not need the signifier to be what it is.” (107). The implications of this statement are staggering. For if the sounds of words get lost in the shuffle, what happens to the person who is making the sounds or to the object that the sounds represent? With this statement, Derrida eliminates all intent and verification from the study of history, including even the possibility of a consensus over his beloved “difference”! The reader of any text is completely free to interpret it in any way he wishes. We might call this “Derrida’s revenge!” “Write if you want,” he taunts, “but you’ll be wasting your time!”

In the next chapter (Pt. I, Ch. III) Derrida shows his awareness of still another problem. If writing is a historical phenomenon as is our whole idea of science, how can we have a science of grammatology without it, too, being relative to our time and metaphysics? Derrida tries to solve this problem in two ways. He describes the efforts of Descartes and Leibniz to invent a science of writing, and then claims that in the nineteenth century these efforts went off on the wrong tangent, but he feels that grammatology, is getting us back on track. As an example he cites the work of A. Leroy-Gourhan on the linearity of writing; which is the fact that we put words into lines. This habit is supposed to have an immense psychological effect upon the reader, to the exclusion, one need hardly add, of what the writer may be trying to say.

From the very beginning, however, Derrida engages in a corrosive practice which militates against the entire thesis of his book. For if, indeed all writing creates an all powerful and unwholesome “difference”, how is it that Derrida, by means of their writings, can manage to come into such direct and wholesome contact with his intellectual forbears, Saussure, Heidegger, Descartes, Leibniz, and Leroy-Gourhan? Indeed, this corrosive element takes over the entire Pt. II of the book, where Derrida concentrates on the life and times of Rousseau. He admits to a bit of embarrassment at having to “privilege” Rousseau as marking the beginning of the grammatological movement, but Derrida does not stop to explain how it is that, in a world of differentiating texts, Rousseau’s manages to come through unscathed. Why does Derrida go out on such a limb for Rousseau? In the answer to this question, I think, we have the key to Derrida’s character and ideas. Derrida admires Rousseau because he was the first defender of natural man against civilization, the first to argue that natural man is direct, noble, simple, and that civilization corrupts him, by, among other things, subverting his feelings through artificiality of writing. Derrida also finds in Rousseau a kindred spirit. He too reveled in contradiction. He too enjoyed being outrageous. . He too laid out impossible missions for humanity. Derrida also admires Lévi-Strauss, because he, in pursuit of the natural man, went off to Brazil and concluded that the much maligned Nambikwara were far from devoid of human feelings. But

before he elaborates on these themes, Derrida adds to our growing lexicon of his terminology by defining for us the term “discourse”, which he defines as “the present living and conscious representation of a text in the experience of those who write it or read it”.(149) .

By this point in the book, Derrida has become so captivated with the flow of his own rhetoric that he loses all consciousness of any contradictions in his thesis, for in the course of his most explicit denunciation of language, writing, and society---the whole kit and caboodle---as “violence”, he come out with an astonishing admission that that “language is writing”. (156). He seems to be blithely unaware that in coming out with this admission, he is making a complete mockery out of himself and his book. For, if indeed, “language is writing,” what is one to make of the *historical-metaphysical epoch* in which writing ostensibly takes over language? Shades of Horkheimer and Adorno! Or, for that matter, if “language is writing,” what was the purpose of his entire debate with Saussure over the distinction between the two? It makes no sense.

Derrida is similarly carried away by Rousseau’s description, in his *Confessions*, of how he learned to masturbate. Rousseau refers to masturbation as “a dangerous supplement which fools nature”, and in this statement Derrida discovers the original thesis of his *Grammatology* expressed in a nutshell. Writing is a form of intellectual masturbation. In this statement, moreover, we can identify Derrida as one more example of a recurring phenomenon in history, namely the individualist living in the midst of a civilization who achieves renown by hurling abuse upon it. Diogenes and Nietzsche, along with Rousseau, immediately to mind. But this kind of formulation also betrays the glaring difference between Derrida and his homologues. They expressed themselves with infinitely more panache.

Without batting an eyelash , Derrida then launches (Pt. II, Ch. III) into the analysis of one of Rousseau’s works, the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* , not as a “text”, not in terms of its “discourse” , but in the venerable manner of a nineteenth -century Sorbonne professor, complete with intention, meaning, and style, He even resorts to the counter-revolutionary device of trying to determine the date when Rousseau wrote it. . All texts, therefore, may be equal, but some, apparently, are more equal than others, and, as I have suggested, Rousseau’s is the most equal of all. Of course, Derrida finds it necessary here and there to add his own glosses, and , on this occasion , he finally gives us his definition of the term “structure”. “Structure” he defines as “the irreducible complexity at the interior of which one can only bend or displace the game of presence or absence (238).”

In other words, after promising us a science of grammatology which cannot exist because all science is part of a violent system of signs relative to a historical-metaphysical epoch, Derrida ends up by defending his ideas with an appeal to Rousseau. Derrida has certainly not proved that writing is violence, but, with his authoritarian, obscure, and inconclusive diatribes, he has certainly proved that his writing is about as artificial as one can get. He has certainly not proved that writing is masturbation, but he has certainly demonstrated that his writing is a form of sadism inflicted upon those who are masochistic enough to enjoy it. If he has proved that words are not the same thing as the thing they signify, he has only proved something that is obvious to any five year-old. What is not obvious and totally implausible is that the “difference” between the thought and the word is some sort of “original sin” which we all bear when we speak or write, and that this sin lies in some sort of metaphysical never-never land which he cannot define or identify in any comprehensible manner. There is no doubt that words

carry implications, but as his own analysis of his intellectual precursors itself demonstrates, these implications may well produce a meeting of the minds between the writer and the reader. Some words may threaten violence, some words may imply a lot of nasty things, but to introduce, as Derrida does, this mysterious canard of “difference” and claim that it is taking over the world is, in my opinion, a complete surrender of any credibility. It may or may not be desirable for mankind to go back to living like the Nambikwara, but it hardly strikes me as feasible. Rousseau’s and Derrida’s solution is to preach, like Calvinist ministers, against sins which people cannot help committing, with the exception that the Calvinist ministers preached in the name of a God who had issued some verbal commandments, whereas Derrida preaches in the name of the unfathomable God of discourse. Derrida concludes his book by admitting that he may be crazy, but takes comfort in the fact he knows he is crazy, whereas the rest of the world is just as crazy but believes it is sane. He is wrong in one respect. The rest of the world does not throw its babies out with the bath water.

3. Have Body, will Discourse: Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* *

When I was a young man at UCLA, I learned a number of things about the history of crime and punishment. I learned about the *lex talionis* of Hammurabi's code. I learned about the Wehrgeld, compurgation, and trial by ordeal. As my education went forward, I learned about how written procedures and torture marched hand in hand during the "Renaissance" in an effort to get the criminal to admit his crime. I became aware that the Old Regimes did not go in for long term imprisonment, although, when it was convenient, they turned their warships into prisons. I found occasion to read Beccaria's *Treatise on Crimes and Punishments*, that scathing humanitarian-utilitarian denunciation of all previous criminal jurisprudence. I even knew that the guillotine was introduced as a more "humane" form of execution. But, in point of fact, I did not need the beneficence of the State of California nor the munificence of the G.I. Bill to learn that, in Western Civilization, the intention in criminal jurisprudence had gradually shifted from the idea from the idea of punishment and vengeance to the idea of deterrent and rehabilitation. Any C. B. de Mille epic, every remake of *Les Misérables* compared to any progressive politician running for office or to any prison spokesman putting his best foot forward, abundantly proclaim this same point to the public at large.

Now comes Mr. Foucault to tell us, that when they poured molten lead into the open wounds of the criminal in front of a frenzied crowd, they were doing it to his *body*, with the intention of impressing the immensity of his crime upon the spectators. The novelty appears to be in his introduction of the term *body*, but what exactly the introduction of this term contributes to our understanding is a complete mystery to me, except that Foucault proceeds to use it in order to build up a number of distinctions which he cannot sustain. For example, he tells us that penal severity (in democratic countries, he should have added) had decreased over the last 200 years, and that this has been accompanied "by a displacement in the very object of the punitive operation". It is not at all clear whether he is asserting that we put *less emphasis* on punishing the *body* or that we *no longer* punish the *body*. He seems to be saying both, but he goes on immediately to claim that we are currently putting all our emphasis on punishing the *soul*. Later it turns out that it is not the *soul* but the *mind* but still later, it turns out that we are still punishing the *body*. In the process of this meandering, moreover, Foucault not too subtly shifts the subject from *what* we are punishing (is it the *body* or the *soul-mind*?) to *for what purpose we are punishing*, namely that modern punishment rejects the notion of vengeance in favor of the notion of deterrent. This well-known historical development becomes, in Foucault's hands "the metamorphosis of punitive methods starting with a political technology of the body (28)".

Foucault is also a great legislator, telling us what it is *legitimate* and *illegitimate* for us to do. "It is legitimate," he allows "to write a history of punishment on the basis of moral ideas or legal structures (30)." But he insists on doing it against the background of the history of his beloved *body*. "Of course," he grants "this technology is diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic *discourses* (31)." It has to be diffuse, because Foucault, like Horkheimer and Adorno, rejects all notions of disinterested, independent knowledge "Power and knowledge directly imply one another," writes Foucault, adding "there is no power relation without the corresponding constitution of a field of knowledge, nor of knowledge that does not suppose and constitute power relations at the same time (32)."

* Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1975) All citations and translations are to this edition.

Since Foucault, as in his earlier *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *Birth of the Clinic* (1963) begins with a whole set of assumptions, it is hardly surprising that he does not put a great deal of emphasis on original research. If we examine his citations on matters relating to legal history, we find that he does not go far beyond the show trials and the standard legal commentators. Most of his examples are from the later eighteenth century. Digging deeply into the rich judicial archives of the French monarchy, studying any single case in depth for the full circumstances of its resolution, all these things take a back seat to a constant reiteration of the theme of power. In the place of research we have an escape into ever more precious symbolism. “The execution anticipates the punishment of the after-life (49).” “The atrocity of the expiation organized the ritual reduction of infamy by omnipotence (60)” If you can just figure out how to describe one phenomenon by its hyperbolic similarity with another you are writing history Foucaultian style, and, needless to say, this easy method has found no shortage of imitators.. Likewise, its facile theories of causation. Somehow or other, by the end of the eighteenth century, “it was clearly seen that the great spectacle of punishment ran the risk of being rejected by the very people to whom it was addressed (66).” Thus, “in the wake of a ceremony that inadequately channeled the power relations that it sought to ritualize, a whole mass of *discourses* burst forth, pursuing the same confrontation (71).” We have here the three principal components of Foucaultian historical method: symbolic comparisons, sudden changes in perception by unspecified individuals, and last but not least, a shift in *discourses*, all based on a superficial sampling of the secondary literature.

There is a lot of anger in all this, a lot of discounting of good intentions. “It was not the more enlightened members of the public, nor the philosophers who instigated the reform, it was prepared for the most part from within, by a large number of magistrates on the basis of shared objectives and the power conflicts that divided them (83)”. Unlike the Marxist ruling classes, who confuse their class interests with the general welfare, the Foucaultian establishment is consciously, albeit anonymously, villainous: “Their desire was not to punish less, but to punish better (84)”. Still he names no names, and it soon becomes evident why. Lurking behind the all the symbolism, the shifts, and the discourses, the culprit is still capitalism, all the more vicious because it refuses to go away. Foucault even works up a little nostalgia for the thumbscrew as the rigidly disciplined prisons of the nineteenth century apply themselves to the art of rendering the body docile.

When we finally get a culprit it is Jeremy Bentham. His Panopticon exemplifies not merely the new nineteenth century effort to exert power over the *bodies* of criminals by constant, efficient, and moderate pressure, but also the new nineteenth century effort to overturn the social contract and exert power over the working classes in the same manner. Once again, Foucault finds himself obliged to inform us, as if we had been under the impression that the *bodies* he is describing existed in a vacuum, that the power wielders of the nineteenth century invented a new way to use *space*. But poor Jeremy Bentham, too, turns out to be a symbol. Power, says Foucault, “has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, of surfaces, of lights, of looks, in an apparatus whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are trapped (203).” Foucault concedes, “every system of power is faced with the same problem (219)”, BUT he goes back to his original causative scheme to the effect that “the growth of the apparatus of production” *necessitated* the “development of the

disciplinary methods”. It is no surprise that we have a citation to Marx’ *Das Kapital*, vol. I, ch. XIII (222) AND an unacknowledged debt to Horkheimer and Adorno: ‘The ‘Enlightenment’, which has discovered liberties, also invented disciplines (224)’.

What is amazing is that after having drawn such a bleak picture of the diabolical power of modern disciplinary methods, Foucault proceeds in the last part of his book to inform us that all these methods do not work, that they do not straighten out criminals, and that by inference, they do not work on the rest of society either. So Foucault raises the question, ‘If they do not work, why does society continue to employ them? There is of course, the obvious answer that might occur to anyone. “What alternative does it have? The people of California spend millions of dollars every year on social programs in an effort to *avoid* putting their fellow citizens into jails. But that is not Foucault’s explanation. To him, the wielders of power need to maintain the disciplinary machinery, as badly functioning as it is, simply in order to isolate the criminal, to marginalize him, to prevent him, in other words, from going out to the barricades with his fellow proletarians and overthrowing the whole rotten system. Once more the whole Marxist substructure of Foucault’s conceptualization emerges to the surface. And it is fine, if it will produce, as Marx predicted, the overthrow of capitalist society and inaugurate the worker’s paradise. But without that promise, what is left of Foucault’s conceptualization?

For it *is* indeed a question of signs, of semiotics. When we use numbers and words as a sign for things, most of us, with the exception of the postmodernists, do not make a production of the fact that the numbers and words are not the thing, and that this simply a price we pay for the utility and flexibility of the symbols. The use of differential equations in calculus or the concept of gravity is certainly not the same thing as the physical universe, but we get a tremendous advantage from these abstractions. We could just as well imagine the universe as a gigantic turtle, and this might gratify our aesthetic sense, but it would not be able to predict for us at what altitude an object of any given weight and velocity could sustain an orbit around the earth. The same is true of Marx’s theory of class struggle. His concept of class, class struggle, ideology, etc. is certainly not the same thing as social reality, but we *would* get a tremendous advantage from it *if* it were able to predict at what point the contradictions of capitalism would result in a successful and permanent proletarian revolution. If, on the other hand, the Marxist system can not come through with its predictions, then its concepts of class, class struggle, ideology, etc. merely go back to being combinations of signs and evidence, without any predictive value. They may be more or less symbolically striking, they may have more or less empirical evidence to support them, but they cannot exclude other generalizations which may be supported by contrary evidence. History, especially since the demise of Marxism, is reduced to combining signs and evidence in the best way it can. To write history as a history of class struggle certainly does have some evidence to support it. But it is also possible to write it as a history of class collaboration or, for that matter, history in which class is irrelevant. To write history as a history of gender victimization has some evidence to support it, but it is also possible to write history as a history of mutual sexual gratification., or in which gender has nothing to do with the question. People of one race have committed unspeakable atrocities against people of another , and people of one race have adopted children of another. Foucault’s concession that other approaches may be *legitimate* is belied by this *universalizing* of the power-knowledge principle, which would only be *legitimate*, to my way of thinking, if he employed it for purposes of prediction. Reduced to signs and evidence, therefore, his history is

deficient on two grounds: first, because the constant repetition of the power-knowledge principle through ever more predictable symbolism becomes excruciatingly tiresome; second, because his capricious standards of evidence exclude both intention and outcome. All that remains is *his* subjective interpretation of such things as the “concerted distribution of bodies.” It’s hard to imagine a more narcissistic application of historical method, and one that is more insulting to the reader’s common sense. Of course, people use knowledge to exert power, and when they do, it is the duty of the historian to document it, but they also use knowledge for a thousand other purposes, and, in any event, more often as not they use ignorance rather than knowledge. The net result of Foucault’s historical method is to produce angry, indolent know-it-alls who don’t want to be confused with facts and who blame all of their discontents and those of society on an anonymous and malevolent power elite. All this, of course, is heresy to the collectivist postmodern mentality, which requires belief in the power-knowledge Deity under threat of excommunication from the academic-literary community.

4. Why make it simple when you can make it complicated? Habermas' *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*^{*}

In his first lecture, Habermas provides us with two definitions of *die Moderne*

1. Max Weber's (1874-1920) definition of modernity as the introduction in early modern Europe of "purposeful - rational dealing with economics and administration" (9)
2. Hegel (1770-1831) "the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity" (13), who sees *die neue Zeit* as "marked generally by a structure of self-relation that he calls subjectivity" in which "freedom is recognized" (27).

In the process, Habermas also provides us with a definition of "postmodern":

1. The definition developed in the 1950's which "dissociates 'modernity' from its modern European origins and stylizes it into a spatio-temporally neutral model for processes of social development in general." (10).

One might expect that any author with some consideration for his readers might then proceed to elaborate, one after the other, on the three definitions which he has set up, but this is not the case with Habermas. He elaborates on only one, and this only for the purpose of complicating it. For he complains that after a short dalliance with the implications of subjectivity, Hegel rushed right back into the arms of the absolute, *i.e.* an absolute standard of truth which somehow guides and transcends self-knowledge.

Since Hegel could not tear himself away from the illusion of absolute truth, he and his disciples run, in Habermas' third lecture, right smack into Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche, according to Habermas, observed that for all their claims to subjectivity, Hegel and his disciples were still functioning within the framework of "Occidental rationalism" (93). That is the subject of the fourth lecture, Nietzsche's scathing critique of "subject centered reason," Nietzsche's "exploding modernity's husk of reason." (106-7). To Nietzsche, according to Habermas, Hegel's modernity was simply "the last epoch in the far reaching history of a rationalization initiated by the dissolution of archaic life and the collapse of myth" (108). What humanity needed was to break through the bonds of reason, to return to its Dionysian instincts: "intoxication, madness, and incessant transformations" (113). There was no such thing as reason, there was only will to power, will to illusion,. This puts a great premium on art, and makes Nietzsche, with his "unmasking critique of reason that places itself outside the horizon of reason" (119) the founder of postmodernism.

^{*} Jürgen Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1985). All citations and translations are from this edition

If, however Hegel and Nietzsche had both developed clear concepts of modernity and postmodernism based on subjectivity, the attentive reader might well wonder at this point what is the difference between the two, not to speak of whatever happened to the Weberian and neo-Weberian definitions that Habermas gave us in his first lecture, but he would appear to have forgotten all about them, for he proceeds to set up an entirely new classification according to which Nietzsche's critique of modernity has been continued along two paths: 1) by Bataille, Lacan, and Foucault, who wish to unveil the "perversion of the will to power" by using "anthropological, psychological, and historical methods" 2) by Heidegger and Derrida who act as "experienced critics of metaphysics with claims to special knowledge" (120).

One has to be patient, because Habermas interrupts this classification as well with a lecture on Horkheimer and Adorno, of whom he clearly disapproves. They made "an ambiguous try to give satisfaction to Nietzsche's radical critique of reason" (129), and they did not succeed. Their attack upon the Enlightenment was unqualified, and he feels called upon to "prevent this confusion"(130). He also finds they have oversimplified their image of modernity. They do not "do justice to the rational (read *good!*) content of cultural modernity that was captured in bourgeois ideals" (137). They do not hold out any prospect of an "escape from the myth of purposive rationality that has turned into objective power" (138). Habermas quite correctly presents Horkheimer and Adorno as disillusioned Marxists who, after experiencing National Socialism, Stalinism, and Social Democratic capitalism, saw absolutely no hope at all for the Enlightenment idea of reason to work itself into anything better.

Habermas then jumps forward in his classification with a lecture on Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), of whom Habermas clearly approves. It was Heidegger who, according to Habermas, breathed new life into the Nietzschean tradition, by reintroducing metaphysics and making it meaningful again. Metaphysics permits "a collectively binding preunderstanding of everything that can occur in the world" (158). It does not matter that Heidegger saw this "collectively binding preunderstanding" as being embodied by National Socialism. Heidegger's great insight was that Nietzsche's "will to power", by a process of collectivization, produces *being*. Men acting in unison create their own metaphysical universe. Habermas has most certainly understood Heidegger's argument to the effect that what traditional metaphysics considered as immanent within things was actually immanent within collective wills., and Habermas, like Derrida, thrives on it. "Heidegger's originality," exults Habermas, "consists in metaphysico-historical organization of the modern dominance of the subject: truth is transformed into subjective certitude"(160). "The modern understanding of being refracts *all* normative orientations into the power claims of a subjectivity possessed with self-aggrandizement" (161). And Heidegger has a view of modernity in keeping with Habermas'. "For him the beginning of modernity is marked by the epochal incision of the philosophy of consciousness started with Descartes; and Nietzsche's radicalizing of this understanding of being marks the *most recent time*...The necessity of another beginning draws our sight into the grasp of the future" (*ibid.*). A comforting thought with which to stroll into the gas chamber! A further implication of this theory, according to the ecstatic Habermas, is that the "critique of modernity is made independent of scientific analysis" (167). In other words, the "collectively binding preunderstanding" does not have to bother itself with facts!

Derrida, to Habermas, is merely a wayward disciple of Heidegger. What Heidegger does for being, Habermas quite acutely points out, Derrida tries to transfer on to language, and even more than language, to writing. Habermas does not consider this as much of a contribution. “This idea is simply a variation on the motif of the dependency of living discourse upon the self-sufficient structures of language”(196). So Habermas’ lecture on Derrida is more like an excuse for a lecture on Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), with whom Derrida disagreed. Husserl, (1859-1938) was a Judaeo-Christian, Austro-German philosopher who tried to cope with the demise of metaphysics by getting around Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*. Husserl tried to make it superfluous by claiming that just by being conscious, we are already in contact with some kind of metaphysical reality. This is *phenomenology*. He has, as Habermas puts it, “recourse to an outlook in which these essences show themselves ‘by themselves’ and reach givenness as pure phenomena “ (203-4). If we are directly in contact with phenomena, what is all this fuss about writing? Husserl may not be up to the metaphysical National Socialism of Heidegger, but he is still a useful instrument with which to bash Derrida.

Habermas devotes one supremely incomprehensible lecture to Bataille, and two fairly lucid ones to Foucault. Habermas quite accurately describes Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, with its attempted analysis of how modern society has tried to isolate madness as a means of enforcing conformity. Habermas also quite faithfully identifies Foucault’s approach to history as a study of discourses, all of which are merely devices by which societies exert power. But Habermas is not entirely happy with Foucault either. In criticizing *Discipline and Punish*, Habermas makes the point that Foucault criticism “is based more on the postmodern rhetoric than on postmodern assumptions”(331), and that his presentation, which “lets out the threads of the juridical organization of the exercise of dominance” is “entirely distorted”(340). Clearly, Habermas is about to set us straight.

He does so in lecture eleven, where he reminds us that he had “marked the places where the young Hegel, the young Marx, and even the Heidegger of *Being and Time* and Derrida in his discussion with Husserl stood before alternative paths which they did *not* choose” (345). We moderns are faced, admits, Habermas, with the “self-reference of the knowing and dealing subject.” But we can direct this self-reference to “communicatively structured lifeworlds that reproduce themselves via the palpable medium of dealing oriented to mutual agreement” (*ibid.*). The problem with his postmodern predecessors is that they had gotten themselves into the predicament of “doubling”, of having to keep reinventing themselves in such a way as to abandon both consistency and contradiction, which is inane. “This alternative no longer applies, as soon as linguistically generated intersubjectivity gains primacy. The ego then stands within an interpersonal relationship that allows it from the perspective of the other, to relate to itself as a participant in an interaction (347). Or, as Lyndon Johnson used to put it, “Come, let us reason together!”

There are a number of serious problems with Habermas’ conceptualization, beginning with his very first appeals to Weber and Hegel.

As to Weber, his entire definition of “rational” as “the European economic system”, which Habermas approves, is so ethnocentric as to be laughable, and the attempt by postmodernists to clean up the definition by internationalizing it, which Habermas also

approves, simply makes it more ridiculous. Weber is presumptuous enough to believe that late nineteenth century Europeans have figured out how to be rational. His successors are presumptuous enough to believe that twentieth century men in general have universalized rationality, whether for good or evil. Both seem to assume that history has come to fullness in the specious present of their own modernity, as if new ideas of what is “rational” organization of human activity were not emerging with each passing day.

As to Hegel, his conception of the development of consciousness through time is completely perverted by Habermas for the purpose of turning Hegel into the prophet of modernity. It is true that Hegel expounded an idealistic philosophy which maintained that man’s consciousness developed through time by means of a dialectic of opposite ideas and was constantly progressing to new and better ones. It is true that Hegel believed that men did this subjectively. It is true that Hegel believed that his philosophy had made men conscious of this and that this consciousness characterized his own time. But Hegel did not preclude further spiritual progress. Whether or not the early Hegel is more subjective than the later Hegel is besides the point, because I would suggest that the term “subjectivity” to him never meant that we all think as we please.. There was always some sort of Divine guidance lurking back there somewhere. Moreover, he himself did not use the term “*die Moderne*”. As we have seen above, he referred to his own time as “*die neue Zeit*”. Finally, whatever his ideas may have been, it does not necessarily follow that they were adopted by the bulk of European society. Indeed, their abstruseness would suggest the exact contrary.

Habermas, it is true, falls back upon such precedents as the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, the idea of progress, and the popularity of the term “modern”, but these precedents only serve to weaken his argument., for they do not require Hegel’s abstruse philosophy for their dissemination. The quarrel of the ancients and the moderns began with an assertion by Charles Perrault in 1687 that modern artists had surpassed ancient ones. You did not need a professorship to understand that. The idea of progress was simply the assertion by the likes of Locke and Fontenelle that modern scientists and philosophers had discovered a key to improving the lot of mankind. The term “modern”, which even in 1687 did not necessarily mean “better” only gradually assumed its positive connotation of representing an improvement. *Philosophes* like Voltaire, who were much more digestible than Hegel, managed to make the idea of progress very attractive in the course of the eighteenth century, and it is the growing power of this idea in the modern ideology NOT the cerebral speculations of Hegel, that make modern men believe that they are smarter than their predecessors and the future men will be smarter still.

What Habermas is doing, therefore, is exemplifying the old pedantic dictum of “Why make it simple when you can make it complicated?” He takes the very simple historical phenomenon, the idea of progress, whose manifestations are evident in a thousand ways from 1687 to the present day, complicates it by renaming it *die Moderne*, and sees it only through the minds of a small number of philosophers.. The result is pure *Geistesgeschichte*, the kind of history perfected by Friedrich Meinecke, the study of disemboweled ideas flowing from the thoughts of one thinker to another, which, moreover, gives the impression that as these philosophers think, so also does mankind. The result, too, is that in the title of this book, the term “discourse” has absolutely nothing to do with the “discourse” of the deconstructionists. It is discourse in the sense of conscious debate between intellectuals. Compared to Meinecke’s,

however, it is very poor *Geistesgeschichte*, making up in self absorption , tendentious interpretation, and tortuous terminology what it lacks in organization and respect for the reader.

Habermas' interpretation of the double Hegel creates a particular paradox for him, because if the youthful Hegel dabbled with postmodernity , then he or somebody before him must have previously invented modernity. On the other hand, if his invention of modernity is just a scam, then it is only the postmoderns who are really modern. But Habermas needs to have it both ways in order to make his thesis sufficiently complicated. By claiming that Hegel invented modernity, Habermas can present the postmodernists as bunch of intellectuals who are opposed to modernity and who are trying to lead us into a new age. If Hegel were simply one more nineteenth century contributor to the idea of progress, then Habermas would have no book. He thus has to create this new transitional age, neither fish nor fowl, which he calls modernity, and, in the process, endow Hegel with the power of attorney to speak for mankind.

Since, moreover, Habermas identifies one of his Hegels with modernity, Habermas is forced into still another complication because he has to oppose Nietzsche, the supposed critic of modernity, to Hegel. I seriously doubt, however, that Nietzsche ever gave much thought to Hegel, or for that matter, to modernity. Nietzsche's *bête noire* , if I remember correctly, was Jesus Christ. He it was who initiated the slave morality that Nietzsche saw all around him. Perhaps this is why Nietzsche never referred to himself as a postmodernist, and perhaps we come here to the reason that Habermas presents us with two origins of postmodernism in his lectures., one by intellectuals who never used the term modernity, and the other by the intellectuals of the 1950's who apparently came up with it.

Habermas' essays on Horkheimer /Adorno, Heidegger, Derrida, Bataille, and Foucault make it all the more evident that history takes second place to advocacy in this work. Horkheimer and Adorno are bad. Heidegger is good. Derrida is a poor imitation of Heidegger. What are we to make, moreover, of this cavalier habit of setting up definitions and then ignoring them? Habermas identifies Lacan as one of his three power theorists and then scarcely says another word about him in the rest of the work. If Husserl is so important why doesn't Habermas include *him* in his original classification and devote a whole lecture to *him*? Why does Habermas classify Foucault as one of the three power theorists whereas he is almost as prolific on metaphysical questions? Why does Habermas classify Derrida as a metaphysician notwithstanding his all too *historical* analysis of Rousseau? Why does Habermas fail to note that Horkheimer/Adorno, Derrida, Foucault, and himself all have different time frames for modernity? This kind of writing is an insult to the intelligence of the reader.

It may be interesting at this point is to consider the most revealing thing that Habermas leaves *out*. For it should occur to almost anyone with a smattering of philosophy, that in Habermas' discourse of modernity, there are no logical positivists. The logical positivist movement, initiated by Wittgenstein, with its emphasis on the *limitations* of language, is not even mentioned by Habermas. Had the logical positivists absolutely nothing to say on the question of modernity? Or did the possibility that they considered it a fatuous bit of intellectual preciousness account for their exclusion from the club? Or is the possibility that Habermas, after putting us through his torture chamber of philosophical verbiage comes up with

a solution no much different from theirs, except that is it much more subject to abuse, because of its metaphysical mumbo jumbo?

For what are these “communicatively structured lifeworlds” after all? Are they not precisely what the logical positivists, seconded by Lyndon Johnson, have been maintaining all along, namely that we should endeavor to make our positions clear to each other? If the inhabitants of a community want to build a school, do they not use communicatively structured lifeworlds in order to decide how and where? One senses here that Habermas is talking about a more speculative kind of reasoning, the kind that he assigned in another of his books to the “public sphere” of eighteenth-century England. He would also appear to be calling for the formation of groups that would, through the elevated quality of their communicatively structured lifeworlds, manage to rise above the practicalities and vulgarities of popular culture. Is he thinking of the PTA, the League of Women Voters, or the Sierra Club? But how would one distinguish the disinterested intellectuality of these groups from every other interest group in society, the Ku Klux Klan, the National Organization for Women, or the American Association of Retired Persons? And if the world’s greatest philosophers have not been able to agree on a normative standard for reality, how could any well meaning assemblies of public spirited citizens be able to do any better? In practice, we seem to be given a choice here between the establishment of a large number of philanthropic societies whose discussions will never get past the metaphysical and an infinity of pressure groups, all of which claim to fill in for the death of God. How different would this be from the shadow Communist, Fascist, and National Socialist organizations which watched over the Soviet, Italian, and German apparatus of government? How does one distinguish between “communicatively structured lifeworlds” and “democratic centralism” until, that is, one finds himself at the wrong end of a purge trial?

Which only confirms me in the conclusion that the fundamental problem with Habermas is that he simply cannot detach himself from the people he is studying. He insists on viewing them at face value in terms of their own ideas. Their conceptualizations are his conceptualizations. If Weber talks about “rationalization,” Habermas does not stop to analyze what Weber means by that term. If Hegel talks about “self consciousness,” Habermas buys into that concept, not as a concept to be examined skeptically for all of its flaws and obscurities, but as a concept that he can integrate into his own description. He is a company man of the company he is describing, trying to put their best feet forward, and in the process, imposing upon them a set of ideas many of which his companions never had. Yet Habermas makes it seem as if they were having a meaningful dialogue, creating precise intellectual links between their ideas, and making them spokesmen for humanity. It is much more likely, on the contrary, that the only place in which the philosophical discourse of modernity ever took place was in the mind of Habermas himself.

Habermas, as we can see, also presents himself as a great reconciler, as the intellectual who gets civilization moving again from the excesses of postmodernism into a renewed world in which subjectivity and rational discussion are combined into great progressive synthesis. His is another *Guide for the Perplexed*, another *Summa Theologica*, which tries to do for the twenty first century what Maimonides and Aquinas succeeded in doing for the thirteenth. Don’t be worried by the crackpots, he seems to say to the CEO’s! Their ideas can be brought into the

fold as long as you keep on subsidizing the think tanks which will maintain the intellectual smoke screen behind which you can do whatever you please.

Will he succeed? Certainly he has a lot of things going for him. With his public spheres he has brought tracts of traditional history back into production. Historians can now go back to plowing their political and diplomatic fields as long as they do so under the protective panoply of the public sphere. Sociologists can now plant seeds for communicatively structured lifeworlds without being thereby accused of turning society into a huge Panopticon. Feminists can now spray pesticide on the victimization of women with full assurance that they are not simply fomenting new strains for the victimization of men. And there will never be any shortage in our society of bureaucratic organisms that live by the euphemism and profit from the passive sentence. On the other hand, there is the entire problem of the spatial limitations of this approach. It is doing very well in the humanities and social sciences departments of universities, and, as long as contemporary capitalism continues with more ups than downs and contemporary students continue sleeping through classes, no one will pay any attention. But there are I would suggest, more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the conundrums of the postmodernists, and if intellectual life continues to be stifled in the universities, it *may* eventually find other outlets.

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