

THEORY IN A TIME OF WAR

by Michael Lubin

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1. Wrong Turn

After decades of passionate debate over people, culture, language, and society, the late twentieth century came down with an escalating case of theory fatigue. By the 1980's, the theories had gotten very advanced but lost most of their sex appeal. Those of us who actually like theory had it largely to ourselves.

That changed when the culture wars widened to make theory a target, or more accurately a political football, in a game of deconceptual brinksmanship. By playing on the aversion most academics just as much as self-proclaimed "ordinary people" have to unfamiliar ways of thinking, organized reactionaries managed to convince the latter to sneer at it as an academic indulgence at the very moment they were mobilizing theory-skeptical professors to challenge its academic acceptability.

All this happened during a period when the overwhelming trend among younger minds was towards an internet-inspired style of factual addition, rather than the complex noncommutative multiplication required by the theoretical constructs widely discussed at however varying a level of comprehension by earlier generations, from Freud to Jung, Sartre to Beauvoir, T.S. Eliot to Marshall McLuhan. The decline of interest among homespun prophets and campus lotharios has consigned theoretical pursuits to the professoriate, the trendier members of which now treat it as a junkyard nuisance. Whenever they catch a glimpse of a still-intact piece of theory, the cry goes out to pick up stones and converge from multiple disciplines, eliminating yet another unsightly reminder of the bygone era when people actually believed they could create complex, interdependent articulations, irreducible to the sum of their parts and built layer upon layer from deeply pondered foundations. In their place, we are treated to endless glorying jingles about the autonomous individual, liberal democracy, and the free market—and "exposés" of those, past and present, who refused to join in the choir.

Woe betide anyone intellectually serious enough to construct theories of their own. Many of the very dissenters who are always flinging gobs of theory at the wrecking crews are the first to join them in ridiculing would-be builders, proclaiming the end of the age of grand theories; one can only wonder why old grand theories are acceptable while new ones are not. It's striking how many devotees of European theory play fastidiously by academic rules which strictly prohibit the original formulation of anything similar as "big-picturism" with too much thinking and not enough footnotes. The result is a peculiarly derivative discourse in which native specifics are analyzed with an entirely imported set of generalities. I am reminded of Yeats' poem "The Scholars," where, after describing stuffy classicists slowly wearing away the carpet, he exclaims, "Oh Lord, what would they say/Did their Catullus walk that way?" What, indeed, would these American scholars say if the theorists they rely on had been as restricted as themselves?

But to concentrate my fire at such folks would risk being drawn into a gladiator's duel between the People's Front of Judea and the Judean People's Front. It is the anti-theory extremists who dominate the field. Even readers sympathetic to theory are likely to have absorbed their biases to some degree; to live in today's world is to be bombarded by them from all sides.

Sometimes their form is subtle; theoretical inquiry can be damned without even being named. Any time you hear that, in this day and age, the confusion and fragmentation of life are not merely apparent but real; how the big discovery is that there is no big discovery; how truly sophisticated explanations consist of pointing out complex interrelationships that have neither system nor starting point; or how specialization has rendered it impossible to be more than a good professional plowing a narrow field—you are being told, *Don't try to theorize*. These postmodern intellectual cop-outs are now spouted like age-old proverbs—a sign of anti-theory on the move.

And like any successful form of obfuscation, the anti-theoretic persuasion boosts its popularity with an irrelevant side-issue. It plays on the sympathies of the intimidated schoolchild (or former schoolchild) who, faced with repressive, demanding teachers and ideas she does not understand, rebels against the need to think, rejecting the possibility of deeper significance for material that, under an authoritarian pedagogical regimen, is presented so as to minimize any sense of connection with her life. This rebellion is particularly effective in the United States, where it has permeated popular culture for at least half a century and is hardly even a rebellion. Without it, anti-theory could arouse little sympathy; but that is not what it is.

Among the rabid conformists who actually run things, theory is valued for its legitimizing function, as a way to patch over social cleavages and give the ideologies that justify the existing order a unified and rational front. Theoretiphobia is therefore in its essence a frank acknowledgement of the hopelessness of the task—of the fact that these ideologies are now so mutually contradictory that even legitimist gourmands can only swallow them one piece at a time. But far from a reason to abandon what is sometimes called critical theory, the breakdown of ideology is precisely why theory needs to be critical. For theory ceases to be hopeless the moment it gives up the quest to reconcile the lies in which we all are inculcated—lies whose logical incoherence is now more open to the casual gaze than at any time in memory.

To take a simple example: if our society proclaims universal equality, yet is fundamentally structured upon massive inequalities of wealth and power—whose necessity, incidentally, it also proclaims—does this mean it's impossible to properly theorize the concept of equality? Or merely that any such theorization would have to reject this society's pretense of being egalitarian?

The aversion to theory, then, is the mating of two refusals—a refusal to reject socially sanctioned lies, and a refusal to try to make sense of them. Nourished by a military-corporate-backed scientism that brooks no fancy debate, they have together spawned an alternative that scrupulously avoids the interrogation of its own foundations a theoretical approach would require. Indeed this anti-theoretic offspring is confined to strictly one-way inquiry, since it assumes all discourse that is not “objective” description of a passively absolute real world to be the mere expression of the speaker's subjectivity. Anyone who has studied at an American university—especially in quantitative social science, public policy, philosophy, or human neurology or genetics—is likely to be quite familiar with this approach, which I will term *objectivism*—the gallant spectacle of the social researcher on an elevated platform from which she reduces the people she studies to biological units and what they say and do to quantified behavior. Her own discourse, naturally, remains beyond the pale of inquiry.

Objectivists do, to be sure, sometimes attempt sociological studies of their research process, but these never extend to an analysis of its discourse. They regard their own words as too “scientific” to require any outside explanation—unlike the poor slobs they study, whose words are objectified as verbal behavior, thereby ensuring that they are never considered on their own terms. In other words, if all analyzed discourse is treated as behavior, this still effects no consistent reduction, since the hidden corollary is that discourse that is considered important for its own sake is not analyzed at all. Objectivism is defined precisely by this double-standard—an unavoidable one, since treating a scholarly paper as the behavior of the researcher rather than a text to be analyzed and critiqued would make it impossible for research to function.

Presented as the latest in rigor, the various objectivist practices thrive, like a mediocre magic act, on the ineptitude of audience scrutiny. Quantitative social “science” is able to reflect some of the prestigious glow of quantitative physical science because of a widespread failure to understand the profoundly different way the latter uses numbers; social “scientists,” having scrupulously obtained and analyzed numerical results that are of little inherent interest, are forced to speculatively draw qualitative conclusions from them, whereas physical scientists insert observed quantities into equations, solve them, and thereby predict other observable quantities—something only attempted, not very successfully, by economists among the social scientific crew. Analytic philosophy can cultivate a role as a go-between of various disciplines only because few people realize how nineteenth century are its routine assumptions about physics, logic, consciousness, and language—even if newfangled notions like relativity, quantum mechanics, linguistic theory, and Goedelian logic are sometimes brought in, one at a time, as special guests. Publicity-savvy geneticists and neuropsychologists can grab headlines with correlations between biological and behavioral phenomena, taking cover behind their “hard” scientific glamour to extract far-reaching conclusions from poorly understood relationships, while leaving the behavior no more clarified on its own terms than before. No matter—sleight of hand is all it takes to redefine an age-old problem so the painfully narrow conceptual scope of the new methodologies can “solve” it. Meanwhile, an endless sideshow of question-begging appeals to scientificity distract the crowd, assisted by that bluff-faced xenophobic clown, Anglo-Saxon common sense, with his pseudo-democratic resentment of any ideas too fancy or too different.

Long dominated by objectivism of various stripes, American thought always left within its heterodox tent plenty of space for alternatives. Today, however, that space is aggressively in dispute. Multiple disciplines are collectively proclaiming a new synthesis of bio- and social science purposing to explain all manner of humanistic issues without bothering to include the humanities at all, let alone “theory.” Indeed, alternative approaches to social inquiry are sternly made to understand that they had better recognize the supremacy of the new hegemon if they wish to retain the remnants of their respectability—witness the breakdown of the consensus for funding the humanities, the automatic sneering dismissals of anything that can be lumped within the undefined catch-all “postmodernism,” and the cloud under which textual critique itself has consequently fallen.

At a time when the national security apparatus is trying to banish dissent from the land of the free, with spinmeisters echoing right-wing talking points to drown out real debate, objectivist partisans are waging a parallel and indeed coordinated campaign to delegitimize intellectual unorthodoxy, with a surprising level of complicity from Anglo-American intelligentsia at large. Having developed a set of talking points of their own, they repeat them endlessly for greater plausibility—biology is the key to human behavior, the mind is the brain, Freud and Marx are discredited, most of such-and-such complex social practice is hereditary, the non-quantitative version of such-and-such concept is superseded, metaphysics is divorced from the real empirical

world, free markets and free trade produce prosperity, and similar doctrinal obeisances whose seeming self-evidence is a relatively recent development in every case—a symptom of just how effective, and aggressive, their propaganda campaign has been. Alternatives to these positions, commonplace in the seventies and even the eighties, now instantly evoke the derision dumped on anyone who hasn't heard something “well known.”

The effect is to gate whole avenues outside the pale of acceptable inquiry—especially on the theoretical side of town. Those of us who know what's good for us had better realize that “There is no alternative” is meant to be understood intellectually as well as politically. The academic establishment's frequent and none-too-subtle appeal to authority fallacies regarding those sacrosanct decrees called disciplinary consensuses (revocable only by those who issued them), together with a “soft” to “hard” scaling of disciplines that flourishes on the vaguest justifications, intermesh to instill firmly into aspiring young minds exactly which abdications of judgment ambition requires.

Even the ideal of cosmopolitanism cannot stand against the new imperatives—thus the emergence of a French exception to the academic taboo on overt ethnic slurs, just as there is an Arab exception in Hollywood. The impunity with which “Gallic” can be used as a pejorative to dismiss a person's work is quite remarkable considering the instant vehement condemnations that would result, for example, from substituting “Semitic.” That this passes for witty intellectual banter is indeed telling, reflecting the passing of the influence of World War II era immigrants on American intelligentsia and a revived Anglosphere chauvinism that sees no need to hide its ugly colors. When those taking an interest in Continental theory are called to heel in the name of consensus, one can only wonder what gives this consensus its supposed authority if it stops at linguistic or national lines.

The situation should be a wakeup call for those of us whose intellectual appetite does not include freedom fries. For like phone taps, or the imperial division of humankind into enemies and flunkies, parochialism does not stop at domestic borders.

It may seem that I am representing the culture wars as if they were fought by only one side; but I do not think I am misreading the terrain of combat. While it cannot quite be said they are like those “Indian battles” which a less racist reexamination of American history later revealed to be massacres, the imbalance of resources, privileges, and power between the two sides couldn't be clearer—epitomized by the widely cited academic pecking order, with physical science on top and humanities at the bottom, a long-standing measure of usefulness to the power structure now baldly confused with a hierarchy of intellectual worth.

When an author whose sole claim to fame is having pulled off what the British call a “jolly good prank” cowrites a book whose net contribution is to quote, out of context, passages he considers particularly ridiculous from already much-discussed works, with no attempt to ground them in their sources or modes of thought, and this book is widely hailed as a milestone in the debate, it becomes only too clear whose nonsense is actually in fashion.* This logic of those with a powerful institutional sanction denouncing those with a weak one for being excessively “fashionable” is the same that enables the grotesque lie of the “liberal media,” or that allows “political correctness” to refer to progressive authoritarianism when a reactionary one prevails in the vast majority of institutional settings. It is the logic of the bully who cannot stand that he doesn't quite run the whole school.

* Sokal and Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense—or Impostures Intellectuelles*, depending on which set of cultural prejudices is being appealed to. (The fear in France is that unworthiness will contaminate the cultural citadel in its immortal chauvinistic glory, not that highfalutin fancy talk will override the common sense of plain, decent folk.)

2. Evasive Maneuvers

Those of us who grow up inside this peculiar globe-spanning isolation called the English-speaking world are inculcated from an early age in the seldom articulated suppositions that underlie objectivism. For most of us—and especially if we are “well educated”—it is the metaphysic that everyone around us implicitly uses. At the same time we are taught to despise all metaphysical inquiry, thus giving us a ready excuse to dismiss uncomfortable alternatives and assuring we need never acknowledge—let alone examine and, therefore, question—the assumptions that permeate our thinking. They include an absolute state of “objective” reality, presumed identical to a vast set of factual statements; the existence of each human mind as a discrete entity which observes this reality, reaches judgments, and makes decisions, all in self-contained isolation; sensory data as a “raw,” self-sufficient substance on the basis of which all other mental forms are constructed; language as a system of conventions whose only legitimate purpose is to describe reality; factual testing as the sufficient and only method for resolving disputes; usually the assumption that ethical heuristics and “values” are inherently detached from reality; human affairs as ultimately determined by individual psychology; a style of reasoning dominated by Aristotelian categories, presumed to preexist the social situations that prompt their construction; and the assumption that all true knowledge exists in a perfect state regardless of whether anyone knows it, actual knowledge being conceived as a distorted fragment thereof. It’s remarkable how much these assumptions lose in self-evidence once they are stated explicitly. But believing objectivists piously assure us that to consider any alternatives beyond modest reformulations is “irrational”—an odd definition of the word to say the least.

Over the past twenty years, we’ve heard increasingly strident warnings about the alternatives, especially “Continental philosophy”—portrayed as a weird cult largely confined to that exotic fraction of Europe that isn’t the British Isles. Led to understand that this cult is a heretical anti-objectivist splinter group, we are never told that it actually consists of the entirety of Western philosophy after analytic philosophy (and, less rigidly, pragmatism) remove themselves through self-imposed isolation; nor that nothing binds this fractious cult’s profoundly divergent schools together except discursive exchanges enabled by a shared conceptual vocabulary—which in the main predates analytic philosophy, although the latter’s practitioners remove themselves from any dialogue by dismissing much of it as meaningless and subjecting the rest to a drastically reductive reinterpretation. Certainly we hear no whisper of the fact that the cultists consider their work *European philosophy* and include analytic philosophy as simply one tendency therein. But we are told enough frightening stories about their relentless ravishings of once-rosy virgins like Clarity and Empiricism to know not to get too curious.

Within the current climate of the English-speaking world, the approved epistemological procedure is to proclaim objectivist “rules” of research and argumentation to be universally accepted, while simultaneously denouncing any inquiry that demonstrates the contrary. Given the widespread assumption that objectivism has a monopoly on rigorous discourse about human affairs, it’s puzzling to observe the reductive poverty of its actual results. What’s even harder to fathom is that the shallow, disconnected field of experimental psychology and its poorly thought through concepts, easily punctured by the most minimal critical analysis, can be confused with science; or that anyone expects its younger sibling evolutionary psychology to rise, now or ever, above the level of informed speculation; or that the methods of economists can be applied to diverse phenomena, considering their failure to explain economic ones; or that the results of polls can, despite generalized disclaimers, be routinely conflated with public opinion, given the

obvious incommensurability between the interconnected thoughts that make up a person's opinions and a series of yes-and-no questions written, however "neutrally," by someone else. (I would love to see the expression on a political scientist's face were she told by a journal that, instead of publishing her paper, they were going to ask her yes-and-no questions about the issues it raised and print them along with her responses.)

And you have to wonder how great social questions are supposed to be solved through analysis of the genetic and environmental factors influencing the likelihood of particular individual behaviors, since no combination of such factors could even describe, much less explain, the simplest social structure. Which side of the supposedly all-encompassing "nature versus nurture" opposition one adopts is far less significant than that *in either case*, one has assumed that individual propensities are the decisive level of the human drama—a doctrine which, if applied consistently, would unravel the whole thread of social and historical experience. A good example is the very expression "nature versus nurture"—raising the interesting question of what allows otherwise serious-minded people to believe a person's "nature"—in effect, her Platonic essence—could be equated with her chromosomes, or "nurture" with everything nongenetic that affects her—in other words, her whole life history, which is hardly reducible to upbringing or milieu. This question could only be answered through a far-reaching historical analysis of the concepts and ideologies involved; Plato's DNA wouldn't help in the slightest (the issue is *what's in his texts*, not what predisposed him to write them that way).

Still more perverse is the attempt to push all of human experience beneath the cocktail umbrella of neuropsychology, bullying those who crave intellectual respectability with the battle cry, now taken to be authoritarian, of natural science. Founded in metaphysical presumption, not scientific logic, the mandate is absolute—the material phenomena of people's speech and actions must ultimately be explained by material phenomena inside their central nervous systems. The practical result is to reduce the rich knowledge of human interactions acquired over millennia to babytalk. People who would trade in their complex, fine-tuned understanding of another's speech, gestures, and expressions for unavoidably speculative interpretations of other signals detected inside the person's brain are simply selling themselves short. If neurology is undeniably rigorous, it is a rigor that drops off rapidly once it tries to explain anything nonneurological. When it comes to human interactions, no experimentally-based discourse has remotely approached the contextualized, nuance-within-nuance rigor of a well-composed novel.

This no doubt accounts for the objectivist tendency to sneer politely at such humanist achievements. The naiveté concerning the theory of aesthetics that regards beauty as a decorative adornment—for good reason, when you see how objectivists write—extends to an evolutionary condescension that treats the remarkably complex ratiocinations of bygone ages as so much primitive intuition. Perhaps this is the only way to avoid the disturbing implications of the fact that people who lacked any of the methodologies of objectivism had so much knowledge concerning the questions it claims to resolve—how Aristotle, Chuang Tzu, Saint Augustine, or for that matter Shakespeare, could have known so much about thought, for example, with next to no knowledge of the brain—and none at all of what happens when you subject a number of people to the same stimulus inside a laboratory and count up their responses.

But objectivism is an historically shallow world. Armed with their new incantation, "The mind is the brain," they now boldly venture into psycho-social domains once thought too contaminated by subjectivity to be safe for folks of their cloth, hoping to vanquish Cartesian dualism and the centuries of attendant philosophical confusion. Their ignorance of the fact that Descartes' fundamental dualism was between thought and extension, not mind and brain, is more

forgivable than the conceptual hypocrisy that lets them adopt his dualism as their own, renaming thought “subjectivity” and extension “objectivity.” The neutrality of their equation is misleading: no one says, “The brain is the mind.” The aim is always to explain subjectivity objectively, thinking thereby to overcome the duality between the two—with all the dialectical precision of the argument that the age-old opposition between Christianity and Judaism could be eliminated if only every Jew would convert to Christianity. Of course, even if that happened, the distinction would remain embedded within Christianity. Similarly, without Cartesian dualism there is no objectivity: even if every subjective phenomenon could be explained “objectively,” the explanations’ validation would then hinge on the concept of objectivity, which in turn depends on the very duality supposedly being overcome.

The brain—an enlarged middle portion of the nervous system whose precise boundaries with the spinal cord have long been debated by physiologists—has thus ceased to be a mere anatomical object and transmuted itself into a metaphysical necessity. Meanwhile, “the mind,” forever plagued by an uncertain definition and hazy outer limits, is to inherit the existential and epistemological security that is the brain’s birthright as an object of natural scientific study among those who use science as a substitute for religious certitude.

The real aim is to save in its basic essence the concept of the soul, in a pseudo-secularized form called the mind, with neurology as the guarantor with which believers can henceforth repel all doubts. What confirms this beyond question is that most of the very people who so aggressively advocate the supposedly materialist reduction to neurology are adamant about preserving the possibility of “free will”—a concept whose religious origins cannot well be denied and which, insofar as it says anything at all relevant to science, quite blatantly contradicts its whole premise—that we live in a materially explicable world.

At the heart of objectivist metaphysics are two holies of holies: objective reality (the word “objective” never explained but implicitly a tendentious conflation between “not subjective” and “true”); and the autonomous mind, an enclosed, indivisible Cartesian idol any critique of which objectivists treat as blasphemy against the rationalist faith. Yet nothing logically or empirically guarantees that all mental phenomena associated with a single biological individual must be directed from a common center. As Kant pointed out over two centuries ago, it is only the word “I” that secures a unity we can neither prove nor disprove within ourselves. And indeed modern theory and literature call this unity gravely into question, suggesting that a human is a fragmented being, its consciousness prone to violent skips, its intentions little more than a mask, the very continuity of its life a retrospective illusion.

Conversely, not only our status and relations but even the thoughts of a hermit are inconceivable outside of a socially determined framework with respect to which we learn to parse our experience. All our concepts derive at least indirectly from our contacts with others and presume our insertion into a common world. The very language that guarantees an “I” locates and subordinates it within its own vastly complex structure. And any attempt to bypass this structure in an enclosed phenomenology only forces the subject to confront all the more starkly the fragmentation of her day-to-day existence.

It is these paired assaults, interconnective and fragmentative, on the idealized, self-standing individual of nineteenth century ideology—not any supposed anti-materialist tendencies—that objectivism finds unacceptable in modern theory. But with a fleet of social scientists hoping to bring up the rear behind the Titanic voyage of genetic determinism, present-day objectivists have all the modesty of aspiration of the new American century. Under such circumstances, there is simply no place at the mainstream intellectual table for any suggestion

that their quest might be aimed in a sterile direction, one radically incapable of a human condition caught between structures that frame our lives and bones of contention that motivate and elude us—language and culture on the one side, desire and exploitation on the other.

Objectivist discourse, confusing language ability with language, tries to biologize both while ignoring exploitation and desire altogether—however convoluted or tendentious explanations of human motivation must be without them. Desire and exploitation are what preclude the self-enclosed mental life objectivists take as axiomatic: the provoking object that would make us whole always slips away, whether in work or in sex, forcing us to cross the doorsteps of others along the pathways of loss in the very act of saying, “I am.” It is precisely the systematic refusal to treat desire and exploitation as causal that objectivists confuse with scientificity, limiting themselves to factors internal to the objects called individuals. The results are as inspiring as the nascent physics of the seventeenth century might have produced had it restricted its efforts to categorizing stationary bodies, seeking to deduce cause from correlation (objects located on target ranges are disproportionately full of holes) while stigmatizing the impacts produced by moving bodies as beyond the purview of science.

Systematic inanity tolerates competition poorly, and indeed the ferocity of the postmodern culture wars is a convenient cover for the far more sweeping objectivist campaign to silence modernism itself—the entire skein of dissidence and dissonance that permeated the twentieth century. The two who more than any others ushered in modern theory by exposing the peculiar trajectories of exploitation and desire have become the leading symbols of the new orthodox purge. Marx and Freud’s heads are paraded around on stakes as a reminder to potential heretics; we have all heard the litany of their officially decreed sins, blessed even by many of their erstwhile “friends.”

Marx’s thought is supposed to have lost all credibility when most Leninist-Stalinist regimes collapsed—an assumption presumably based on a complete ignorance of the long tradition of anti-Stalinist and anti-Leninist Marxism,* or indeed of Marx’s own work, since it’s not easy to say why the fall of bureaucratic police states would discredit an advocate of a society of freely associated producers. Well after Marx’s death, well before 1917, Lenin and Co. formulated their revolutionary goal: a postponement of worker self-governance to an indefinite, idealized future in favor of rule by a “vanguard” elite Marx had always forcefully opposed. Not a single Leninist revolution (as opposed to Soviet army takeovers) occurred in a predominantly capitalist nation, let alone at the terminally advanced stage of capitalism identified by Marx as prerequisite to socialist revolution. In the post-Leninist consolidation of world capitalism, Marx’s predictions about its future course have continued to be ever-more alarmingly correct, explaining its chronic instability, expansionism, class strife, and even details of its technological stages—as economics cannot. His apparently unforgivable error, then, was not that his predicted revolutions crashed—it remains to be seen whether they will ever happen—but that other revolutions which neither he nor anyone else had anticipated used his name. But ever since the Cold War ended, glib slippery slopes and guilt by association have been far more acceptable here than basic distinctions.

Freud’s thinking has likewise been obscured behind a slew of gross misinterpretations and personal attacks, compounded in the English-speaking world by mistranslations of much of his theoretical vocabulary. In particular, *Verdrängung*, which means something like “expulsion”

* See, for example, the rich explorations of Marx’s thought in the books of American democratic socialist icon Michael Harrington, who was anti-Leninist to the point of repressive excess (cf. his confessions vis-à-vis Students for a Democratic Society).

or “driving out”—i.e., from consciousness—is translated as “repression,” with the result that people think it identical to, or at least caused by, parental and societal repressiveness (in the ordinary sense). Freud, on the contrary, tells us that social repressiveness is *caused by his Verdrängung*, a process in which an unacceptable, often sexual idea (not an emotion) is removed from the field of the thinkable and taken over by the formidable strangeness of the unconscious primary process. No matter—it’s much easier to interpret Freud as saying neurosis is caused by uptight sexual attitudes, and dismiss his theory because neurosis is more prevalent than ever (though how does anyone know that?) despite a sexual revolution.

Indeed, the one thing that seems to unite Freud’s legendarily diverse attackers, whose range of disciplines and ideologies greatly reassures those who prefer not to think for themselves, is a near-total ignorance of the concept on which his psychoanalysis was founded—the *unconscious*, glossed over, misconstrued beyond recognition, or bypassed altogether in commentary after commentary, with all the cumulative profundity of a discourse about Darwin that doesn’t mention evolution.* This invisible scene from which something I do not recognize speaks through me, subjecting my thoughts and even my body to defining moments in my life history, allowing recombined fragments of yesterday’s memories to give unexpected expression to long-buried wishes—far from being passé, the Freudian unconscious is hardly any less novel to the English-speaking mainstream now than it was a hundred years ago. Quite unable to process the fact that Freud, oblivious to the fashionable obsessions of today’s America, wrote thousands of pages on sexuality focused on unconscious fantasies and childhood reproductive theories while saying literally nothing about how to make better whoopee, today’s well-trained mind reduces him to a very bad sexologist. Witness the universal outrage over his flimsy association with the concept of “vaginal orgasm”—always without citation, since the term appears nowhere in his published work.

Thus Marx and Freud, the two indispensable modernists, have become the Tabooed Two. The flip side of their pariah status is an uncritical reembrace of the very mythologies of the autonomous individual they most definitively demolished. The last twenty years have proved the point. But the consequences of coerced anti-Marxist consensus began to unfold as far back as the fifties, when national security liberals, craving intellectual rigor but unwilling to question, or even dialectize, the pro-Cold-War, anti-socialist dogma that was the price of their respectability, began their step by step descent into neoconservatism—for if socialism’s unacceptability is a rigid absolute, why should social democracy be more than a tolerable evil?† The policy consequence of a return to unfettered Victorian barbarism is now writ large for all to see—girded by an “intellectualism” whose refusal to address the substance of any criticism of capitalism is its very fundament. Once a critique profoundly hits its mark, the breach cannot be healed; avoiding the site of the rupture compels endless evasive maneuvers. That’s why the retreat from Freud and Marx has turned into a panicked stampede away from everything they loosely inspired—which happens to include much of modern thought.

Within the prevailing atmosphere of deconceptualized empiricism, every dialectician from Hegel to Thomas Kuhn has fallen prey to sneering incomprehension. An extreme case is

* Contrary to a common impression much encouraged by the American psychoanalytic establishment, Freud never abandoned either the concept of the unconscious or the discoveries attached to it. As he neared the end of his life, he spoke of the unconscious as a separate from the id and repeatedly reaffirmed the centrality to his thinking of his turn of the century breakthroughs. Indeed, Freud continued to add material to his two most famous “early” works on the unconscious, *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sex*, well into old age; less than half of the former’s material appeared in its first edition.

† The same question in reverse order is precisely what drove more honest minds to overthrow the dogma.

Heidegger—probably the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century, especially among the theoretically inclined—and the concerted campaign to brown-bait his intellectual heirs by invoking his involvement with the Nazi party. Given that this involvement began several years after the completion of his major work, which has very little political content, and that most of the targets are leftists, the real motivation is only too clear. How much energy would be expended to attack the conduct of a dead professor—however justifiably—without the prospect that living critical voices could be silenced through blatant guilt by association? What makes Heidegger threatening today is his conceptualization of an unenclosed mind intrinsically open onto the world. The genuine personal scandal of this giant’s willing prostitution to enthroned brutality is subordinate to the truly intellectual scandal: not that someone with a propensity towards fascism dared join the long line of critics of Cartesian individualism—but that *only* such a person succeeded in philosophizing a viable alternative.

In the academic arena, just as in the political one, the boundaries of acceptable opinion have closed in an ever-tighter circle around acceptable petit-bourgeois proprieties, which do not include unenclosed minds—or nonautonomous individuals subject to exploitation and desire. It has become a recognized fact—i.e., a dubious assertion repeated many times—that Freud and Marx’s supporters have “retreated” to the humanities after having been cast out of the social “sciences” like Adam and Eve before an enraged God. Not surprisingly, no one tries to date the mythical era when a significant share of social “scientists” were Freudians or Marxists—nor explain how the deliberate exclusion of certain viewpoints from departmental hires constitutes evidence against their validity.* But the canard has helped to put the entire multidisciplinary category of the humanities under fire.

To be sure, the less strident, more patronizing anti-modernists are always eulogizing the blessings we owe the Tabooed Two—how much better we now understand the importance of sexuality than before Freud, for example, even if the poor dear greatly exaggerated it. But Freud’s whole point is that the very *meaning* of sexuality is transformed, that it turns out to be a far richer, stranger, and more elusive domain than previously (or currently) conceived—not a mere emphasis on the sexual element. Marx subjects work relations to a similar transformation. His position—that the mode by which a surplus is extracted from workers in the process of production is key to a whole social order—is much more sophisticated than the “economic determinism” usually attributed to him; far from postulating an economic determination of the political, he viewed the very act of work as already political. Their highly theoretical reformulations of the most basic terms of daily life make Freud and Marx nearly incomprehensible in an age in which pragmatism predominates even among theorists.

The failures of free market and free trade policies—already obvious in the early nineties to those not mesmerized by the post-Cold-War ideological extravaganza then in swing—have finally in the last few years coughed up a scrap of a Marx revival. But the very possibility of Freudianism has nearly vanished behind a remarkably sweeping reconceptualization of sexuality, presented as liberating, that evades a Puritanism it lacks the courage to oppose by excluding what Puritans most despise—desire—from the field of sex. The new formulations pose sexuality as a means to the end of pleasure, as a battle for domination, as a biological need, as a necessary physical release, as a vehicle of intimate love, as a manifestation of “natural” attraction, as a healthy self-expression, even as a fetish or perversion conceived as a gnarly personal quirk—anything but sexuality as *driven by desire*, or what Freud called a wish—a permanent, free-

* Understandably, the latter point may shock the many who treat academia as a holy sanctuary of truth rather than a socially embedded institution.

standing demand, divorced from the need that engendered it and inseparable from its own prohibition, that fantasy can bring to life but no satisfaction can extinguish. The widespread perception that the age of sexual prohibition is over is the upshot, not of any increased tolerance for transgression, but of a misconstrual of sex as nontransgressive. Anyone disputing this misconstrual registers as a Puritan through its lens, since pointing out the transgressiveness of sex can only seem sex-negative in the absence of any space in which sexuality could freely speak its own transgression. Yet that is the very space that Freudianism requires, and that it opened up for desire during an historical moment now closed.

The closure has successfully filled in the approaches to the great problems of modernism, while leaving the problems themselves untouched—a loss in richness but far from a gain in rigor. The objectivist engineers who try to keep the individual isolated and dry with an atheoretic dam meant to power a whole science of humanity have not been able to fix massive breaches ripped from their edifice by Freud, Marx, Heidegger, and many others. The engineers' success has depended instead on creating a suspicion around their names and a vacuum around their concepts—so that anyone encountering their thinking is jaundiced and uncomprehending.

3. Dead End

We live in an age of imperial aggression and intellectual retreat. In a world increasingly homogenized and unequal, with might-makes-right and limitless greed the new commandments and Yahweh's ten plagues replaced by transnational capital flows, triumphalist prophets of the existing order have since the late eighties proclaimed a long succession of quickly failing watersheds—the end of history, the all-sufficiency of the “free market,” the “third way,” and one info- or bio-utopia after another. We are told we are in an era of stupendous knowledge in which life's mysteries—having been duly reduced to a miniscule fraction of the proportions they seemed to have a few decades ago—will soon, on their new reductive terms, be resolved; the only pitfall remaining, apparently, is “information overload.” Yes, but the overload is due far less to quantity than to the tendentious, fragmented *quality* information acquires after it has been censored and injected with propaganda to suit the interests of the powerful. The study of propaganda, fueled by a glut of new data, is indeed one of the few areas of social thought to escape the prevailing loss of nerve.

But what's striking is how so many bright young minds have been inspired to dismiss, along with the dominant propaganda, the messages of its usual targets. The cynicism commonly associated with Generation X labels any attempt by progressives and the dispossessed to provide an alternative to the reactionary barrage as just propaganda with another slant. Acute awareness of PR's pervasiveness thus goes hand in hand with a refusal to acknowledge its overwhelmingly lopsided distribution, allowing hegemony to achieve its well-poisoning goals even as its message is purportedly rejected. Intellectually, the long string of abandoned instant revolutions has actually intensified dismissals of the more theoretically oriented inquiry they displaced. Only an obsessive avoidance of a previous generation's idealism can explain these contrived failures of judgment, and the paradoxical capitulation to authority that results.*

* It is no coincidence that a recent revival in progressive energy manifests itself first and foremost as a rehabilitation of idealism (added February 2008).

In parallel, the civil society people rely on as a check on their rulers has adopted institutional values that treat the most blatant subversions of democratic principles to accommodate the powerful as reasonable implementations thereof, any alternative to which is “irresponsible”; malfeasance is a public relations problem to be viewed with sympathy, so long as it doesn’t exceed “professional” bounds that have nothing to do with protecting the rest of us. Taking advantage of a naive exaltation of professionals and professionalism that has permeated even progressive circles, the soft elitism of the 1970’s world of NGO’s and experts-on-behalf-of-the-people gradually calcified into the mid-level institutional despotism under which our society continues to labor, even now that it has enabled a tyranny from the top to steal the headlines along with the elections. Bold posturing by complacent progressive organizations long since defanged by entrenched leadership and corporate donations, producing much fanfare but little effect—followed by right-wing attacks on the postures which cover for highly effective social reaction, rationalized despite its unpopularity as the outcome of a democratic process—such has been the pattern of our times.

There are still rebels, of course, within society at large; but from the 1980’s onward the best equipped armies have acquired an increasing resemblance to the very empire they are supposed to be fighting. Far from dissenting from the imperial glorification of greed, they, too, seek individualist utopia, proceeding from a concept of “freedom” consisting of the right to behave with unrestrained selfishness, with personal conscience confined to evading guilt, political conscience to the avoidance of representations that would call “offensive” attention to oppressive aspects of our social order. Any actual challenge to that order seems beyond the logistical capacity of these armies to mount, let alone sustain. Transcending the great debate between the revolutionists who would free us from our chains and the reformists who would merely, but more feasibly, loosen them, this dinner-party brigade restricts itself to designing pretty slipcovers for the chains so that no one will have to look at the mechanism of their bondage.

Their handiwork includes a version of cultural relativism that, horrified by the far more effective systems of social control that prevail in most of the world, reduces all cultures to the status of emasculated curiosities, which are then heaped with “respect”; the socially mandated use of language whose evident purpose is to obscure, not challenge, social prejudice; and a sexual and marital economy in which the overt patriarchy and hidden hypocrisy that preceded the sexual “revolution” have been replaced by overt hypocrisy and hidden patriarchy—allowing a reconfiguration of marital and family life with barely a skip in the underlying patriarchal logic, though overt mention of it is now chivalrously avoided. The enormous energy expended to achieve these microscopic victories should not overshadow the rebels’ remarkable accomplishment in the 1990’s, when—admittedly with considerable help from the right-wing propaganda machine—they managed to provoke a powerful reactionary backlash against a “politically correct” progressive hegemony they had never actually achieved. But given the Stalinist taint these New Age brigadiers routinely impute to any firm limits the left might impose on people’s behavior, what other result could they possibly have been hoping for?*

Still less can be expected from the ranks of those conceptual mechanics who, having “deconstructed” the social order on paper down to tiny pieces—thus accomplishing their great goal of proving they are no one’s fools—consider that their work is done, having indeed left

* The profoundest error of American neoconservatives when they finally usurped power was to forget how much they depended on the masked desire of so many liberals to reconcile with them. Or perhaps they simply failed to realize that even this desire must have its limits.

themselves no opening though which to go further. But even the politically engaged have been afflicted by the prevailing conceptual backslide, giving us a detheorized leftism focused exclusively on “race, class, and gender.” Though we’ve been assured throughout years of escalating reaction that all progressive critique must inevitably boil down to these three fundamentals, they’re far from a complete list even of the prevalent forms of discrimination against individuals—where are religion, nationality, and age, among others? And the very inclusion of class—presented, as it nearly always is, without reference to the workplace relations of production and ownership that give the concept its meaning and the accouterments of *class solidarity* and *class struggle* that give it its political punch—is largely tokenistic.

The individualistic focus of “race, class, and gender” renders them in any case quite inadequate for political analysis. For example, if a powerful cartel monopolizes markets, reaps huge profits, manipulates governments, and stokes wars, while obviously the people behind the cartel have a different class status than the victims of its shenanigans—and very likely a different race and gender status too—categorizing individuals in this way can hardly suffice to explain the sequence of events in which the cartel gains and exercises its monopoly, or why one group of upper-class white males prevails over others in power struggles whose consequences are far from neutral for everyone else, or even the specifics of exploitation. The sustained, organized contestations that dominate political life can never get much scrutiny so long as personal identities are treated as the ultimate substrate.

From a rigorous theoretical perspective, there is little reason even to group race, class, and gender together as a series of conjoined terms. If gender is based on an important biological difference—one that has always been with us—then race is a centuries-old social amalgamation of unimportant biological differences, while class is a millennia-old social formation with no biological basis. Even more glaringly, the three concepts have radically asymmetric relationships to social inequality. While the concept of race is so dependent on racism that eliminating racism would make racial difference as we currently understand it largely irrelevant, the elimination of sexism would only equalize sexual difference; men still wouldn’t get pregnant, and this would still have important social consequences. The elimination of “classism,” on the other hand, would not be enough even to equalize class difference: if you treat poor people with respect, they’re still poor. Equalization would require class itself to be eradicated, which couldn’t happen to race or sex.

In other words, “race, class, and gender” are not three things of the same kind like “apple, orange, and pear”; they’re more like “space, grass, and blender,” and it makes as little sense to discuss them as a series. Racism, classism, and sexism can only seem convergent because they constitute three infringements on the universal equality promised by this society’s reigning ideology.

Here is the site of two easy truths no committed cultural warrior, on either side, would dream of saying: that since this promise of equality was quite clearly never meant to be kept, its violation is not the relevant yardstick of oppression; and that a critique limited to the standpoint of individual discrimination poses little threat to the real culprits—(post)colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, respectively, *as systems* which permeate our lives in ways too numerous to mention, discrimination against individuals being merely one of the toxic byproducts. The oppressive everyday conditions of work are another byproduct, more massive but far less discussed, that *must* be discussed if progressivism is to climb out of the trap it has so busily domesticated. The across-the-board discursive swing towards worker issues that finally began in

2005, fifteen years overdue, though left-driven, cannot hope to avoid head-on collisions with the left's engrained mental and institutional habits.

But workers will have few options so long as they view their bosses as just human beings like them who happen to have the personal responsibility of telling them what to do—while their own equally urgent responsibility, however unfortunate, is to do it. According to this personalist conception, we're all just people and therefore equal, even if our respective assignments often makes it appear embarrassingly otherwise; first-name basis with hard-working, unpretentious superiors must be the final spoil of the workers' revolution, since any further demands would necessitate renegeing on one's responsibilities. We would have no labor unions, no social safety net, and no meaningful labor rights had genuine workers' movements not taken precisely the opposite tack, making their supposed responsibilities the very site of their protest, demanding that the system that imposes them be changed while leaving the asymmetrical personal relations of the workplace largely unchallenged as symbols and reminders of greater wrongs. Nor is student radicalism likely to resurface among those who consider any questioning of the gross power imbalance between themselves and their professors a violation of their chummy relationships. Within the confines of systemic social inequality, the very idea of personal equality is delusional, that of responsibility a weapon of enforcement.

The last fifteen years have borne witness to the logical political outcome of the personalist approach: a progressivism hell-bent on expunging oppressive representations yet blind to the social structures that produce them, and therefore unable to formulate any demand for structural social change. It's only necessary to contrast what radical voices were saying in the 1960's—a now-mythical period, far from devoid of its own reactionaryism, whose very mention has nonetheless become a curseword on establishment lips. Even though progressives have subsequently breached some major blindspots, the anti-hegemonic discourse of that time was vastly more clear-headed than in our own. For people then, believing—admittedly without justification—that revolution was imminent, saw society from a revolutionary perspective: not in terms of conflicts but of *contradictions*. Seeing, as few do now, a social order not merely obnoxious but unsustainable, not merely riven by discord but *made up of it*—a society intrinsically at war with itself by its very nature—they perceived far more clearly than we do both how things really work and how it might be possible to change them.

In those relatively unconfused times, before the postmodern withering away of conceptual rigor and political dissent, social change was firmly associated with the left. Not for a moment could it escape the company of its baby sibling: cultural and political paleo-conservatism, with its soiled blanket of tradition and constant whining about anything having the temerity to be “new.”

One of the most persistent moans was that all standards and distinctions were collapsing. This actually meant only that the standards and distinctions favored by conservatives were collapsing—which in turn meant that they weren't collapsing at all, since the moan's purpose was to position the moaner on one side of those very distinctions. The true meaning—distorted by a sort of mandatory ideological exaggeration—was that the other side (permissive values, pop culture, nonwestern societies, etc.) was daring to assert its prerogatives—and that it should stop doing so immediately.

In other words, the complaints of collapse derived their force precisely from their lack of justification. Perhaps, as conservatives wailed, nothing was any longer sacred, but some spaces remained nonetheless reserved. While commercialism pervaded Western society like construction in Manhattan, there was always Central Park. The walls between popular and elite

culture, academia and business, news and entertainment, low, middle, and high brow, however dubious in substance, were often crossed but hardly ever really breached where it counted.

The irony is that, now that the modernist “age of the new” is over and the intellectual mainstream is celebrating a revival of nineteenth-century ideology, standards and distinctions really *are* collapsing. For when the Cold War ended, so did the need to assert virtue against Communist power, to salute the gallant struggle against an evil to be opposed all the more fiercely the stronger it grew. No longer was good required to contest strength, or indeed to be distinguished from it. With a sigh of relief, capitalist ideologues reverted to their natural Hitlerian philosophy of might makes right, abandoning the tedious idealist distinctions that were forever in annoying conflict with the social realities they were supposed to defend. Heavily invested in those distinctions—particularly the opposition between commercial and artistic success—and hostile to the automatic glorification of power, American high culture had thus been unwittingly dependent on Stalinism, or on the fight against it. The global dichotomy between capitalism and Communism had acted as a symbolic plug to hold in sharp, principled demarcations of all kinds, well past their expiration dates, against the relentless erosions of modern life. When that plug was pulled, all previous barriers, all perceived limitations, began washing, just as Marx had predicted, down a capitalist drain.

But the change was not merely a new way to make money but a new moral compass in which integrity’s needle has been mysteriously demagnetized, making any lie plausible, any usurpation palatable, so long as it comes from a big enough fish. Transgressions that used to be thinkable only behind a veil of secrecy now take place in the light of day and are publicly defended as “reasonable,” whether it’s torture as public policy, prisoners with no legal status, legal nullification as an executive right, candidates who own the firms that count their votes, scientific studies altered at the demand of the government, “experts” who throw their opinions to the highest bidder, product placement presented as entertainment, or entertainment as news. Elite journalists have almost dismissed fact checking in favor of achieving a “balance” of opinions, thereby promoting spin doctoring to a level superior to actual events, and politicians have not surprisingly elevated “perception management” from an enhancement of track record to a replacement for it. Television pundits have made a blithe disregard for accuracy and logic seem as normal as commercial breaks, while even more informed defenders of the military-corporate orthodoxy have long since ceased to distinguish sneering from refutation or sophomoricness from sophistication.

Meanwhile, as attested by *The Matrix*’s resonance, many of our youth seemed afflicted throughout the nineties by a nagging post-apocalyptic mass delusion—suggesting that these perennial barometers of the leading edge of prevailing discourse were experiencing a symbolic collapse they could only assimilate in the real. When 9/11 arrived, it was as if the conquistadors had fulfilled Mayan prophecies for the youth of America—despite the eminently non-apocalyptic scene outside a portion of Manhattan.

To anyone not caught up in the prevailing mindset, the scene reeks of a bizarre decay of rational discrimination—to such an extent that distinguishing rationalism from irrationalism has come to be widely regarded as merely one partisan bias among many. What with liberals for whom truth is relative, and conservatives for whom the belligerent assertion of its absoluteness is accompanied by a painstaking insistence on always lying, to assert the truth as true now takes a revolutionary defiance.

The breakdown has inspired an endless succession of bad-ass sheriffs to ride into town, promising to restore order and impose law on everyone but themselves. Thunderous applause

often greets the performances of these postmodern practitioners, from Judge Judy to Alan Sokal to Sheriff Arpaio to Karl Rove, who by flagrantly disregarding every restraining principle gain power and prominence undreamt of by their customary targets, the postmodern theorists, who, by verbally undercutting all principles, are able to achieve impotence with ease. It is noteworthy that while most of the theorists are at least vaguely leftist, the practitioners invariably serve reaction. That postmodern “life without principles” thus leads to right-wing dominance is neither ironic nor coincidental; far more effective than COINTELPRO, a “left” doctrine that firm principles are intrinsically reactionary, by reducing disputes to the level of personal conflicts, leaves no compelling way to adjudicate them beyond the fact that some persons loom larger than others—a criterion hardly calculated to elevate the subalterns.

Meanwhile a posse of “posts-” has invaded the increasingly contorted social landscape, from postfeminism to post-dot-comism to postmodernism itself. The received explanation for this “postitis”—that we’ve seen it all—fails to explain the parallels with early twentieth century, high-modern ennui. How many today would accept that people had already seen it all in 1925—and how likely are people a few decades hence to be any less amused by *our* know-it-all pretenses?

During the 1960’s and ‘70’s, when there was an enormous pace of social change, folks didn’t talk much about “posts-”: they were far too interested in the new that was emerging—even when they opposed it. But the world wide web notwithstanding, our own era has up until very recently been strikingly devoid of major social innovation—unless you count the long line of unabashed chauvinisms empowered by the deterioration of any commonly accepted standard of fairness.

“Post-” means after, not beyond. We cry like carrion over previous inspirational insurgencies and artistic high points, lacking anything with which to replace them, trying to capture a gleam of a bygone creativity, plagued by a nagging feeling that we ought to be moving forward.

Postitis then, far from the curse of the excessively advanced, is a disease that breeds in cul-de-sacs—and world-weary smarminess is no more than a particularly gruesome symptom.

With an energized new left finally waking up to the assorted hangovers I’ve been describing, it’s high time to reconsider the historical choices that drove us into these narrow straits. For it is all too clear we cannot get out if we’re too proud of being “with it” to use reverse gear.

4. Culture and Modernism

The first half of the twentieth century—especially its middle three decades—was the heyday of high modernism. Until the end of that period, the concept of *culture* in today’s neutral ethnological sense was little used. Instead and to a quite astonishing degree, Western thinking tended to differentiate societies in terms of race. Even the differences between European countries were typically given racial explanations, with fine shadings of “ethnic stock” called in to justify any number of variations in national temperament.

Insofar as there was, nonetheless, an undoubted understanding of the decisive role of transmissible information within a society, it tended to be treated within an evolutionary construct. Culture was something that some peoples had more of than others; technological

stasis was equated with social stasis and a correspondingly “low” level of cultural development. “Primitive” peoples were those that hadn’t changed much since their inception, and were therefore regarded as preservations of the oldest strata, yet at the same time “young” because of the absence of an antecedent arc of historical change. Similarly, ancient societies were regarded as lying closer than us to a much-discussed “primitive social state.”

It’s hard for anyone who hasn’t read extensively from the social and humanistic writings of the time to understand how pervasive those attitudes were, such a long, short while ago. Subsequent rethinkings have quite justifiably rejected them in the strongest terms. Human “race” is largely a myth, cobbled together from ethnic divisions that don’t divide along the lines of perceived racial groupings, are not stable over time, and have limited biological importance, genetic diversity being primarily within, and not between, ethnic groups. Most of what had been explained by racial divisions is actually due to differential cultural transmission. All cultures change over time, even when their technologies are fairly static. And social development stretches so far into the past, for *every* culture, that none can be considered young or old. No primitive social state can be found; each culture has antecedent stages so numerous and varied that the cultures of ancient times were for all intents and purposes as much the product of an evolution, however unrecoverable, as our own. Cultural change is in no way confined to any pre-given linear pattern; and language, the decisive distinguishing trait of humankind, achieves the same degree of grammatical sophistication in every single culture, from hunter-gatherer to post-industrialist—its features in no way predictable from technological level.

The advance in understanding has been profound enough to give the now-prevalent tendency to dismiss modernist theory a ready excuse. Yet ideas from that era, however often they are rebutted, keep flaring up, serving as touchstones of a remarkably large portion of today’s farthest-ranging debates, stretching from the still-echoing clashes of sharply defined artistic and literary schools to the surprising resonance of the Freud/Jung/Adler split with divisions in contemporary feminism, from the radical reductions of logical positivism to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, from repressed childhood memories to doublethink, from formalism to Newspeak, encompassing practically every basic concept of cultural anthropology, and even extending to the 1930’s biological synthesis, along with fundamental debates in logic, mathematics, and physics that have since been refined but whose open-ended urgency has never been matched.

If modernist texts remain so pivotal, it’s because they raise possibilities people now fear to approach except at a level of remove. Whatever modernist theory may, putatively or actually, have lacked in rigor, it had a fertility and devotion to foundational issues we are sorely wanting. In sharp contrast with the unearned irony and denigration of language that permeate today’s *zeitgeist*, modernists took symbols seriously—theory still more so. Myth and metaphor likewise loomed large for them, for, seeking linkages across gulfs of time and space that today’s far more “connected” world seldom attempts except through the most flaccid humanist platitudes, they perceived their world as ordered by a single symbolic system. In this way modernists were no different from people since time immemorial—except that they saw those symbols slipping, the net of signifiers that had previously grounded Western society becoming relativized and even dismembered, opening up dizzying new spaces. But however far the net might slip, it had no alternative. If modernists thought in evolutionary terms, it was not only because of their chauvinism, but because doing so allowed them to place other societies within a common temporal framework: for there could be but one. “Primitivism,” in all its manifestations, was

appropriated, juxtaposed with the latest experiments in Western surrealism, because it could only be there. There was no separate space.

The predominant modernist outlook slowly shifted in the fifties, sixties, and seventies under a barrage of critiques. A new version, anti-racist and culturally informed, which I will designate *late modernism*, developed side by side with a tendency that although deeply indebted to modernist thought turned drastically away from both its structural unitarianism and its theoretical ambitions. The latter is widely known as *postmodernism*, though the term is often used far more indiscriminately. Indeed the two tendencies became so confused, despite their sharp differences, that what is called poststructuralism,^{*} commonly treated as almost a single school, in fact contains elements of both—Lacan, Barthes, and Althusser advancing late modernisms, with Derrida and, more equivocally, Foucault tending towards postmodernism.

Of course labels of this kind must be applied with caution, lest they become an excuse to ignore the specificity of a theorist's articulation; but the distinction itself has nothing fuzzy about it. Postmodernism is both highly theoretical and anti-theoretical; all formulations, all systems are to be undermined—even the author's own. While late modernists also at times undercut their own statements, the purpose is to dialectize and extend them, not to make of underminedness a universal status; late modernism very much shares the modernist aspiration of theory building, though it engages the task with a hard-won awareness of its limitations. In particular, where modernists expected one theory to solve everything, spurring endless bitter wars between rival theoretical schools, late modernists recognize that even a universally applicable theory does not say everything valid about its referents—hence the need for multiple intersecting approaches. The subtlety of this distinction is lost in postmodernism's supposedly more radical outright rejection of all-applicability, and its concomitant preference for fragmentation over intersection.

Though postmodernism has always positioned itself as modernism's successor, it has in fact stood side by side with late modernism since the mid twentieth century, as is legible across a wide variety of arts, popular and otherwise—culminating in every case in a decisive shift in postmodernism's favor as the century neared its end. In the English language the shift began perhaps earliest in poetry, but Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Galway Kinnell are among the conspicuous late modernists who declaimed fundamentals through charged metaphors against a rising postmodern trend of prosaic language and mandatory irony that, extending from Robert Lowell, has come to totally dominate academic poetry; conversely, postmodernism can be seen temporally side-by-side with high modernism in the person of Wallace Stevens, far more highly regarded within the current orthodoxy than he ever was in his own time. Musically, the Beatles, with their magisterial lyrics, presided over the last transition before the parting of the tribes, with intense, tightly focused melodies like those of hot jazz, whereas forms as drastically divergent as cool jazz and hip-hop share a postmodern looseness of structure, the lack of a central driving melody, and—not incidentally—increasing prominence as the twentieth century waned. Abstract expressionism—the last great flareup of modernism in art, but with the more permeable boundaries typical of late modernism—was simultaneous with the birth of postmodern “pop art,” now metastasized in endless forms of kitsch, overt and otherwise. The decline of the structurally unifying category of “general fiction,” and the consequent segregation of literary fiction into a commercially maligned ghetto alongside multitudes of demographically targeted “genres,” follows a similar trend—not a clean temporal break between post- and late modernism, but an increasingly lopsided coexistence. Postmodernism is not, then, the successor to modernism; it is

^{*} Itself a suspect term, invented by the French media, adopted by American academics, but accepted by few if any of the major figures to which it was originally applied.

a simultaneous movement expressing a certain beyond of modernism—one incapable of a sequel of its own.

With their tactic of putting everything into question, including “hard facts” and “common sense,” postmodernists have become the perfect objectivist bogeyman. But ironically, by relativizing all theories and rejecting a definitive status for any, they have also cleared objectivism’s way. Nothing is easier than rallying people against theories that are not only incomprehensible to most but seem to inspire no passionate commitments even among those who use them. To undermine everything is ultimately to affirm nothing. But many postmodernists have gone further, espousing a surprisingly pragmatist anti-theoreticism on the grounds that all system, even all representation, is unsound or repressive. In this sense, postmodernists and objectivists not only need each other as ideal enemies with which to rouse their respective supporters, but are partners in a mutual storm of theoretic destruction.

The winds in the postmodern direction have blown especially fiercely in America, where the anti-modern turn is more extreme than in Europe; Derrida and Foucault are far and away the most influential “poststructuralists” here. But the phenomenon is not limited to the self-consciously artistic or intellectual. Popular, political, and academic trend-setters, for all the ostentatious difference of their vehicles, have driven in tandem down the same no-through street. Postmodern youth culture—characterized by a segmented social vision, cynicism without rebellion, a belief in universal self-centeredness as an ineluctable fate, impotently sympathetic recognition of the underdog’s plight, the cultivation of fakery as an art form, ideological nihilism, and pervasive post-apocalyptic motifs—came during the nineties to permeate not only music and movies but the everyday fabric of social life.

The postmodern trend has inaugurated a pervasive discourse about the deconstruction of master signifiers—Big Words like essence, nature, and origins, and markers of authority from “God, family, and country” to royal seals to IBM. In showing their hollowness of content and the myriad occupants who are capable of ascending the same throne, postmodernists have not succeeded in the least disruption of the power of those who occupy places of mastery. In fact, it must be said that the latter are in their debt. Nothing is more freeing for a king—and less so for everyone else—than to learn that he is no longer expected to be regal. If the crown is an emblem of raw power guaranteeing not even a pretense of restraint, and every sophisticated subject knows it, the king will exercise none, all the while purring to the remaining naifs that he is behaving exactly as a king must—to question which is treason. The postmoderns thus end up fingered as traitors by a tyranny they helped to create, with the naifs serving as informants. Such a scenario is too present and familiar to American readers to need further elaboration.

Indeed the backlash against deconstruction has been a double success, drawing people with progressive leanings into the politically untenable position of defending the supposed dismantling of master signifiers, while simultaneously distracting them from the effectiveness of their continued operation. Until the last few years awakened them to their danger, most liberals seemed to think master signifiers a fading relic that could simply be bypassed through a sufficiently inclusive multicultural diversity. The goal was to treat each culture as an autonomous encampment, with none in a dominant position.

But this vision requires a universal plain on which they can all camp out. The very concept of inclusion implies simultaneous coexistence and mutual awareness—which in turn necessitates a comparative space, however abstract, that encompasses every culture.

Multicultural “relativism,” then, turns out to be a particularly rigid form of universalism. Not only does it logically require the very God’s-eye perspective it so stridently disclaims, the

result is impossible to dialectize, since any critique would inevitably impinge on someone's self-determination. Instead, each culture is left frozen and autonomous within the invisible container of universal tolerance.

Beyond all the talk about one global community lies the reality that this community consists only of a certain elite; past the shiny office buildings of global capitalism still lie slums and villages which may be under homogenizing pressures but are far from homogeneous. The supposed unification that "globalization" implies refers to a process imposed entirely from above. The concept of multiculturalism—at least in its most widely accepted form—differs less from the logic of globalization than its advocates would like to believe. In effect, it is globalization without assimilation, an abstract proposition neither useful nor offensive to the forces of global capital.

But who came up with universal tolerance, anyway? Certainly not the cultures it's supposed to shield. Far from a neutral value, it has the effect of allowing every culture to exist, but only so long as none of them matters—for if they were allowed to set standards and impose their strictures as all real cultures do, their simultaneous equality would be impossible. Real cultures may "coexist," that is, work out arrangements with their neighbors, and may borrow from each other at will, but each within its own domain exercises an unequivocal and coercive preeminence.

The study of culture has shown, in fact, that any one culture covers the totality of meanings, leaving no space for alternatives. While it's true that some meanings that are important in one culture make no sense in another, that's only because their possibility is excluded outright by the latter: no gap is to be found there. A culture, taken as a whole, *has no gaps*, because only in reference to its total field, ultimately identical with language, can gaps be defined.

For example, a polytheist culture never exposed to monotheist influence (as used to exist all over the world) probably does not *lack* monotheism: in all likelihood, the possibility of monotheism is simply not marked out within its structure. Only if monotheism, or its rejection, were hidden within the folds of the polytheist discourse itself would its lack be an issue therein.

Cultural plurality means that gapless fields of meaning come in many varieties—which can in no way stand side by side. The physical coexistence of different cultures masks their profound incompatibility. Even people who live in a bicultural world, who go daily from one to the other, must in monocultural settings bow entirely to their neighbors' expectations, which may well encompass other cultures as disparaged terms. And those who remain inside a culture do not perceive it as arbitrary, any more than speakers engrossed in conversation perceive their native language's grammar as arbitrary. They are right not to. For any one culture, however hybrid in origin, is a total world.

Late modernism accepts this totalization and dialectizes it from within. One's culture is not a particularism; rather, it is one's only access to the universal. When we analyze and compare other cultures, it is not a failure but a necessity that we still speak from within our own. The fractured world of symbol and myth is *where we live*; "cultural constructedness" is not a vanity to be derided but the human destiny *par excellence*. One can cross from one culture to another, but there is no cross-cultural space; one always finds oneself enmeshed in a single, all-inclusive framework within which its subjects' lives are ordered.

Rather than trying to "deconstruct" their culture's master signifiers, modernist poets, mythologists, and theorists *played with them*, understanding their contrived, even gamelike character, and at the same time their unavoidably privileged place. Even revolution can only

replace one set of master signifiers with another. To show the symbolic truth behind the religious or biological trappings is no debunking: symbols, in their own way, are just as strong as DNA.

The beyond of culturalism and the beyond of modernism are the same: a direction already clearly marked when the wrong turn was taken. Late modernists were starting to unravel, not the supposed arbitrariness of master signifiers, but the contingency and necessity of our relation to them, before their message was drowned under a tidal wave of revanchist anti-theory propaganda—with the ironic assistance of the New Left's 1970's turn, which increasingly replaced the banner, "Don't let them rule you," with "Don't let them represent you." After a fateful mismatch between discursive and material conditions allowed insurrectional discourses to traverse a late-sixties tipping point without revolution occurring, "personal discovery" became a code-word for continuing the discursive revolution shorn of its political pretenses, and the right to define oneself outside of the established signifying system became a substitute for the demand that it be overturned. An insistence on thwarting the representations of master signifiers—conceived as dead weights, oppressive in themselves—drove erstwhile rebels to view any experimentation with them as a reactionary act. So began a paradoxical anti-modernism that, taken as a self-liberation, has spread far beyond the left—with little resistance, and for good reason, from those who wield these signifiers to their advantage.

This anti-signifying ideology powerfully reinforced the illusion, irrelevant to capitalist production but essential to its propaganda, that the individual stands self-sufficient above all symbolic restraint. It also paved the way for a proliferation of social groupings purportedly independent of any common allegiance—radicalized further in the general post-Cold-War breakdown of principled distinctions. But if seventies-style personalism complete with designer subcultures and matching identities has turned into a dead end only Prozac can make bearable, it remains true that we cannot go back to the culturally single world history of modernism, nor pretend that one discourse constitutes an Archimedean point under which all others can be subsumed.

But any perspective of all-encompassing relativism is itself merely a disguised Archimedean point. To truly escape such points, I must accept that my place in the world is radically contingent and beyond my control, governed by a history that extends far before my own life. From such a place, undetached, nonneutral, defined by relations of proximity to others, predetermined and yet ever-evolving, one is forced to take one's stand.

Against the whole historical tendency of Western thought, we must answer "Where are we?" with no pretense of universality—as actors caught in time. It is precisely the refusal to acknowledge the role of past events as *organizing frameworks*, artificially limiting them to disconnected causal factors, that makes it impossible for objectivists to recognize the context that alone gives meaning to a subject's act. This leaves them with no consistent choice but to reduce an act to "behavior," a response stripped of meaning in advance and devoid of the very possibility of authentic freedom.

Yet the eminently postmodern position that action merely expresses where the actor is coming from likewise misses the mark, for it ignores precisely what objectivists most compulsively deny: that what determines my act is not so much *what conditions me* as what conditions *the desire I act upon*—a desire, exterior to my being, whose meaning cannot be pinned down in advance—not where I'm coming from, but where what I'm coming from leads me to.

I myself cannot predict where this lure will take me. Yet far from a reason to consider my actions eternally provisional, their chance-dependence is what I must *fatefully embrace* to make them hit home. This is precisely where my freedom becomes possible—when I take upon myself like an inherited obligation the circumstances that impel me, however far they are beyond my power, or indeed against my will. Only then can I unreservedly avow my response to them as my own, asserting my freedom even if in the very act of affirming that my principles leave me with no choice.

All the paradoxes arising from the concept of “free will” stem from the wish to say, “But I could just as well have done something else”—a statement motivated by the will to stand above the concrete fortunes of life, the fear to embrace them in midstream—in other words, the very fear of freedom. Those who refuse life’s contingencies so as not to be fooled by language are condemned to wander from discourse to discourse, unable to use their terms as anything but exit passes. As Jacques Lacan titled one of his seminars, *The non-dupes go astray*.*

The task of theory is not to avoid being dupes, nor to acknowledge a dupedom we hold ironically at arm’s length. It is rather to be language’s willing fools, accepting our ineluctable fate as enactors of discourse. The discovery of the endless structural circularity of language has led postmodernists to forget that *to speak* has nothing circular about it: it is *an irreversible, unrepeatable act* within an ongoing drama. The modernist gamble was to stake life itself on the chance of *gaining recognition* for this act, entering freely into a theater of words with self-divided players strewn across a stage at once shabby and rich with meaning. For discourse is a labor in which meaning is always born, even if from a womb of nonsense.

Failing to understand that no recognition can be granted except inside a specific discourse, today’s most prevalent form of multiculturalism operates under the pretense of giving all discourses equal standing from a position—never clarified because it is impossible—of universal recognition. Correctly perceiving the lack of connection among the various discourses it seeks to bring together under the roof of diversity, this multiculturalism is compelled to treat their disconnectedness as a real phenomenon—hence the endless platitudes about how we live in an inherently fragmented world. Once it is understood that no such outer roof exists—that it is impossible to talk about diversity except as a contingent phenomenon of real social contact—unified theory reawakens at the precise place where its articulation uncovers a fault-line within one of the all-too-familiar discourses that sponsor its social existence.

The perspective of the new modernism must be the ability to encompass a coherent world of universal import from any such position—just as the principle of relativity in physics is the perfect adequacy, indifferent to apparent contradiction, of each located observer.

* Seminar XXI, *Les non-dupes errent*, 1973-4, unpublished. *Errent* in French means both err and wander, and Lacan intended (and discussed) both meanings—hence my translation.

ENDNOTES

My suggestion is to read these straight through, without referring back to the main text.

SECTION 1

- 1. If objectivists treat all analyzed discourse as behavior, this still effects no consistent reduction, since the hidden corollary is that discourse that is considered important for its own sake is not analyzed at all (p. 3a):**

The solution is to analyze all discourse *in itself* and on a single level: if I talk about you, you can just as easily talk about me. Even a special jargon or symbolism I create to discuss you with is merely a horizontal extension of common language, not a higher level. Language has only one level, and discussion of language and discourse is intrinsic to it. Since words and other linguistic units are defined by their distinctions from and relations to one other, there is no level of language not already suffused by self-reference; and indeed the speech of even the most presumptively “unsophisticated” people turns out to be chock-full of overt references to discourse, both the speaker’s and that of others.

- 2. Right-wingers and objectivists are waging parallel and indeed coordinated campaigns to delegitimize intellectual unorthodoxy (p. 3d):**

The nexus of objectivism and political reaction is not always recognized because it is most pronounced within the pro-establishment New-York-Times-style center-rightism that contemporary Newspeak terms liberalism, and among libertarians. Though neither tendency identifies itself as “conservative,” both hew more loyally to the corporate line that provides the right-wing machine with an engine than do some of the fiercest champions of the religious and chauvinist obscurantisms that serve it as window dressing. The convergences between the corporate line and objectivism, from personnel to ideology to top-down logic, extending to their shared roots in Gilded Age social “science,” are today so blatant that I find myself puzzled by how someone like Noam Chomsky, who sees through that line and its advocates with admirable clarity, can believe that political reaction could be repelled by a sufficiently detached objectivism. While objectivism, in the absence of a highly specific set of excess baggage, does indeed support progressive arguments over reactionary ones, the dynamic of power ensures that precisely that baggage will inevitably pass into popular consciousness unless subjected to the inspection of an autonomous leftist logic that objectivists would have to disclaim. Facts alone cannot do the trick: they mean little until put inside a framework (even an objectivist construct like cognitivism takes this as a starting point). And as Chomsky himself has quite brilliantly shown, the generally available interpretive frameworks are reactionary, because the powerful exert intellectual as well as economic and political hegemony. The popular common sense Chomsky pushes as an alternative, while it may indeed produce sporadically subversive results, is unreliable, since it is a logical expression of prevailing social practices: that is precisely why in our times it is noticeably objectivistic. When enough people find out what their leaders are really up to, the most widespread demand is usually for new leaders who better embody prevailing ideals; only a structural understanding of *why* these things happen and keep happening can spur a cry for structural reform. And the objectivist logic of detached observation (as Chomsky puts it in one article, trying to gauge how our world’s doings would be judged by Martians) is theoretically insufficient to clarify actual social relations, which always require people—even when they theorize abstractly—to speak from one socially and linguistically embedded position to another. Social analysis, social dissent, and above all social movements need a body of theory that takes this embeddedness as a starting point and not a perpetual obstacle.

SECTION 2

3. Objectivist naiveté concerning the theory of aesthetics regards beauty as merely a decorative adornment--for good reason, when you see how objectivists write (p. 6d):

This is not due to mere incapacity but to a positive *aversion* to good writing and everything connected with it, regarded as a sign of humanistic “softness.” The use of parallelism in all its manifestations—indispensable for good writers—is especially intolerable, with its blatant opening of language to the beyond of the communicative function to which objectivists wish to reduce it. It’s not surprising that the usual quantifying methods are now used to justify replacing good writing with “effective writing techniques”—defined in advance as what a less gullible era used to call “pandering to the lowest common denominator,” the research being confined to the determination of how this can most effectively be done. A good writer writes not for a demographic average of existing readers but for an idealized reader, accepting the specific risks of misunderstanding or unintelligibility her choice entails.

4. People say, "The mind is the brain," but never, "The brain is the mind" (p. 7a):

Indeed, anyone suggesting that what goes on in the brain might be *caused by* the mind is instantly labeled an anti-scientific occultist—although in practice both causal directions are tacitly assumed by everyone. A neurological explanation of a mental “disease” can in no way replace the “behavioral” pattern that led to the diagnosis, for without the latter there would be nothing for neurology to explain. Thus, the significance of the neurological consistency observed in different cases is irreducibly dependent upon a psychological consistency. Far from overcoming dualism, then, neurological explanations of behavior make it insuperable. But “mind-brain” issues inspire such profound conceptual disorientation that even non-objectivists tend to accept neurology as a “substrate” that determines what ultimately counts as a single diagnosis, so that widely disparate behavioral patterns would be judged the same syndrome were a common neurological “cause” to be discerned, while indistinguishable behavioral patterns would have to be separated to accommodate multiple neurological “causes.” Psychiatry, far from benefiting from neurological “explanations,” is thus completely disorganized by them. With the rise of neuropharmacology, this outcome has nothing hypothetical about it.

5. Science as a substitute for religious certitude (p. 7b):

Whiggishness and positivism concerning the history and knowledge of science culminate in a belief in the sanctity of the scientific peer review process—the bride of Nature—which, like the Catholic church, has apparently been granted an institutional grace enabling it to transcend the admitted human flaws of its participants, achieving near-perfection in the screening of acceptable claims and rationalizing the flagrant violation of freedom of debate that is the inevitable result. Within science’s increasingly institutionalized self-conception, the idea of it as a self-revolutionizing process whose inherent uncertainty is its greatest strength has little traction.

6. Insofar as “free will” is at all relevant to science, it quite blatantly contradicts its whole premise—that we live in a materially explicable world (p. 7c):

The concept of free will, seldom clearly defined, is usually found trapped in a murky zone between an endless regress of will controlling will controlling will and reams of rationally uninterpretable celebratory verbiage. But what its supporters seem to want to believe is that each human being making a choice acts, like Aristotle’s God, as an unmoved mover. The attempt to find free will a material foundation in the confinement of parts of quantum mechanics to purely statistical predictions is an object lesson in the power of tendentious thinking. Freedom—if the concept is to be given any dignity—is a property of a subject, not of an observed object—and certainly does not consist of statistically predictable arbitrariness. But even if we grant the supposition that randomness is freedom—which would vitiate all the wishful

consequences people expect from it—who exercises this freedom? Myself—an electron inside my brain—my whole brain—a portion of it—the immediate space that includes me—the earth’s biosphere—or the whole universe? Physics does not answer this question: randomness is not “exercised” by anyone, and a human is to physics merely a clumping of particles without fundamental status. While quantum randomness coupled with extreme complexity may well make the notion that an unmoved mover is a decisive player inside the brain impossible to disprove, a universe inhabited by many unmoved movers is no more compatible with scientific inquiry than is intelligent design—which can likewise use indeterminacy as a shield against any outright disproof.

7. Objectivist discourse, confusing language ability with language, tries to biologize both (p. 8b):

Any reduction of language to our animal existence is as hopeless as trying to convert the square root of two into a rational number through genetic neuro-engineering; for the symbolic order in which language and mathematics operate is a “reality” in its own right, quite independent of those who use it, whether taken individually or collectively. That is precisely why biological explanations of language, however flimsy, hold such fascination for an age obsessed with obliterating every trace of symbolic efficacy—or rather concentrating all of it into the mechanism of the universe, what Einstein called God’s clockwork, a black box whose end results fundamental physics tries to represent in the eminently symbolic form of equations.

8. Marx's thought is supposed to have lost all credibility when most Leninist-Stalinist regimes collapsed (p. 8d):

No one seems to perceive how illogical it is for those who fiercely condemned Stalinism while it persisted to regard it as discredited by its fall—if the tyranny had lasted longer, would that have improved it? Only the triumphant jettison of a secret, grudging admiration for Stalinism’s “success” can truly explain why so many Westerners perceived its demise as an exhilarating confirmation of how bad it was. The jettison has required a rewrite of history, a systematic belittlement of past Communist states that diametrically contradicts the scare-story anti-Communism of the Cold War. Ridicule attaches to anyone who contests the now-obligatory falsehoods about Communism’s economic failure, its massive inefficiencies dooming to inevitable extinction a Soviet regime that turned a backward nation into a superpower during seventy-five years of procrastinated collapse, while Red China was forced to scotch economic policies so unsustainable they nearly doubled the life expectancy in their first thirty years, despite both nations lacking the benefits of Western investment and aid. And the shills for the American national security state who as late as the eighties argued for supporting brutal right-wing dictatorships on the grounds that leftist insurgencies, if successful, would establish Communist regimes that could never be overthrown—whereas rightists would eventually be supplanted by lovely democracies though diplomatic pressure—instead of apologizing for their grotesque error, now give us to believe that Communism’s unique depravity is proved by the fact that it *was* overthrown and that bringing about its downfall was their plan all along.

Even the English language cannot stand against the new logic. In a now-mandatory misuse restricted to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the phrase “the former” is prefixed to their names, not only in the correct sense that describes their territory after their demise, but in reference to the states themselves. Nobody speaks of the policies of the former Roman Empire or the former South Vietnam; a former state doesn’t have policies. But to the sensitive mentality of post-Cold-War ideologues, Communist states cannot have been altogether real even when they existed—and anyone who points out that some still exist and that millions of people live in them is quite obviously “in denial” of the eternal truth that *Communism is dead*, against which mere actualities are as nothing.

9. Lenin and Co. formulated a postponement of worker self-governance to an indefinite, idealized future in favor of rule by a “vanguard” elite Marx had always forcefully opposed (p. 8d):

Marx, declaring he had learned more from workers than they ever learned from him, consistently struggled for that most difficult aim, a worker-led workers’ movement. See also his “Theses on Feuerbach,” where he says, in rebuttal to an early form of objectivism (which he calls “materialism”) and its pious hope of transforming the world through reeducation, “The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.” Although this is not specifically addressed to the more sophisticated form of objectivism that would later be called vanguardism, I cannot imagine a more cogent refutation of its error.

10. Freud’s legendarily diverse attackers, whose range of disciplines and ideologies greatly reassures those who prefer not to think for themselves (p. 9b):

Among arbiters of opinion so threatened by Freud’s ghostly presence they must obsessively redeclare him dead every few years, an essential comfort is the peculiar recurrent assumption that the evidence for psychoanalytic theory is limited to his own cases, or indeed to the tiny subset he wrote about. Indispensable to this refusal to acknowledge the ongoing work of the analytic clinic is the Anglosphere provincial belief that French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, famous for advocating a *return to Freud*, was really more of a literary theorist or philosopher than an analyst. Often proffered in a “friendly” spirit, this interpretation exhibits a sweeping ignorance not only of the explicitly stated and consistently pursued aims of Lacan’s teaching but of the most basic facts of its social impact. That Lacan personally trained a sizable proportion of young Parisian analysts at a time of explosive growth in the French analytic movement, or that Lacanianism is today one of the world’s major psychoanalytic schools, with thousands of practitioners across Europe and Latin America, is a nonconcept in circles where Lacan’s life work is considered to consist of texts for whose explication the main qualification is an English degree.

11. Marx and Freud’s supporters have supposedly “retreated” to the humanities after having been cast out of the social “sciences” like Adam and Eve before an enraged God (p. 10b):

This oft-told yarn goes hand in hand with the causally confused notion, repeated well beyond the rightist confines within which it was concocted, that the rise of radical academics is due to the failures of radical politics. Interestingly, no one dwells on the correlative assumption that political success would have led to relative academic failure, or provides a political or institutional rationale for the idea that weakness breeds strength. The issue is, well, *academic* anyway: those of us who actually practice radical politics are painfully aware how few so-called “radical professors” are of much use when the political chips are down.

12. Freud and Marx are nearly incomprehensible in an age in which pragmatism predominates even among theorists (p. 10c):

The ridicule of Marx is particularly revealing in the mouth of socialists who think the laws of accumulation unfit for our times, although their effects, from corporate consolidation to capital accumulation to technological downsizing to the weakening of national barriers to the proliferation of capitalism itself, have never been more obvious. Similarly, the denigration of Louis Althusser’s concept of *epistemological break* by people who “do theory” reveals all too clearly the profound gap between the level at which his texts are pitched and that at which they are now being read—the latter focused on a straw man in which it amounts to a mental reset button it is all too easy to show Marx did not push. The very idea that there could be a conceptual shift at so fundamental a level that it would cause, not the obliteration, but the redefinition and rededication of all other terms within a radically new framework, is profoundly unacceptable to an intellectual climate dedicated to the proposition that all complex ideas are created equal to the sum of their parts.

SECTION 3

13. The study of propaganda is one of the few areas of social thought to escape the prevailing loss of nerve (p. 11d):

The advance in understanding propaganda's dominant place in our society has, for obvious reasons, been less than enthusiastically welcomed within establishment circles. Yet the conception of human behavior as ruthlessly self-interested with which establishment apologists disguise their idealism blatantly contradicts the imagined "free society" in which they claim we live, in which propaganda spews only from the margins, while those best able to get away with it mysteriously refrain—contrary to their historically well-documented previous practice. The competitive necessities of the "free marketplace of ideas" are always ready to be rolled in as a generic explanation for how ruling class discourse is kept reasonable, convincing until one asks for causally detailed examples. A quest for a rigorous definition of social freedom and its limits might do well to begin from the failure of this approach.

14. Detheorized leftism (p. 13a):

The rise of just about every new American progressive movement has been accompanied by an Arctic spring of theoretical innovation. The chronic weakness of a left in which anti-theoretic pragmatism is otherwise the rule is no more coincidental than the passionate spates of well-being that have accompanied these brief releases from theoretical inhibition. Contrast the European left of the past half-century, often disparaged by Yankee rebels for being consistently more theoretical, though it is equally consistently more organized and more successful.

15. The very inclusion of class within "race, class, and gender" is largely tokenistic (p. 13a):

It's no coincidence that most academic discussions of race, class, and gender quickly reduce to race and gender—the two that fit most comfortably within the paradigm of individual discrimination, while posing the least threat to institutional privilege. Among the tenured class, there are many whose dream, while overlapping with Dr. King's, is a bit less lofty: to extend just as much chance to women and people of color as to whites and men to join them within the tiny fellowship of those who get to exploit graduate students—while taking care that the latter don't unionize.

16. Class is a millennia-old social formation with no biological basis (p. 13c):

To prevent the obvious fact that class is purely social from having its proper impact, it's sufficient to make it seem debatable: thus the unironic attempts of some objectivists to ground class in animal social hierarchies, despite the manifest absence of anything remotely approaching instinctual fixity within the vast variety of human social arrangements, some of which even preclude class. Similarly, the endless arguments over the influence of "individual abilities" on a person's class are an effective way to ignore the nondebatably social determination of which abilities have economic value and what openings exist in which to profit from them. The correlative limitation of job equity to "equal opportunity" was decreed in the early Cold War as the price of political respectability, and establishment liberals have been pleading ever since for the right of slum children to have their fair shot to become board chairs and downsize any of their colleague's sons and daughters who might be unworthy. Once the Cold War ended and the corporate establishment completed renegeing on every promise it had ever made to these liberals, they had only two ways to maintain both oppositional creds and respectability: retreat into more and more abject attempts at unrequited compromise, or the equal opportunity *reductio ad absurdum* of libertarianism—the nineties substitute for a radical new idea.

17. Cultural and political paleo-conservatism, with its soiled blanket of tradition and constant whining about anything having the temerity to be “new” (p. 14d):

That was before the right decided it was disadvantageous to be associated with the “old” in an age of collapsing idols and used its control of the corporate media to launch a propaganda campaign around the oxymoronic talking point that conservatism actually represents the new. After an intensive “Hip to be Square” barrage in the early eighties, this became an accepted truism, aided by a remarkable complicity in American liberal consciousness which seemed to take rueful relish in the hegemonic canards about its own unfashionability. The supposed return to conservatism among ordinary people during the Reagan era became a mutually convenient lie covering for conservatives in the top-down nature of their “revolution” and for liberals in the self-inflictedness of their organizational decline. “Conservatism” subsequently became so associated with trendiness that what was previously understood by the word has been all but forgotten.

18. Liberals for whom truth is relative and conservatives for whom the belligerent assertion of its absoluteness is accompanied by a painstaking insistence on always lying (p. 15e):

Conservative pundits seem to have adopted a policy of tendentiously distorting, misleading, misrepresenting, or inventing *all the time*—even when discussing facts that work in their favor. Since “moderates” are those who adopt conservative spin half-way, the very concept that one should report the unexaggerated truth can now be plausibly ascribed to liberal bias—thus ruling out in advance any “neutral” alternative to conservative lies and strangulating the most straightforward logical and factual issues in partisan knots. No doubt this clever strategy is taught quite deliberately, if not named for what it is, in conservative “leadership” training. It gives the true meaning of the exclamation, “But you only hear that from liberals”—and of political “science” demands for “non-partisan” analysis.

SECTION 4

19. A culture, taken as a whole, has no gaps, because only in reference to its total field, ultimately identical with language, can gaps be defined (p. 20d):

If language is defined in its broadest and most rigorous sense, as everything that determines the meaning of speech, it encompasses all cultural phenomena, because anything that is part of a culture—as opposed to the physical plant called society—will inevitably affect that meaning. For instance, while the dictionary definitions of kinship terms in cultures with quite different kinship practices may coincide, the import of statements making use of these terms will not. The definitions of language and meaning used by linguists are of course much more restrictive, reflecting an understandable if problematic desire to limit their inquiry to less ambiguous mechanisms. Language and culture refer strictly speaking to a single synchronic field; but the two are accessed along distinct pathways, which only converge once their quite dissimilar phenomena reveal their congruent structures, and I find it useful to retain both terms—“language” when on the linguists’ road, “culture” otherwise.

20. Any one culture, however hybrid in origin, is a total world (p. 20f):

That hybrids quickly develop their own rules makes clear that they are not merely intersections between cultures but autonomous cultural developments of their own. And if a trait couldn’t belong to a culture that borrowed it from another, not much would be left of *any* culture. It is precisely the overemphasis on origins that inhibits understanding culture as a synchronic totality that closes around whatever it contains.

21. A fateful mismatch between discursive and material conditions allowed insurrectional discourses to traverse a late-sixties tipping point without revolution occurring (p. 21b):

The mismatch was hardly unprecedented. Indeed, Marx's own error was not his laws of accumulation of productive resources (the material conditions), nor his dictum that revolution depends on their reaching a state of unsustainable contradiction with the social relations that govern them (the discursive conditions), but his drastic underestimation of how long it would take for the contradiction to come about—for the discourse of Marxist revolution to meet up with its material enactment. However little rooted in the logic of his theories, this optimistic miscalculation has had fateful theoretic and historical consequences for Marxisms always straining to see a revolution around the next bend in the road. What was different in the sixties was the widespread popular penetration of discourses suggesting an imminent, if ill-defined, social revolution: thus the leitmotif of hypocrisy and repression serving only to conceal the untenability of the existing order. The subsequent postmodern discursive implosion attests to the leitmotif's surprising truth: the existing discourse really *was* untenable. The mistake was in thinking that this was enough for revolution—that a discursive collapse could bring about a material collapse, when in fact only the reverse causality is possible. Thus the missing truth of the nonrevolution of 1969 is a Marxian materialist fatalism from which would-be revolutionists, including “Marxists,” arm in arm with their political foes, have been running in horror ever since, proclaiming the voluntarist mantra that the people can be held back only by their own faulty discourses. Nothing short of this full-spectrum ideological complicity could have produced a disillusionment so deceptive, or a wrong turn so pervasive.

22. In the seventies, “personal discovery” became a code-word for continuing the discursive revolution shorn of its political pretenses, and the right to define oneself outside of the established signifying system became a substitute for the demand that it be overturned (p. 21b):

The breakdown of confidence in theory left only the Protestant work ethic to counter this new inward emphasis; thus the misinterpretation of Marx's “Change the world” by those who remained defiantly political, demanding diligent manipulation of an objectified world as the price of social salvation, lumping together every failure to separate from and denounce the world as passive acquiescence with a supposedly inertia-ridden status quo whose convulsive dynamism these moralistic leftists overlooked. All their diatribes against the solipsistic indulgences of their more Jungian comrades-in-arms failed to contest the shared Romantic fantasy of being outside rather than inside the signifying system they opposed. “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it,” concludes Marx's “Theses on Feuerbach”—but the whole thrust of that work is precisely to *reject* the dichotomy between active subject and passive object. It is from the inside out that Marx wants us to change the world.