

Everyday Resistance to Postmodern Theory

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ABSTRACT

This introductory paper outlines the main ideas and some central arguments of several critical studies assigned in an interdisciplinary course entitled "Knowledge and Theory in the Academic Humanities." The ultimate goal of the course, along with this essay, is to facilitate independent thought conducive to a skeptical and rational engagement with a number of highly problematic current theories—many of which have become hegemonic ideologies within comparative literature, cultural studies, and transnational studies. Therefore, the books and articles I highlight offer readings that are critical of the theoretical orientations in question: Freudian and neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxism and neo-Marxism, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Saidian conjurings of "orientalism," poststructuralism, and postmodernism.

Postmodernism, so vaguely and contradictorily defined by its advocates, is here used as an umbrella term for all of these and other theoretical orientations operating under the illusion that the modern era has ended due to a recent paradigm shift away from a scientific world view and the values of the European Enlightenment. In every case, these theoretical orientations are shown to be lacking in evidentiary support. For that reason, these theories are held in low esteem by most serious academics, including scientists, historians, philosophers, and humanists. Moreover, these theoretical orientations are quite irrelevant to social activists working for human rights, equal justice, economic betterment of the poor, and environmental improvement throughout the world.

KEY WORDS**Foucauldian discourse analysis****Eurocentrism****Freudian psychoanalysis****liberalism****Marxism****Orientalism****postmodernism****poststructuralism****psychoanalysis****science**



A Personal Introduction

In the summer of 1979, I attended a conference on Chinese literature at Tamkang University, where I presented a paper on the Southern Song poet Lu You 陸游. I vividly remember that the most animated panel at the conference was one in which William Tay (Zheng Shusen 鄭樹森) debated the pros and cons of the theories of Jacques Derrida with Zhang Hanliang 張漢良 and other specialists in comparative literature from Taiwan. This debate marked my first encounter with Derrida and his curious poststructuralist theories. The debate may have even played a role in the introduction of postmodern theory to the study of Chinese literature, especially with regard to 20th-century literary texts—and in the partial transformation of the study of an important national literature into an offshoot of globally homogenized “cultural studies.” The degree to which this transformation has been accomplished has been a direct result of the propagation of contemporary Western cultural-studies theory through the mediation of various departments of literature and comparative literature in the West, especially in North America.¹ It is a selective propagation to be sure, primarily of the theories, literary and social, that emerged primarily from the heady atmosphere accompanying large-scale public protests during the summer of 1968 in Paris and elsewhere. Of course, the radar screen of Western cultural-studies theory in the wake of 1968 did not really extend to Beijing, even though some rather more significant events unfolded there in the years immediately before and after the Eurocentric watershed date of 1968.²

By 1982, I had secured a tenure-track position in the Asian

Studies Department of the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, where I taught and wrote exclusively about modern and contemporary Chinese literature. I also represented the department as a member of both the Comparative Literature Program and the organizing committee of the Women's Studies Program. I supervised the programs of a number of M.A. and Ph.D. students with modern Chinese literature as one of their fields. It soon became obvious to me that the UBC Comparative Literature Program promulgated the application of Western cultural-studies theory to all national literatures. Consequently, I quickly gave myself a crash course in contemporary Western literary theory as taught at UBC.³ As I learned more and more about Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Said, and a host of their followers while at the same time renewing my old acquaintance with Marx and Freud, I became concerned with the counter-factual, anti-liberal, anti-Enlightenment, and anti-humanistic thrust of many of the ideas I was encountering.⁴

My teaching experience only served to increase my concern. After team-teaching a Comparative Literature course in 1986 that actually compared literary works in Chinese and Japanese with similar works in English, American, and Anglo-Indian literature, in 1990-92 I participated in two courses entitled "Orientalism and the History of the Discipline" and "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Eastern Other." Initiated and coordinated by my younger colleagues who champion postmodernist theoretical orientations, the former course uncritically accepted Edward Said's version of Orientalism as a given, and the latter subjected non-Western fiction to "interrogation" by radical academic feminism circa 1990. After these experiences, in 1992 I revised my graduate research methods course, which was cross-listed in Comparative Literature, to "explore some questions of Euro-American (and Chinese) standards of literary criticism and evaluation and their application to modern and contemporary Chinese literature." No ethnically non-Chinese Comparative Literature graduate students signed up for this Comparative Literature course, and my formal requests to add canonical texts in Chinese literary theory to the Comparative Literature Program's required reading list went unan-

swered. Asian literary theory was in practice marginalized, despite the presence of several Asian Studies professors on the Comparative Literature Coordinating Committee.

As the influence of postmodernist ideas and their concomitant privileging of Western cultural-studies theory rapidly grew at UBC, in 1998 I decided to confront postmodern theory head on by offering my Comparative Literature course as an interdisciplinary course entitled "Green on Gray: Knowledge and Theory in the Academic Humanities." Having sent out email announcements of this new course campus-wide, I achieved an enrollment of twelve students, five of whom were majoring in fields unrelated to Asian studies. What follows in this paper is what emerged from this course: a review of the most important conclusions and some of the main arguments in these works that marshal factual evidence to take issue with postmodern theory. Some topics will be covered at length, while others can merely be touched upon, due to limitations of space. My hope is that readers of *Tamkang Review* with a bent for philosophical and literary theory will give many of these significant contrarian works a careful reading.

Let me make two more introductory points before I launch into the substance of this paper. In order to engage with the academic hypotheses under investigation, I shall refer to postmodern theory in its broader sense, and without enclosing this term in quotation marks. Since postmodern theory's most celebrated practitioners have defined this term in vague and typically contradictory ways (Ellis 1997: 135-37), this essay's reference to this term functions as an umbrella to cover postmodernism per se, poststructuralism (deconstruction), Saidian anti-Orientalism (really just one more application of Foucauldian discourse analysis), some currents of radical academic feminism, postcolonial theory, and other forms of neo-Marxist and neo-Freudian theory. This rubric includes most of what passes for academic cultural studies, whose adherents employ virtually the same discourse of postmodernism and claim to be part of the same paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism. They claim, that is, to dwell in a "postmodern world"—not in the world I live in.

Strictly speaking, I do not believe that postmodern theory qualifies as *bona fide* theory at all. The narrow component of theory within the views of a representative postmodernist like Jonathan Culler on “What is Theory?” in “literary and cultural studies these days” (1997: 1-17) can be compared with a robust standard definition of what constitutes a theory in the natural sciences by a representative scientist like Edward O. Wilson (1998: 49-71; especially Wilson 56-58 and Culler 15). This comparison reveals that Culler views “theory” as little more than a linguistic or “discursive” analysis leading to supposedly “intimidating... critiques of the guiding conceptions of [our] elders.” Such “theories” should be surrounded by quote marks, because they have little in common with the rigorous theories employed in both the physical sciences and some branches of the social sciences. Postmodernist “theories” would be more accurately characterized as hypotheses or conjectures.

Wilson enumerates five key criteria for scientific theories: repeatability (through equally repeatable analyses and experimentation), economy, mensuration, heuristics, and consilience. Among these five criteria, Culler’s literary and cultural-studies “theories” only partially succeed in heuristics—they often pose interesting questions, only to turn around and respond with prefabricated ideological answers that are innocent of evidential grounding—and fail in all the other four criteria, most egregiously in economy. According to Wilson (and virtually all philosophers of science), “Scientists attempt to abstract the information into the form that is both simplest and aesthetically most pleasing—the combination called elegance—while yielding the largest amount of information with the least amount of effort” (58). Since the 1976 publication of Derrida’s *On Grammatology* in English translation,⁵ postmodernist “theorists” have instead striven mightily to inflate the “information” into the form that is both the most complicated rhetorically and the least pleasing aesthetically—the combination rightly called pretentious—while yielding the smallest amount of concrete information with the greatest amount of discursive effort.

Postmodernism in the Academic Humanities

The outcome of the introduction of postmodern theory in the academic humanities over the past twenty years has naturally been hailed as a much needed paradigm shift by its adherents. These results have also been highly praised by scholars not necessarily associated with any particular theory or school. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1997) presents the new humanities curriculum as the best way to cultivate humanity and train students to be citizens of the world. There is much to be said for her balanced view, but she does not seem to me to represent the majority of postmodern theory's advocates. A historian of China, Alexander Woodside, has argued that Western-based students of Asia are still parochial, that Western theories such as postmodernism are of little help to Asian nations and peoples, and that, as a result of their over-concentration on postmodern theory, Western scholars are becoming overwhelmingly focused on "the most industrialized societies of North America and western Europe" to the exclusion of Asian and other developing nations. Having said that, Woodside nevertheless asserts that in the West "the gains from doing history the new Western postmodernist way have so far been undeniable." He sites two gains. First, "the overthrow of the academic dualism" that separated "the study of economic change" from "the study of philosophy and literature." Second, and more broadly, he maintains that "the postmodernist questioning of the objectivity of scientific and social-scientific language and its concern that this language may have falsely and subjectively universalized certain cultural norms and power distributions at the expense of millions of people who were marginalized by it" have led "feminist historians, ethnic minority historians, not to mention gay and lesbian historians, [to find] freedom from a scheme of 'binary oppositions' in Western thought that seemed constructed to disable them" (1998: 123-24).⁶

The view that recent positive changes in the academy have resulted principally from the introduction of postmodern theory has been challenged by the historian Perez Zagorin. He maintains that although "in several areas such as women's studies, social history,

and cultural and intellectual history, a number of scholars have been receptive to postmodernist conceptions of language and discourse, . . . the vast expansion of the historical horizon during the past generation to encompass the histories of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and all kinds of marginalized or forgotten groups and communities, owes none of its original inspiration to postmodernism and has developed mostly in independence of it." The same is true for "the enormous growth of social history and the concentration upon the lives of ordinary people" (9). This latter trend would seem to owe more to relatively liberal Marxists and other liberal democratic historians than to postmodernists.

I am not so sure that Woodside's "academic dualism" or historiographical "binary opposition" between "the study of economic change" and "the study of philosophy and literature" was ever so rigid—nor has this division been so completely resolved in contemporary times as Woodside implies. When I took an undergraduate course in European history at U.C. Davis in the early 1960s, the readings included social, economic, political, and cultural topics. We read and discussed Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748), a picaresque novel critical of "the vicious disposition" of the eighteenth-century world, along with Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations*. Written by a social thinker who would later become a famous British prime minister, the latter novel is a realistic fictional critique of economic change and concomitant inequality leading to the formation of "Two Nations" of "the Rich and the Poor" in the wake of the English Reform Bill of 1832's failure to grant political rights to the working classes. *Sybil* presents the main justifications for the reformist Chartist Movement of 1837-48 in a sympathetic light—economic change and literature could hardly be more closely linked. Charles Dickens and similar realistic and meliorist literary works were assigned in most nineteenth-century English history courses, while Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair were required reading in twentieth-century American history courses. History courses at U.C. Berkeley (1963-75) regularly assigned works of literature and philosophy, but no technical econometric studies of

economic change. George Mosse's course on European intellectual and social history at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1980-82 concentrated on political, social and cultural changes involved in the rise of the bourgeoisie, but certainly did not ignore the economic changes that made it possible. However, he did not venture into technical econometric details, either. A tour of the UBC Bookstore in 1999 did not turn up any economics courses requiring literature or philosophy texts, and vice-versa for English and philosophy courses. What I did find in the history section was Zagorin's "vast expansion of the historical horizon . . . to encompass the histories of women, racial and ethnic minorities," and many courses on previously marginalized groups. Especially significant is an expanded first-year course on world history that attempts to encompass the whole world without privileging western Eurasia. This is all very welcome, but does not seem to have much to do with postmodern theory. After all, many well-known world historians explicitly reject the tenets of postmodernism.

Four important interdisciplinary historical works of the past decade argue persuasively against racist, genetic, and essentialist assertions of innate Western superiority and against the Eurocentrism inherent in measuring the whole world by European historical experience (Abu-Lughod 1989, Diamond 1997, Wong 1997, and Frank 1998; Abu-Lughod and Frank are assigned in UBC's first-year course in world history). Though greatly concerned with economic and technological change, they have little to say about either philosophy or literature. Wong's book is extremely important for Chinese studies in general, but does not mention literature at all.⁷ They are entirely grounded on a respect for science and factual evidence, and they have little or nothing to mention about postmodernism. Andre Gunder Frank makes one reference to it, and that is negative. In anticipating some of the arguments against his revisionist world economic system thesis in *ReORIENT*, he offers the following comments:

Postmodernists will object as well. They may appreciate my "deconstruction" of manifest and latent terminological

and conceptual Eurocentrism. Postcolonialists may also like the demonstration that the colonial idea is only recent and probably temporary in and about Asia. But those who think that there is no reality beyond its perception by the mind or its communication through language⁸ will dispute my insistence that *it is the historical evidence itself which disconfirms received historiography and social theory*. Moreover, they will themselves insist that only my imagination permits me to contend that there is a real world economy and system out there, and that its rendering here is no more than a figure of my imagination. They will be persuaded by no amount of argument or even evidence, unless they themselves drive their own rhetorical cart into an imaginary tree and live to tell about it.

Here it will be *more useful* to confront those who admit the reality of the trees and even of a world economic and systemic forest. (43-44, my italics)

These words would seem to indicate the cogency of Zagorin's assertion that "postmodernism is a distinctly minority phenomenon among professional historians . . . [because] they find it so contrary to their own personal understanding and experience of historical inquiry" (9).

Furthermore, it seems to me that virtually all of the positive changes in human life and human well-being throughout the world in the twentieth century were made on the basis of philosophies fundamentally at odds with postmodernism. These positive changes include an overall improved standard of living, as evidenced by better health leading to increased life expectancy due to reduced infant mortality and better disease control and sanitation, not to mention increased food production and distribution, all the result of progress in science, technology, and management practices. Other steps in the right direction are the twilight of colonialism and imperialism; the birth of new democracies and the widespread acceptance around the world of the ideals of democracy and basic universal human rights; an explosive global rise in access to education; feminism and an accelerating rise

in the status of women in society and the family, also very much due to changes in industrial technology and the growth of the consumer society; the international labor movement and improvements in working conditions for members of independent labor unions'; and the rise of multiculturalism, with its emphasis on equal rights for all.⁹ The people who worked and sometimes fought and died to accomplish these and many other beneficial changes were primarily motivated, in Marshal Berman's words, by "all the collective hopes for moral and social progress, for personal freedom and public happiness, that were bequeathed to us by the modernists of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment," (9) the very ideals that the postmodernists claim to have been displaced by their paradigm shift.¹⁰

Not only does Zagorin find postmodernism rejected by most historians, he also demonstrates that within the humanities, postmodernism "has made its fewest inroads and gained the fewest converts in philosophy" (Zagorin 4, citing Putnam 201). It is common knowledge that most practicing scientists are not actively involved in the philosophy of science, but among those that are, few if any are receptive to postmodernism.¹¹ In other words, postmodernism is a phenomenon native to some of the weaker fields in the humanities and social sciences, where standards of argumentation and evidence are neither very well-defined nor broadly agreed upon. Postmodernist views are most widely held in departments of cultural studies, Western literature, and comparative literature.

The Impact of Postmodernism on Academic Literary Studies

Although he ranges beyond these areas, John M. Ellis's *Literature Lost* (1997) focuses on the unfortunate effects of postmodern theory emanating from departments of literature. His first chapter ascribes the origins of "political correctness" to the quintessentially Western romantic belief in a primitive utopia of "innocence and natural goodness" on the part of intellectuals who are alienated from Western civilization and its "flaws, inconsistencies, and retrogres-

sions" (14). He traces this depressingly familiar view all the way back to the Roman writer Tacitus' *Germania*, then moves forward to Rousseau's "noble savage," Herder and the German Romantics' glorification of the *Volk*, the recent disparagement of high culture as represented in the Western canon of great books, and postcolonial theory's depreciation of the Western political tradition and sentimentalizing of Third World societies and cultures.¹² He then relates how "history has been most unkind to these illusions": Tacitus's noble-minded Germans included the Vandals, Goths, Vikings, and Visigoths who "committed more than their share of rape and plunder"; the Rousseauist French Revolution greatly unleashed the "cruelty, bloodlust, vengefulness, envy, [and] greed" in human nature, and culminated in the Terror. Subsequent egalitarian revolutions in Russia, China, Iran, and Cambodia, among others, have resulted in similar or even worse periods of terror without producing a significantly more just and egalitarian society. Ellis concludes these remarks with a survey of everyday "political incorrectness" in various postcolonial nations—ethnic strife, genocide, infanticide, police brutality, discrimination, injustice, and, especially, the cruel mistreatment of women (16). In commenting on the problem with this characteristically Western mode of romanticizing the hazily understood outsider or "other," Ellis notes that "it takes an extraordinary act of self-deception not to see that it is the developed countries that are slowly leading the world away from racism and male dominance. To demand an end to racism and sexism [and, I would add, dictatorship and authoritarian government] is not to reject Western society but, on the contrary, to ally oneself with certain Western values" (26).

The subsequent three chapters defend "The Diversity of Literature" against critics who regard race, gender, and class as fundamental to literary criticism. In his critique of "Gender, Politics, and Criticism," "The Academic Politics of Race," and "Class and Perfect Egalitarianism," Ellis argues that race-gender-class critics practice a form of reductionism because they decide in advance what each work of literature is about before they even begin to read it; moreover, they believe that all literature is primarily about the same things: race,

gender, and class. Their criticism is thus not “concerned with the contents of a literary work, its unique stamp, the individual meaning that makes it unlike any other work, [and] the specific qualities that make readers return to it again and again,” but is rather an “ideological trial” in which works of literature “are measured [anachronistically] against ‘correct’ attitudes toward race, gender, and class . . .” (34).

Such ideological trials and litmus tests of literature were commonplace under Stalin and Mao, and the results for twentieth-century Soviet Russian and Chinese literature, not to mention the human beings who produced it, were horrible. They are out of place in a liberal society, and besides, as Ellis reminds us, “the sheer diversity of literary texts has always been an insuperable problem” for critics of all stripes who have tried to find their favorite set of ideas confirmed in each and every work of literature. We need, he writes, to “remember the obvious fact that literary texts are all different. Once we accept that fact, the determination of race-gender-class critics to see race, gender, and class as the central issues in every work must be regarded as a serious mistake” (36).

Ellis defines the diversity of literature as coterminous with the diversity of life itself, and reminds us of the elementary fact that what we call literature “is a collection of very different texts written by all kinds of people of differing temperaments and viewpoints [representing] a great range of opinion on social and political questions, as well as on every other kind of question” (36). As he cogently argues, we read literature not to confirm our own attitudes, but to broaden and deepen our experience. And it works because “the new situations and people we are exposed to . . . are created by writers who give us a distillation of real life and an interpretation of it that often takes us beyond anything that everyday life offers” (37). The Western canon in particular “can claim universality—that is, it is interesting to anyone who wishes to read and think—precisely because the diversity of attitudes contained within it is so great, [and] the great writers present more questions than they do answers . . .” These writers’ works contain few “uncomplicated truths,” but are full of controversy.

Indeed, “many of the classics are remarkable precisely for provoking long-lasting controversy and taking no clear-cut stand between competing values.” Ellis concludes that “it would be more true to say that we get eternal questioning, not eternal verity, from Shakespeare [and, by implication, Western literature as a whole], . . . [rather than the] extraordinarily rigid ideas about race, gender, and class” we find in putatively postmodernist critics (47-48). These general statements are supported by a series of concrete examples.

As in *Against Deconstruction*, Ellis uses logic to demonstrate the weakness of the postmodernist claim that everything is “in the last analysis” political, an idea emphasized in the works of Michel Foucault and other major postmodernists like Fredric Jameson. This slogan is intended to imply not simply the truism that “every action has a political dimension,” but that “politics is always the most important dimension of every action.” This far-fetched claim is “certainly not so, [because] the political significance of an action may be important in some cases, but trivial in others.” The postmodernists repeatedly “confuse generality with priority” and commit the fallacy of the excluded middle. “If,” Ellis argues, “we think that the statement (1) ‘everything has a political [environmental, physical, chemical, ecological, economic, etc.] dimension’ implies (2) ‘politics [the environment, physics, chemistry, ecology, economics] is the deepest and most important consideration in any situation,’ then we shall reach the contradictory conclusion that a dozen or more factors can all claim to be the most important aspect of an action. The inference from the first statement to the second is true only if the first is unique—and it is not” (61). Therefore, “the corrective to the view [supposedly held by ‘conservatives’] that literature has nothing to do with politics is that it has something to do with politics, not that it has everything to do with politics.” The two crucial questions postmodernists avoid are “Must political considerations take precedence over all others?”—and “Is the particular politics we are offered by literary radicals a viable politics?” (62).

Having already supplied a negative answer to the first question above, much of the rest of this book provides evidence for arriving at

a negative answer for the second question as well. The most interesting sections are Ellis' discussions of radical academic feminism, of racism and Enlightenment values, and of the ideas of Fredric Jameson. I shall deal here with only the last topic, which probably has the most significance to Chinese studies, in light of Jameson's measure of success in recruiting a coterie of deferential young disciples from mainland China since the mid-1980s.

Ellis's critique of Fredric Jameson is indeed one of the high points of the book. In Chapter 5, "Class and Perfect Egalitarianism," after a brief statement on the "inadequacy of Marx's labor theory of value" because it "entirely failed to grasp the importance of management, distribution, and buyers in creating value" (117), Ellis presents a twenty-page analysis of Jameson's chief writings. In Michael Polanyi's terms, he exposes the nearly complete "moral inversion" inherent in Jameson's thought.¹³ Without learning from the lessons of ruined economies and murdered and terrorized peoples of Marxist-inspired communist countries, Jameson consistently makes egalitarian moral appeals to the immorality of Stalinist and Maoist cruelty. He does not waver in his support of Maoism as the "richest of all the great new ideologies of the 1960s" (121). Jameson continues to admire Mao's Cultural Revolution, the most destructive social movement in the fifty-year history of the People's Republic, and laments the fact that Mao himself drew back from this great "collective experiment," which, Jameson implies, would have saved China from its problems of the 1980s and the decades to follow (122). It does not seem to concern him that the deadliest famine in world history, which killed at least 30 million Chinese in mostly rural areas during the late 1950s and early 1960s, was directly due to Maoist "Great Leap Forward" economic and social policies, as even party cadres and historians in the PRC have openly admitted in print. Jameson's cavalier disregard for the lives of tens of millions of ordinary Chinese subalterns represents the height of Eurocentric cultural imperialism, and ought to be repudiated by all genuine anti-imperialists and anti-colonialists. Alas, many fervent anti-colonialist West-based scholars in Chinese studies are among Jameson's most fervent admirers—even

many whose parents were among the victims of Maoist extremism and cruelty.¹⁴

Jameson's defense of Stalinism is equally unconcerned with the fate of that portion of humanity that had to endure it. "Stalinism is disappearing," Jameson wrote in 1990, "because it succeeded and fulfilled its historical mission to force the rapid industrialization of an underdeveloped country"—it thus became "the model for many of the countries of the Third World" (122). The same sort of argument could be made to assert that Maoism succeeded and fulfilled its historical mission, though few outside the higher echelons of the Chinese Communist Party are willing to make it so boldly. Ellis' rejoinder applies equally to Stalinism and Maoism: "This defense assures us of the success of Stalinism by ignoring everything except industrialization; but Stalinism also represents extreme ruthlessness, cruelty, paranoia, senseless purges, the extermination of the kulaks [landlords under Mao], mass murder [and government-created mega-famine under Mao], government by terror, and more" (122). None of this outrages Jameson, but he is outraged by "the current propaganda campaign" to Stalinize Maoism and thus discredit it and "trash the 60s generally" in the process (123). In Jameson's moral inversion, perfectly in keeping with that of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, he has completely lost sight of the human costs of ideological utopianism.

Jameson seems to fit perfectly the character outlined in Mark Lilla's review of the late Francois Furet's *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*: "In the puritanical ruthlessness of Lenin, many Europeans saw the spitting image of Robespierre, and they liked what they saw. Foremost among these were intellectuals, who were attracted to the claims of Russian Communism to have united science and morals, and who remained attached to it even when the science failed and the morals were perverted" (25 July 1999: 12). This leads to a general consideration of Marxism.

The Failed Magic of Marxism

Many of Marx's most committed erstwhile academic followers have abandoned Marxism and resigned themselves to democratic liberalism. However, various forms of neo-Marxism still continue to express the Continental tension between the bourgeois world created in the aftermath of the French Revolution and anti-bourgeois passions—or, in Anglo-American terms, the modern world created by the Industrial Revolution and the anti-capitalist, egalitarian passions. The transition is analyzed in Furet's book, while the tension is evident in the uneasy mixture of postmodernism and neo-Marxism in contemporary academic discourse, despite the strong version of postmodernism's call for a rejection of all "grand narratives," including that of Marxism. It seems a good idea, then, for doubters of postmodernism to review the history of Marxism from Marx to Mao to understand the extent to which this ideology was responsible for the enormous human tragedy that was the history of "actually existing socialist states" in the twentieth century.

In his very detailed and finely argued study, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia*, Andrzej Walicki takes freedom as his organizing principle, as did Hegel and Marx, and borrows his title from Engels' slogan about "the leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom." The greatest value of this book for our post-1989 generation of university students is the crystal-clear distinction Walicki makes between Marxism and Liberalism, and the answer he provides to the question about the role of Marxist ideology in the creation of totalitarian state systems. Recognizing that most Western academic Marxists or neo-Marxists regard Marxism as an anti-capitalist critical theory of history, and that they are no longer dogmatic communists or usually even communists at all, Walicki still takes them to task for "ignoring the Marxist roots of twentieth-century communism, or treating the latter as a merely Russian or 'Eastern' [Chinese, in our field] development" (2). Walicki's contrary thesis is summarized in the following paragraph, with my additions in brackets.

Without the communist ideology provided by Marxism, the historical development of the former tsarist empire (and, later, of East-Central Europe [and China]) would have been fundamentally different from what it was. The postrevolutionary polity might have been undemocratic, but it would not have been totalitarian. Without the tremendous authority of Marxism, claiming a virtual monopoly of truth and the last word on both social science and universal progress, Russia [and China], together with the other countries in [their] sphere[s] of influence, would have been spared the uniquely cruel experiment of “constructing communism,” of being compelled to follow a preconceived utopian blueprint. This experiment was also unique in its extended duration, and in its institutionalization of consistently totalitarian power structures (3).

In China, the same Marxist ideology, with its combination of utopianism, moral inversion, coercion, and fear, was responsible for the “uniquely cruel experiment” that was Maoist totalitarianism from Yan’an (1936-47) through the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Although the co-authors may not have intended to highlight Walicki’s thesis, it is nonetheless the inescapable conclusion one reaches from reading David E. Apter and Tony Saich’s *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic*. The very different historical trajectories of Taiwan during the same period under the authoritarian but non-totalitarian, non-utopian rule of the Nationalist Party and of the post-Mao reform period in the People’s Republic both offer irrefutable evidence in support of the thesis that it was Marxist ideology, not some sort of essential corruption at the heart of the so-called “Chinese national character,” that led to the horrors of Chinese Communist rule.

Walicki makes an extremely strong case for his view that the ideal of freedom originating with Karl Marx is in essence an ideal of unfreedom and of totalitarian dystopia that is labeled, in Orwellian fashion, “the kingdom of freedom.” Walicki contrasts “the liberal definition of freedom as opposition to arbitrary coercion by other people” close to the common sense idea of freedom to do what one wants to do within certain rational and mutually agreed-upon rules with Marx’s ideal of freedom.¹⁵ He carefully demonstrates in a meth-

odical manner that “Marx conceived of freedom as [a] conscious, rational control over economic and social forces [that] would only be realized by rational planning” (5-6), and by the abolition of the market, of money, of commodity exchange—and of the entire apparatus that makes up what we now call civil society (11-110). To Marx’s utopian scheme, Engels added the concepts of “scientific socialism,” historical determinism, communism as one big factory modeled on the English factory system, and complete ideological unity (111-207). With Lenin’s characteristic combination of audacity and cruelty, he in turn added the indispensable idea of a “vanguard” Communist Party, with a complete mastery of “scientific socialism” and the future it demanded—in spite of opposition from a majority of the peoples it set out to “liberate”—and the reign of terror that led to totalitarian communism (269-397). Stalin shrewdly and with equal cruelty combined all of this ideological inheritance from Marx, Engels, and Lenin to produce the system of terror and total control that led from totalitarian communism to communist totalitarianism (398-494).

Walicki does not discuss Mao Zedong’s contribution to Marxism, but we can now see that Mao followed Stalin most directly, and also combined all the elements of Marxism from Marx through Lenin. Although Mao made the revolution by organizing the peasants, a class that Marx, Lenin, and Stalin despised, he did so by subjecting them to the will of an omniscient vanguard Communist Party that was totally subservient to the will of its paramount leader, the “Chairman” himself. He then used this party to control every level of society, as long as it remained loyal to him. When some sector of society struck Mao as falling short in loyalty, Mao again resembled Stalin in relying upon a personality cult—the omniscience of Chairman Mao and Mao Zedong Thought—along with unrelenting propaganda, thought control, fear, and occasionally well-advertised extra-judicial killings to enforce total ideological control by the party-state. Despite differences in Mao’s personal qualities and China’s cultural characteristics and historical background, the Maoist totalitarian utopia that grew ever more irrational, ruthless, and destructive of Chinese life and culture from Yan’an to the Cultural Revolution can be seen in light of

Walicki's study to be directly and fundamentally indebted to the Marxist ideology that runs unbroken from Marx through Stalin to Mao.

Freud's Flawed Legacy

In its 29 March 1999 issue on the most important scientists and thinkers of this century, *Time* magazine featured a cartoon of Sigmund Freud with pencil and notebook seated beside a recumbent Albert Einstein, as if the pair were ready to begin a session of classic psychoanalysis. Although Yale historian Peter Gay admits in the article inside that there is a "Freud war" going on, he nevertheless presents the standard view of Freud as an important man of science. Over the past thirty years, however, a growing body of revisionist literature has increasingly convinced those interested enough to delve below the surface of popular culture that Freud was actually not a genuine scientist—as the biologist Edward O. Wilson remarks, "To put it as kindly as possible—he guessed wrong" (82). This literature has convinced many others that Freud was a fraud, a charlatan, a bully, a misogynist, and a liar—among other less than savory epithets.

The retired UC Berkeley professor of English literature, Frederick Crews, has for several years now been engaged in a campaign against the view of Freud as either a great scientist or a great man.¹⁶ He published two reviews of more than twenty revisionist studies in the *New York Review of Books* and then in *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute* (1997). More recently, Crews edited the book *Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend* (1998), which includes essays by noted scholars such as Frank Cioffi, Adolf Grünbaum, and Frank J. Sulloway, who have been most instrumental in the demythification of Freud, his ideas on human psychology, and his psychoanalytic movement, including the recovered memory movement.

To the claims that Freud was a careful scientist and that psychoanalysis is a science, Crews responds as follows:

The movement's anti-empirical features are legion. They include its cult of the founder's personality; its casually anecdotal approach to corroboration; its cavalier dismissal of its most besetting epistemic problem, that of suggestion; its habitual confusion of speculation with fact; its penchant for generalizing from a small number of imperfectly examined instances; its proliferation of theoretical entities bearing no testable referents; its lack of vigilance against self-contradiction; its selective reporting of raw data to fit the latest theoretical enthusiasm; its ambiguities and exit clauses allowing negative results to be counted as positive ones; its indifference to rival explanations and to mainstream science; its absence of any specified means for preferring one interpretation to another; its insistence that only the initiated are entitled to criticize; its stigmatizing of disagreement as "resistance," along with the corollary that, as Freud put it, all such resistance constitutes "actual evidence in favor of the correctness" of the theory (SE, 13: 180); and its narcissistic faith that, again in Freud's words, "applications of analysis are always confirmations of it as well." (SE 22: 146) (1995: 61-62n4)

If science has anything to do with empirical evidence, and the testing thereof, then Freud and psychoanalysis cannot be regarded as science. This is also the conclusion of perhaps the most thorough re-evaluation of every aspect of Freudian theories to date, Malcolm Macmillan's *Freud Evaluated: The Completed Arc*:

Should we therefore conclude that psychoanalysis is a science? My evaluation shows that at none of the different stages through which it evolved could Freud's theory generate adequate explanations. From the very beginning, much of what passed as theory was description, and poor description at that . . . [Freud's] key psychological concept of repression was nothing but an objectification of his own

sense of effort in overcoming resistance, and it had no greater explanatory power than realization, hypnoid isolation, or dissociation. In every one of the later key developmental theses, Freud assumed what had to be explained . . . (1991/1997: 624)

While affirming in a deadpan tone that Freud's conception of the unconscious "was a fundamental contribution to culture [and] a wellspring of ideas flowing from psychology into the humanities," E. O. Wilson declares it "mostly wrong," and for the same reason as Macmillan. Wilson writes that "Freud's fatal error was his abiding reluctance to test his own theories—to stand them up against competing explanations—then revise them to accommodate controverting facts" (81).

The scholars reviewed in Crews (1997) and the contributors to Crews (1998) have tested Freud's theories. The results from their studies and many others is that every tenet of Freudian psychoanalysis—the Freudian unconscious, Freudian repression, the Oedipus complex, free association, transference, symbolic dream interpretation, the Freudian slip, female masochism, penis envy, and so on—is seen to be fundamentally flawed, lacking in evidentiary support, and devoid of scientific or humanistic value. As Macmillan puts it most succinctly, "Freud's method is neither capable of yielding objective data about mental processes, nor of potential value for those seeking to turn psychoanalysis into an acceptable historical or humanistic discipline" (xxiii).

Nevertheless, as Crews writes, "Freudian concepts retain some currency in popular lore, the arts, and the academic humanities, three arenas in which flawed but once modish ideas, secure from the menace of rigorous testing, can be kept indefinitely in play. There psychoanalysis continues to be accepted largely on faith" (1997: 35). Why is this still so much the case? Macmillan offers five possible explanations of the continued appeal of Freud's theory: most people remain ignorant of this body of devastating criticism; psychoanalysis has a totalistic pseudo-explanatory power; the irrational has a strong

appeal for many people; Freudian theory “concentrates on precisely those things [primarily sexuality] in which people have the greatest interest”; and most people take it for granted that psychoanalysis is an effective therapy for many behavior disorders (617). My personal view is that all of these reasons play a role in the continued appeal of Freudian and neo-Freudian ideas in literary and cultural studies, but that the first two—ignorance and pseudo-explanation—are the most important in these areas. Judging from graduate reading lists and some recent published works, ignorance of the behavioral sciences does seem to be cultivated in university literature and cultural studies departments, and untestable modes of pseudo-explanation seem immensely satisfying to some academic literary critics.¹⁷

Orientalism Contra Said

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), a Foucauldian “discourse analysis” and postmodernist attack on West-based scholars in Middle Eastern studies, has had a very good run in the academy. Its theoretical approach and its overall thesis are still widely accepted as virtually incontestable by what one wag has called “the herd of independent minds” in North American departments of cultural studies and comparative literature, including, of course, postcolonial studies. Recently, however, more critical historians and other scholars, even among early supporters of Said’s views, have quietly undermined much of the house of Said.¹⁸ Perhaps no one has done more to revise Said’s *Orientalism* thesis than John M. MacKenzie, Professor of Imperial History at the University of Lancaster. His well-argued and beautifully illustrated book, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (1995), briefly reviews the history of “the ‘Orientalism’ debate” (1-19), refutes on theoretical grounds Said’s ideas concerning “the Orient and culture and imperialism” (20-42), and virtually redefines Orientalism as a positive force in the making of modern Western culture. His examination of a much wider range of both elite and popular culture leads to an informed and cogent conclusion: far from being the insidious imperial monster depicted by Said, Orientalism

involved to a much greater extent the utmost respect, though not necessarily complete understanding, of late eighteenth- to twentieth-century Western artists, architects, craftsmen and designers, musicians, and dramatists for the same arts of the Orient, by which MacKenzie means not only the Middle East, but also East, South, and Southeast Asia.

After noting the “indifference, even hostility of historians” to the “Orientalism debate” that took place mainly among literary critics and was based on poststructuralism, Foucauldian discourse theory, and postmodernism (more evidence of Zagorin’s views given above), MacKenzie points out “one of the principal problems of the strongly ideological approach to Orientalism”:

Said and his followers purport to write about certain arts within the matrix of imperialism. But they are not imperial historians, and their “imperialism” has a disturbing vagueness about it. It becomes a generalized concept *inadequately rooted in the imperial facts*, lacking historical dynamic, innocent of imperial theory or the complexities of different forms of imperialism and varieties of economic and political relationship. When Orientalist ideas are fitted into the grand progression of the historian’s periodization, a curious counterpoint establishes itself. Orientalism and imperialism, as the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, did not march in parallel (xiv-xv, italics added).

If one purports to believe, like Nietzsche-Derrida-Foucault, that there are no such things as facts, one will not be bothered by the simple fact that Said and his followers’ Orientalist theses do not accord with the facts of imperial and colonial history. On the other hand, if one retains a modern scientific turn of mind and is willing to admit after researching a topic that the facts may not support one’s favorite beliefs, however noble, one will, as MacKenzie did, turn away from Saidian Orientalism to something more in accord with historical reality.

As an example of how Said's ideology leads him astray, MacKenzie demonstrates that Said (1993) misinterprets Verdi's opera *Aida* "in terms of its allegedly imperial context." According to MacKenzie, Said anachronistically "reverses the true import of the opera, misunderstands its conclusion, and fails to contextualize it adequately in terms of intra-European conflict (particularly that between Germany and France) and Verdi's views on nationalism and imperialism." MacKenzie further writes that *Aida* "illustrates [not an Orientalist approach, but] the power of love to transcend not only national differences, but also the gulf between the dominant and subordinate in a conquest situation as explored in Verdi's reworking of the personal story of an Egyptian general and an Ethiopian princess" (xvi). Poststructuralists and postmodernists could respond, in their characteristic manner, to this illustration of Said's imperfect historical understanding by saying that his and MacKenzie's interpretations are equally "invalid." However, scholars less fond of such a cynical pat answer might prefer to agree with MacKenzie's simple rule of thumb: "The deciphering of a message is, of course, immensely difficult, but of one thing we can be sure: it can only be done in terms of the meanings of its own age and not those of others" (xvii).

The Orientalist interpretations of history offered by several of Said's chief intellectual followers are also strongly criticized by MacKenzie for taking "a disturbingly ahistorical" form. In this he echoes John Ellis's strictures against "politically correct" literary scholarship and radical feminism's insistence on "patriarchy" as a unicausal explanation of women's position in history (12-32; 65-77). In the works of the art historian Linda Nochlin and the literary critic Rana Kabbani, MacKenzie writes, "We find the susceptibilities of the late twentieth century applied to nineteenth-century art; . . . moral condemnation befogging intellectual clarity; . . . an entire epoch condemned out of hand as though historical ages themselves can be divided into 'goodies' and 'baddies.' At its worst, this type of activity, surprisingly favorably hailed in some quarters, is reduced to the level of grotesquerie" (xvii). MacKenzie laments that this sort of Saidian Orientalist research, riddled with ideologically-driven misconceptions,

“poisons the deep wells of sympathy and respect which artists of all sorts felt for the East in the nineteenth century, which they expressed in distinctively nineteenth-century ways, not necessarily amenable to the critical values of the twentieth century. . . . This is a pity, for the effect of their work is to further the very misunderstandings they seek to allay” (xviii). The bulk of MacKenzie’s book repeatedly offers cogent, historically contextualized, and factually grounded refutations of a number of Saidian Orientalist works, as well as copious and most welcome demonstrations of “the deep wells of sympathy and respect” that most Western artists had and still have for the East, along with the important role the East has played in the making of modern life and culture worldwide.¹⁹

Foucault and the Illusions of Postmodern History

“It is a mark of a higher culture to value the little unpretentious truths, which have been found by means of strict method, more highly than the joy-diffusing and dazzling errors which spring from metaphysical and artistic times and peoples.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

The most influential figure behind postmodernist historiography, or discourse analysis, is undoubtedly Michel Foucault. Since his death in 1984, Foucault has become the idol of postmodernists everywhere. His ideas on philosophy and history, his pronouncements on madness, science and language, punishment and discipline, and sexuality—along with his vision of the relationship between knowledge and power—have become the ideological last word for most postmodernists. Biographies, studies, and translations of Foucault make up a small library. The best critical introduction to Foucault, however, is one that cuts through the postmodernists’ repetitious adulation and examines closely the evidentiary basis, or lack thereof, of Foucault’s ideas. *Foucault* (1991) by the late José Guilherme Merquior, truly “the best general account of Foucault” (Ellis 246n1),²⁰ is a fair and thorough-

going critique of all of Foucault's major ideas. In each case, Foucault's views are clearly summarized before they are subjected to careful scrutiny by juxtaposing them with the findings of less illustrious but more meticulous historians of each era or field in which Foucault wrote. In the end, Merquior demonstrates the truth of the epigram above that he ironically takes from Nietzsche. Nietzsche's "little unpretentious truths" effectively undermine the "joy-diffusing and dazzling errors" of his most thoroughgoing neo-anarchist follower. In this book, as Ernest Gellner wrote in his obituary for Merquior, through his critique of Foucault Merquior "further[s] liberal values rather than the illusions of the age."²¹

Limitations of space do not allow for a detailed exposition of Merquior's critique, but suffice it to say that with the exception of Foucault's history of sexuality in the West, every one of Foucault's major ideas is severely undermined by the facts of history. No wonder he followed the Nietzschean dictum that there are no facts, but only interpretations, and practiced an "intellectual machismo" (Gellner's term) in which "the strength of one's argument is not propped up by logical quality—rather, it is conveyed by the unflinching self-confidence of one's tone. Impressiveness, not cogency, is the thing. So it was with Shaw; so with Sartre—and so, too, with Foucault" (157).²²

Foucault's four phases of "the discourse on madness" in the West are shown to have more support in rhetoric and ideology than historical fact. Historians have long known that the insane have been treated with great cruelty in many cultures at many different times in history, but Foucault's notion of madness as nothing more than a social construct ignores everything contemporary science has come to know about the chemistry of the brain. This lack of interest and basic grounding in science is perhaps the most fatal Foucauldian error. It is thus not surprising that Foucault argues in essence that words and "discourse" create reality.

The four "epistemes" or "historical *a priori*s" of Foucault's archaeology of the human sciences—pre-classical, classical, modern, and contemporary (designated postmodern by others) are far from

accurate or clear-cut. They are contradictory and overlapping, demonstrating continuities rather than the discontinuities Foucault insists upon. Merquior gives abundant examples of Foucault's errors of fact and interpretation, none perhaps more instructive than his complete misunderstanding of the key example he employs to buttress his view of his "classical" episteme. Relying on the work of solid but unpretentious art historians who accurately contextualize the objects of their study, Merquior demonstrates how Diego Valázquez's painting *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honor) means *precisely the opposite* of what Foucault's ideological interpretation makes it seem to portend (48-49).²³

Foucault's views of nineteenth- and twentieth-century "bourgeois" society as one vast prison, and his equation of liberal democratic societies and totalitarian societies is seen to be even more divorced from historical reality, not to mention our common-sense perception, than their original inspiration in Nietzsche. Nietzsche, rather than being "a fierce foe" of the Enlightenment like Foucault, actually "paid homage to its critical spirit." Foucault's mid-1970s work *Discipline and Punish* is thus "flawed on three scores": (1) he "seems to get some of his most important facts wrong" (as when he cavalierly omits the entire French Revolutionary period); (2) he offers "lopsided evaluations of historical data" in which Enlightenment prison reform becomes a totalitarian enterprise, an idea to which no other serious historian of the subject would subscribe; and (3) the "nature of the explanations it offers" is overwhelmingly ideological and dismissive of contrary facts. As Merquior writes, "The point is, teleological explanations of [the kind Foucault offers] do not, of course, qualify as genuine causal analysis; they just assume causes without demonstrating any causal mechanism; hence the circularity and the question-begging" (102-107).²⁴

Foucault's cratology or his pancratism—the notion that power is the most significant element in every human relationship—is shown to be based on Freud's now discredited theory of repression, Nietzsche's (according to Foucault) theory of power as war, and the usual ideologically driven fallacy of the excluded middle pointed out

by Ellis (quoted above). As Merquior sums up:

We can therefore say that one of the peculiarities of Foucault's anatomy of power is its *pancratism*: its tendency to sound [like] a systematic reduction of all social processes to largely unspecified patterns of domination. Now pancratism is a considerable liability from an analytical point of view. Indeed, to say that (1) power is suffused all over society, or even that (2) some form of power permeates all major social relations (two rather plausible propositions) does not mean that (3) everything in society, or even everything significant therein, bears the imprint of power as a defining feature (115, italics in original, numbers added).

The plausibility of propositions (1) and (2) does not entail the truth of proposition (3), as postmodernists seem to believe. Merquior gives several examples of the weakness of this Foucauldian discourse on power. The basic problem can be seen in Merquior's summary of the conclusion of Alfonso Ruiz-Miguel's critique of the idea of law as primarily a matter of force and power: "The overburdening of the concept of power corresponds to an equal loss in depth and specificity" (116). If everything is power, then power is useless as an analytical concept or tool.

It is only in Foucault's *History of Sexuality* that Merquior finds more to praise than to criticize, though historians of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages would not wholly agree with Foucault. Ironically, this is due to the fact that, without admitting it or drawing attention to his own mini-paradigm shift, in his late studies of sexuality Foucault proceeds in a manner almost identical to most other unpretentious, non-postmodernist academic historians. In the process he simply ignores his epistemes, his archives, his concept of free-floating and discontinuous discourses, and his strictures against the objective understanding of historical texts.²⁵ Just as the People's Republic made the greatest improvements in the lives of the Chinese

people in the twenty years after the leadership effectively gave up on central tenets of communist ideology, Michel Foucault wrote his finest, most scholarly, most empirical, and least revolutionary studies after he walked away from the ideological concepts that unfortunately continue to inspire his postmodernist followers.

Zagorin's General Critique of Lyotard and Other Postmodernists

The best short but thorough refutation of postmodernism as a philosophy of history is Perez Zagorin's (1999) critical examination of Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodernism, David Roberts and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr.'s postmodernist theory of history, and Hayden White's narrativism. He begins by pointing out that although postmodernism is "an amorphous concept and a syncretism of different but related theories, theses, and claims," they all originate from French poststructuralist theories of language and some 1960s French intellectuals' restatements of German philosophy, especially Nietzsche and Heidegger.²⁶ "In the most general sense [the sense I have used in this article], postmodernism stands for the proposition that Western society in recent decades has undergone an epochal shift from the modern to a postmodern era said to be characterized by [at least the following elements]: the final repudiation of the Enlightenment's legacy of belief in reason and progress; a pervasive incredulity toward all metanarratives imputing a direction and meaning to history; a multiplicity of discourses and language games; a questioning of the nature of knowledge together with a dissolution of the idea of truth; [all of this has been perhaps occasioned by technological and social changes leading to] a new global economy and to an electronic, computer-regulated, media-saturated, and mass consumer society" (5-6).²⁷

Zagorin makes several comments on postmodernism in this general sense. The idea of a new postmodern epoch is "highly debatable." The changes mentioned might be more "plausibly interpreted as further unforeseen developments of modernity itself."²⁸ Distrust of totalizing metanarratives does not originate with postmodernists, but

goes back to the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment itself, the skeptics including at least Burke, Tocqueville, Carlyle, Burckhardt, Herzen, and Taine, as well as many critics of Marxism, Raymond Aron's "opium of the intellectuals." Ranke criticized Hegel and Fichte's philosophies of history and sought to ban such historiographic metanarratives, while Karl Popper argued for their impossibility and Karl Löwith proclaimed in 1949 that "Historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning." Postmodernists are actually illogical, inconsistent, and reactionary in relation to metanarratives, because their postmodernism is itself the mother of all totalizing metanarratives—purporting, as it does, "to explain the entire course of modern history and its outcome in the present and future. At the outset, therefore, the theory of postmodernism presents a striking inconsistency, since it is obliged to proffer a metanarrative to sustain its thesis of the demise of metanarrative" (6-7). This sort of muddled thinking, often combined with intellectual bad faith, is typical of virtually all postmodernist discourse.

The more specific philosophical features of postmodernism are "its conception of language and its rejection of realism." As Zagorin notes, "It is a philosophy of linguistic idealism [that claims that] language constitutes and defines reality for human minds, or rather that there is no extralinguistic reality independent of our representation of it in language or discourse. . . . Postmodernism thus denies both the ability of language or discourse to refer to an independent world of facts and things . . . [and] . . . dismisses the possibility of objective knowledge and truth as goals of inquiry. [Although it claims not to be,] this idealist philosophy is itself a species of metaphysics founded on unproved and unprovable assumptions concerning the nature of language and what there is" (7).

As many other scholars have pointed out, this linguistic idealism is based on the poststructuralists' basic misunderstanding or willful misreading of the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and their almost perfect ignorance of contemporary logic, linguistics, cognitive psychology, and the philosophy of language since Wittgenstein. Saussure's famous definition of "language as a system of signs distin-

guished solely by their opposition and difference from one another [and] his definition of the sign as a signifier arbitrarily linked to a signified” is taken by postmodernists to justify their claims that there is no external world and we can have no objective knowledge of it. Unfortunately for these claims, as Zagorin points out, “Although formed by an arbitrary connection between a particular sound and a particular meaning, the sign as [Saussure] defined it was itself a concept with a referential relation to things. Saussure therefore never supposed that the world is constructed in language and does not exist independently of our linguistic descriptions. . . . [and he] never endorsed the fantastic notion that the world is the creation of language and has no existence outside of it.”²⁹

Virtually all postmodernist reasoning—anti-realism, radical skepticism, narrativism, constructionism, and so on—stem from this mistaken view of the relation between language and reality or words and things. At the close of Zagorin’s arguments against them, which I will not repeat here, he reproduces a quotation from Bertrand Russell that essentially sums up the case against the metaphysical position of postmodernist linguistic idealism: “It is the essential function of words to have a connection of one sort or another with facts, which are in general non-linguistic. Some modern philosophers . . . tell us that the attempt to confront language with fact is ‘metaphysics,’ and is on this ground to be condemned. This is one of those views which are so absurd that only very learned men could possibly adopt them” (15-16, quoting Russell 1959: 148).³⁰

Conclusion

Postmodernists in general, as well as poststructuralists and deconstructionists, exhibit intellectual bad faith in that they do not practice what they preach. Just as Edward Said does throughout *Orientalism* and Michel Foucault does in his *History of Sexuality*, they “make many factual statements, ostensibly about the past” (Zagorin 14); they assert the truth of these statements by footnoted references to supporting evidence; they do not maintain that either the stories they tell

in narrative form or their own interpretations are mere “constructions” undeserving of belief, or self-serving attempts “to gain power over their readers in the name of [a false] reality” (Robert F. Berkhofer Jr.’s views, quoted in Zagorin 12). Their discursive practice merely confirms what Michael Polanyi’s “Critique of Doubt” (1958/1962) elegantly demonstrated over forty years ago: radical skepticism is simply belief in something else, and its discourse or rhetoric is an attempt to win converts to those beliefs. Let me partly quote and partly paraphrase Polanyi’s discussion of Bertrand Russell’s over-enthusiastic advocacy of philosophic doubt: those who advocate postmodernist radical skepticism of science, objective knowledge, and all historical narratives “would not desire to bring up children without any rational guidance, or contemplate any other scheme of universal hebetation . . . What they actually want is not expressed but concealed by their declared principles. They want their own beliefs to be taught to children and accepted by everybody, for they are convinced that this would save the world” from the horrors of modernity, including at least economic inequality which they equate with capitalism, along with imperialism, colonialism, racism, and sexism. “Since the skeptic does not consider it [reasonable] to doubt what [she herself] believes, the advocacy of [postmodern] doubt is merely the [postmodernist’s bad-faith] way of advocating [her] own beliefs” (297). Polanyi concludes, as we might well do in contemplation of postmodernism: “Modern fanaticism [by which he means Fascism and Marxist Communism] is rooted in an extreme skepticism which can only be strengthened, not shaken, by further doses of universal doubt” (298). Universal postmodern doubt can muster no rational arguments, no arguments that it would be reasonable to accept, either *for* obvious social goods like the rule of law, democracy, even their favored economic democracy, or *against* manifest social evils such as the excesses of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, racism, and sexism that many avowed postmodernists wish to eradicate. To make such arguments, postmodernists would have to abandon the mistaken notion of postmodernism, but they are generally unwilling to do so.

This is precisely why Jacques Derrida “risks giving bad faith a

bad name” by his continued paeans to the “unique attempt” and “messianic promise” of Marxist Communism, and his refusal to offer any rational justification for preferring justice and democracy over injustice and tyranny (Lilla, 25 June 1998: 40). And it is why I maintain that as a philosophical position, postmodernism is useless for and harmful to all attempts to muster rational arguments in favor of policies and actions leading to any future amelioration of the human condition. The best thing to do with postmodernism is, as E.O. Wilson suggests, to “begin by simply walking away from Foucault, and existentialist despair,” and then to remember that in the tension and “the Darwinian contest of ideas” between original thinkers who try to create order out of disorder and those who, like Foucault and postmodernists, try to create disorder out of order, “order always wins, because—simply—that is the way the real world works” (47).

NOTES

¹ A number of literature departments in several countries and territories have promulgated contemporary Western cultural-studies theory, such as Japan, various European nations, and Hong Kong. However, North American departments have played a central role in imposing an agenda of Western cultural-studies theory on the study of Chinese literature, particularly of the modern period.

² Aside from the Cultural Revolution in China, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam was also in full swing during 1968. For a brief but insightful review of the summer of '68, see Lilla (16 August 1998).

³ It is truly ironic that virtually every accepted doctrine in the supposed postmodernist paradigm shift, theoretical revolution or linguistic turn, is essentially Eurocentric. The UBC Comparative Literature Program is probably not exceptional in requiring first-year graduates to pass courses and qualifying examinations exclusively in Western theory before they can even proceed to the study of genuine literary works per se. The basic reading list for Theory does not include any works at all from the canon of Chinese, Japanese, or any

other non-Western literary theory—not even as suggested readings in translation.

⁴ Darwinism and other evolutionary concepts of human nature and psychology, like evolutionary biology, practically never receive serious consideration in recent literary cum cultural-studies theory; such scientific, fact-based theories, if taken seriously, would undermine most postmodernist ideas. One never knows how much information is required to be “situated,” but perhaps I should “situate” myself a bit more in this note by stating that my philosophical autodidacticism began with Bertrand Russell in my high school and university studies. My interests centered on Marxist classics and Marxists like C. Wright Mills and the contributors to the independent socialist magazine *Monthly Review* in the 1960s while I majored in anthropology and psychology, reading at random about biology, evolution, physics, and other areas in the sciences. Student radicalism and lectures by Edgar Snow and Felix Green led me to graduate study in Chinese because I believed, naively and incorrectly, that Chairman Mao had “liberated” the Chinese masses. I had little time for philosophy in the 1970s, focusing instead upon learning classical and modern Chinese and reading widely in Chinese literature and literary thought. My philosophical studies reached an epiphany with the works of Michael Polanyi in 1980-82 at the University of Wisconsin, where my wife Josephine Chiu-Duke studied with Lin Yü-sheng; I had the good fortune of learning from both him and her. Since that time, and especially as a result of my recent immersion in literary theory, I have come to rely on many of the writers introduced here. Just as Yan Fu was inoculated against the lure of revolution by reading early Darwinian philosophy, I was inoculated against the excesses of Western cultural-studies theory by reading Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*. Turning to matters of a more personal nature, I am the white male American son of a machinist father and kindergarten-teacher mother who both voted for Franklin Roosevelt four times and backed unions with an almost religious fervor. I grew up in public housing projects with many black friends and classmates, and was hooked on the Bible as a born-again Christian while a teenager. Be-

fore entering college, I studied General Semantics and subscribed to its journal *ETC*, was profoundly influenced by Carl Sandberg's multivolume study of Lincoln, and was fascinated by the U.S. Civil War. As an undergraduate at the University of California at Davis, I co-founded the Gadflies, the only student political club on campus, and protested against the Reserved Officers' Training Corps. During graduate school at U.C. Berkeley, I was an officer in the W.E.B. Du-bois Club (an American Communist Party front), an activist in support of racial integration in Oakland during the civil rights movement, a minor leader in the anti-Vietnam War and Berkeley Free Speech movements, and even belonged briefly to a self-proclaimed Maoist group. As to whether or not all these nuggets of personal history "situate" me, some readers might answer in the affirmative. However, I believe that such "situating" is just as wrong-headed a practice for scholars as is "racial profiling" for police forces.

⁵ Wilson astutely characterizes Derrida's new "science" of grammatology as "the opposite of science, rendered in fragments with the incoherence of a dream, at once banal and fantastical, [and] innocent of the science of mind and language developed elsewhere in the civilized world, rather like the pronouncements of a faith healer unaware of the location of the pancreas" (45).

⁶ Woodside earlier discussed the weakness of Global Theory (1996).

⁷ Wong's only mention of Michel Foucault (7n) reads as follows: "Foucault's insight that the production of knowledge is intimately enmeshed with the production of power relationships has provided fertile ground for research in the social sciences and humanities, but it is not adequate to adjudicate among competing interpretations. If we can do no more than recognize differences and attribute them to social and political factors, we significantly limit our ability to generate systematic social science knowledge."

⁸ This sentence refers to ideas that are widely accepted by post-modernists, at least in theory.

⁹ With regard to positive 20th-century developments specific to the United States, the list would include the New Deal, with its Social

Security and a host of other reforms; the civil rights movement, civil rights and anti-discrimination laws, equal opportunity programs, and the rise of African Americans to near equality at the same time that Hispanics and Asians gained increasingly full participation in American cultural, social, and political life.

¹⁰ For a brief survey of the major changes in human life from 1900 to 2000, see Wills, "A Reader's Guide" 24-28.

¹¹ The views expressed in Wilson 1998: 43-48, 233-35, 329, 344 are typical.

¹² Ellis does not use the term postcolonial theory, but his argument responds to some of its ideas; I do not sense as much sentimentalizing of contemporary Third World societies as he claims, just a great deal of romanticizing their pasts—an expression of belief in what Bertrand Russell once called "the superior virtue of the oppressed."

¹³ On moral inversion—"the moral appeal of immorality," as embodied in fascism and Marxist-inspired communist movements, including Maoism—see Polanyi 227-233, "The Magic of Marxism."

¹⁴ For a closer look at some of these followers of Jameson in Chinese studies, see Williams 1995 and 1998-99, Duke 1993 and Link 1993; Liu and Tang 1993 is a collection mostly of their neo-Marxist postist writings, with a characteristically polemical forward by Jameson.

¹⁵ Walicki is not uncritical of the liberal tradition. Indeed, he treats Marxist communism as "the most important, however exaggerated and, ultimately, tragically mistaken, reaction to the multiple shortcomings of capitalist societies and the liberal tradition." If Walicki had not been convinced that this was the case, he "would not have written this book" (9).

¹⁶ A committed psychoanalytic critic in the earlier stages of his academic career, Crews publicly repudiated his former views during the 1980s and 1990s, when he became a leading critic of Freudianism's excessive influence upon both the academic humanities and popular culture in North America. For more on Crews' open break with his own previous views, see Williams, "The Rage" 53.

¹⁷ A recent highly praised book in Chinese studies by Wang Ban (1997) takes the main tenets of Freudian theory, all of them discredited by recent research, as unproblematic givens, and even uses pop-Freudianism to explain the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁸ Early reviews by, respectively, the scholar Said most venerates and the one he most vilifies in *Orientalism*, Albert Hourani (8 March 1979) and Bernard Lewis (24 June 1982), disputed key areas of Said's thesis, but to no avail; no practitioners of academic cultural studies seemed to be paying much attention to the fundamental flaws in *Orientalism* that these genuine scholars of Middle Eastern studies revealed.

¹⁹ Chen Xiaomei (1995) is another book in the field of Chinese studies that, despite the many flaws that make it sometimes painful to read, nevertheless illustrates MacKenzie-style Orientalism. Unlike MacKenzie, however, Chen seems to have been so terribly confused by her training in contemporary North American comparative literature that she cannot see the land she lives in as well as the Chinese advocates of "unofficial Occidentalism" do. They know that the United States is a liberal democratic society in which human rights and freedom under the rule of law are real and inalienable.

²⁰ See Ellis (1997), Chapter 7, "Power, Objectivity, and PC Logic," for the rest of his critique of Foucault's views on power and the lack of realism on the part of his American academic followers whom Ellis dubs "race-gender-class scholars." As Ellis writes, they and their master suffer from a "failure of any sense of scale or of shading. . . . [and] "the extraordinary fact is that although Foucault led the privileged life of a professor at the Sorbonne, he nonetheless believed that his oppression as a citizen of a Western democracy was comparable to that of the victims of totalitarian societies" (170-71).

²¹ This excerpt from Gellner's tribute to Merquior is found on the back cover of Merquior (1991).

²² Ellis (1997) contains copious examples of such "intellectual machismo" and postmodernist refusal to deal with the substance—the factual core—of an opponent's arguments. See especially Chapter 6, "Activism and Knowledge."

²³ Foucault's oft-cited misreading of *Las Meninas* resonates with Said's anachronistic interpretation of *Aida* mentioned above.

²⁴ The italics are in the original; note Foucault's similarity to Freud, despite the former's insistence that he was not a Freudian.

²⁵ This is not to say that Foucault's views on sexuality are altogether rational or reasonable. He actively promoted pederasty, sadism, and masochism, recommending that the French government abolish the age of consent for all sex acts, because children might desire sex with adults, and should not be discouraged from acting on those impulses. Foucault associated sexuality with cruelty rather than love, and advocated male homosexual promiscuity even after being given the best medical information on AIDS. As Roger Shattuck (1999: 77) writes, "Foucault was defending and normalizing his own homosexual, sadomasochistic tastes and pleasures. Proust, who dealt extensively with these subjects, would not have sympathized. Nor would Wilde, who wrote a sentence beyond Foucault's grasp as a thinker: 'Kindliness requires imagination and intellect.'"

²⁶ Ferry and Rénaut (1985/1990) offer a detailed critique of the antihumanism of Foucault as French Nietzscheanism, Derrida as French Heideggerianism, Bourdieu as French Marxism, and Lacan as French Freudianism; all four of these postmodernist icons are revealed as being far less original than their followers imagine them to be.

²⁷ I have included all of Zagorin's main points in a modified paragraph that leaves out some connective phrases without ellipses.

²⁸ This argument has been made quite persuasively by Anthony Giddens (45-53, 163-73).

²⁹ For a detailed critique of poststructuralism, particularly Derrida's embarrassing misreadings of Saussure and his nearly total ignorance of modern linguistics and the philosophy of language, see Raymond Tallis (1988), John Ellis (1989), and John Searle (1996). The reckless arrogance of most poststructuralists is shown by the fact that they pretend to be at the cutting edge of linguistic philosophy while blissfully "innocent of the science of mind and language" (Wilson 1998: 45, on Derrida), and without any awareness or mention of the

key school of transformationalists, as represented by Noam Chomsky. As Norman O. Holland puts it, "In writing [Chapter 22 on Chomsky], just as I could not find linguistics books that mention Saussure, so I had trouble finding 'theory' books that mention Chomsky. (I found one or two, but they misrepresented his ideas.) At the same time, film and literary theorists by the dozens quote Saussure or rely on his terminology and claims. It is as though the linguistic revolution of 1957 hadn't happened yet. It is as though most of the literary professoriate had stuck its collective head in the sand" (150).

³⁰ This quote from Russell comes from Israel Scheffler (1996). For a more thorough critique of postmodernist intellectuals' anti-realism, as well as their misunderstanding and misuse of science, see Gross and Levitt (1994) and Sokal and Bricmont (1998, especially Chapter 4, "Intermezzo: Epistemic Relativism in the Philosophy of Science").

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