

Preface

We have been long accustomed to seeing antiquated knowledge produced as new by taking it out of its former context, and fitting it into a systematic dress of any fancy pattern under new titles.¹

Men [*sic*] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.²

I sometimes joke that historians are people who tell other people's stories for a living. But I'll start here with one of my own. Like Kant during the days of his dogmatic slumbers, I had forgotten Hume. He was part of my basic boot-camp training in intellectual history, but had quickly disintegrated into the generic mulch of post-lockean British empiricism. This decomposition was perhaps inevitable as my interests began to focus on the Continent and on social and political theory.

The occasion of my own awakening was a course I was asked to teach on 18th century philosophy. Like many teachers impressed with recent challenges to the canons of the standard curriculum, I sought to enrich my version of this standard old course with exciting new texts from the margins of philosophical discourse. Women philosophers appeared to challenge the received myth that only men did philosophy back then;³ the canonical white males' writings on race and gender were included to explode their claims to serene rational disinterestedness;⁴ and a history of Atlantic slavery called attention to the everyday philosophies of particularity and domination that existed side-by-side with

1Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus, rev. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1977 [1783]), 7.

2Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 595.

3Margaret Atherton, ed., *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1994).

4Good selections can be found in Mary Briody Mahowald, ed., *Philosophy of Woman: An Anthology of Classic to Current Concepts*, 3rd. ed. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), and Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York, etc.: Penguin, 1995).

the sublime transcendentalism of Enlightenment philosophy, and indeed, were its conditions.⁵

As so many contemporary theorists have noticed, attention to the margins can throw a whole different light on the center — or decenter it entirely. In this new light, much to my amazement, Hume may have been the most incandescent reading of the lot. From a position of privilege within mainstream philosophical discourse, and with the devil-may-care gusto that can mark the truly privileged, he set up the conceptual foundations for the devastating critique of any kind of privileged foundations such as those that underlay mainstream philosophical discourse. His critique of causality as a mirage of juxtaposition — “constant conjunction,” as he calls it — made the universe inherently probabilistic already and demolished positivism before it had even started. Perhaps his most striking achievement was to demonstrate that experience is all we have to go on, and hence, that all knowledge of the world can only come from particular relationships to it. This is the basic insight of any standpoint epistemology (or sociology of knowledge, or critique of ideology). But it is also the basic insight of a more fundamental break from an aspiration for universality toward a recognition of inescapable locality and hybridity, because constant conjunction (i.e. habit) is the only thing that holds the fragmented manifold of what Hume charmingly calls “treasured up” experiences together into something that looks like (but obviously isn’t) a unitary truth, knowledge, or ‘self’.

This is exactly what frightened Kant about Hume;⁶ and in attempting to save philosophy as a purely rational, universal method of truth-detection and knowledge-validation from humean empiricist indeterminacy and hybridity, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant wrote the script that sophisticated modernists have been performing ever since.⁷

⁵Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800* (London and New York: Verso, 1997).

⁶“If we accept his conclusions, then all that we call metaphysics is a mere delusion whereby we fancy ourselves to have rational insight into what, in actual fact, is borrowed solely from experience, and under the influence of custom has taken the illusory semblance of necessity.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s, 1965 [1781, 1787; trans. 1929]), 55.

⁷Of course, in the process Kant made philosophy explicitly irrelevant to everyday lived life by locating purity and universality prior to any possible particular experience. This makes him both a dangerous ally and a surprisingly elusive target, because he refused to underwrite anything practical that might ‘matter’. Strictly speaking, any practical criticism or appropriation of Kant’s philosophy (including his own, in the other Critiques and his essays) is illegitimate or impertinent. For Kant, particular (empirical) experience or interest can only degrade or pollute pure reason,

From our present vantage point, therefore, the striking conclusion that emerges from this little tale is that Hume was a precocious postmodernist. Hume occupied a power/knowledge system quite different from that of the late 20th century, and consequently he did not draw all of the conclusions from his premises that we now would. He was, for example, unembarrassed to say pathetically stupid things about the natural inferiority of brown peoples to white ones.⁸ But this was clearly (in retrospect) at odds with his own argument about the central role of particular experiences in shaping (or, as we would now say, constructing) particular human lives. Hence, the even more striking conclusion of this tale is that Hume was a hybrid of emergent modernity and precocious postmodernity.⁹ To see this, it is necessary to do two things together that are usually kept separate: to call attention to the conceptual resources that were available in the past, and to explore the specific uses (or misuses) that were made of them.¹⁰

What all of this suggests to me is that for at least the last 300 years there has been sniping already at the borderline of modernity and postmodernity.¹¹ For most of this time, the modernist orthodoxy most elaborately scripted by Kant has been in the position to dictate the terms of the debate and to crush voices of particularity and hybridity that became too insistently irritating. It is virtually a commonplace that the power of this orthodoxy as a knowledge system cannot be separated from the success of the universal ‘rationalizing’ project of globalizing capitalism, the colonial empires, and constitutionalist patri-

which precedes experience and is hence a “transcendent” faculty.

8See Richard H. Popkin, “Hume’s Racism,” *The Philosophical Forum* vol. IX nos. 2-3 (Winter-Spring 1977-78) 211-226. This is a double issue on philosophy and the Black experience.

9There is nothing more tedious than a book designed as an elaborate proof of someone else’s point, and this is not one of such. But I do think I will incidentally provide a great deal of support for Bruno Latour’s argument that *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993 [1991]). Latour also finds in Kant the “canonical formulation” of the modern.

10There is a disciplinary divide here: sociologists and other ‘social scientists’ who bother to look at old ideas tend to wade in with the former approach, earning a reputation for insensitivity to context; historians tend to make a peremptory commitment to the latter approach, earning a reputation for antiquarian irrelevance.

11Without saying much about postmodernism Stephen Toulmin makes much the same point in *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992 [1990]). His illustrative pair is Montaigne and Descartes, pushing the story back even further (and, incidentally, foregoing chances to spotlight Pascal as the hybrid). Since Toulmin essentially reads canonical philosophical modernism as a historical parenthesis now closable not just by postmodernism but by a return to premodernism, his argument is interestingly comparable to Latour’s in *We Have Never Been Modern*.

archy. Yet, from the margins Hume's spiritual followers have been gradually drawing 'yes, and' conclusions from premises that have been rediscoverable within the West's conceptual equipment throughout the same centuries in which capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy reached their acmes. It should not surprise us, then, that the historical contraction and/or realignment of the capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal systems that underwrote the modernist orthodoxy's power should see the return of the repressed in force.

Late in the 19th century, drawing a 'yes, and' conclusion from basically Hume-like conceptual materials, Nietzsche announced that God was dead.¹² In another famous formulation delivered late in the 20th century, Lyotard characterized the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives."¹³ In each case, the point of departure was an understanding that no Truth or Knowledge is able (or, so far as they could see, could be able) to claim universal authority, to be a story that encompasses all stories (a metanarrative). We are left with truths and knowledges that are dispersed and localized in fields of lived life (or Being, perhaps): effective, even peremptory in their contexts, but experientially *different*.

In this spirit, I believe that incredulity toward the metanarratives of novelty is one of the distinctive contributions that historians can make to contemporary human studies. This is especially true in the late 20th century, in which *difference* has become something of a conceptual Swiss Army knife — a tool good at all times for all purposes. As a historian, I am reflexively suspicious of claims that something is 'new' (the kind of difference associated with the passage of time). This suspicion extends to the corollary claim that something is 'post': poststructural, postindustrial, postconsumerist, postcolonial. History is too routinely punctuated with anguished reports of catastrophic doom and manic proclamations of immaculate birth to allow anything but irony in the presence of more such. 'Wolf!' has been cried so often that there is an extraordinary burden of proof on those who wish to assert that one age has passed and another has begun.

¹²In this sense, Nietzsche marked one spectacular step in the degeneration of the kantian modernist orthodoxy, a history of the repressed returning that includes Wollstonecraft, Hegel, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Musil, and many, many others.

¹³Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984 [1979]), p. xxiv. 'Metanarrative' literally means a story that includes or explains all stories; Lyotard uses the term to refer to any legitimating discourse that aspires to universal validity — the stock-in-trade of the kantian modernist orthodoxy.

New things do happen all the time. But they can only emerge out of the material of the old by rearranging and reinflecting that material. Hegel was right: sometimes a quantity of small events do reach a threshold and emerge into something qualitatively different. Yet, as generations of historians have shown in endlessly recycled controversies over the prevalence of change or continuity in history, the traces of the old can always be found persisting within the new, just as the new gestates within the old before it is born. This basic historical logic of continuity within change may be ascribed, as Hegel did, to an underlying continuity of Spirit progressively bringing itself to fruition. More prosaically, it could simply be noted with Machiavelli, Marx and many others that the materials history gives us to work with at any given time and place are limited in the variety of practical realignments they will permit.¹⁴

It was with this in mind that I first began to think of postmodernism as something that must have had a prehistory. It must have come from somewhere before it became what it is.¹⁵ My reawakening to Hume just gave me a satisfactorily distant point of reference for this, but once one is properly attuned, the precocious postmodernities start to crawl out of the woodwork.¹⁶ Often, they appear as nuances, open questions, undrawn conclusions, quirky intersections, and inflections from within the discourses of modernism itself, which is thus revealed as always already a hybrid. Consequently, thinking of postmodernity as a 'there-already' tendency within modernity can open us out to a far more interesting past, one in tension with itself and a little less coherent, but also filled with striking resources that remain relevant today.

¹⁴Marx's best-known statements to this effect are probably the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and the seminal lines from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* quoted above. An equally evocative reminder of the material boundaries of historical change is in the *Gruntdrisse*: "[I]s Achilles possible with powder and lead?" Trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), 111. For Machiavelli, see Chapter 4, below.

¹⁵I have since found a number of like minds, among them James Livingston, whose *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: UNCP, 1997 [1994]) features an overlapping but different cast of characters than the present book. Because he distinguishes pragmatic radical empiricism from Hume's prototypic empiricism much more carefully than I do, Livingston has an unfolding story to tell that describes what I call precocious postmodernisms developmentally rather than prefiguratively.

¹⁶Is this just another metanarrative? Not exactly, because I present this account as plausible, edifying, but optional. I do recognize that this attitude precludes a tragic reading of history, and may accordingly be considered immoral by those inclined to tragic readings.¹

Just what is this postmodernism of which someone can be a precocious exemplar from within the dominion of the modernists? Actually, there are many postmodernisms, corresponding to various disciplines and practices (e.g. art, architecture, literature, philosophy, social and political theory, advertising) in which the dead traditions of modernity seem to weigh particularly nightmarish.¹⁷ Furthermore, postmodernism makes itself hard to define by rejecting the very mode of thinking that yields singular definitions. Yet, the strategy of postmodernism as an aggressively self-conscious movement is strikingly standardized, and comes in two basic tactics that provide clues for just such an orienting definition. The first postmodern tactic, as I have already suggested, is to sniff out and insist upon difference both among and within things, even — or especially — where things seem most alike. *Cherchez le difference! Vive le difference!*

Such category busting — basically, the idea that anything can be lots of things — has a flip side that yields the second definitive postmodern tactic. This consists in the rejection of essentializing. Nothing, postmodernists insist, is essentially any one thing in particular. Targets of this critique cover the spectrum from vulgar stereotyping of the racism/ sexism/ ethnocentrism/ heterosexism variety, to something more subtle like notions of ‘authenticity’ or ‘identity’.¹⁸ Thus, postmodernists bristle at any attempt to find

¹⁷Bibliography goes out of date very quickly indeed in the postmodern universe, so the following suggestions should be approached with incredulity. Of several such, *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) and *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990) are among the better assemblages of texts. Barry Smart, *Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) is a fairly lucid overview with a helpful short bibliography. Steven Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1989) is cautiously celebratory; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and Stephen Crook, *Modernist Radicalism and its Aftermath: Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in Radical Social Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) are more critical. Robert G. Dunn, *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998) offers an excellent critical overview and reconceptualization.

¹⁸Another related casualty of this strategy is any assertion of a ‘center’ that creates ‘standpoints’ and ‘margins’. A fascinating diagnostic of this can be found in Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, rev. and exp. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998 [1987]), 9. Asante criticizes ‘Eurocentrism’ as many postmodernists in postcolonial and subaltern studies have done. But he does so from the standpoint of ‘Afrocentricity’, explicitly recognizing that this essentializing discourse of ‘centers’ requires that “the structuralism of modernism” be preserved against the decentering attacks of postmodernism. He wants to demarginalize Africa with respect to Europe by reconstructing its own structural centrality (he wants Africa as such to be something good), hence cannot want to reject centers and standpoints altogether. A similar critique of poststructural decentering from the feminist side is Nancy Hartsock, “Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theo-

the ‘true nature’ of things, because for them things do not have true natures. Everything (and everyone) is multiple, fragmented, and in flux. Fragmentation and difference are consequently the defining terms of postmodernism. They appear as explicit rejections of modernism’s aspirations to unity, totality, or universality (of morality, reason, humanity, progress, etc.). So the story goes, where the modernist seeks the ‘real’ unity and consistency beneath the disturbing chaos and contingency of experience, the postmodernist celebrates this diversity as reality in itself, filled with infinite possibilities, or none at all.

By definition, then, postmodernism is incoherent, and not in a pretty way. The postmodern imagination contains a powerful temptation to degenerate into a slippery slope of skepticism, for which any hint of even pragmatic categorical closure may be taken as evidence of the opponent’s vicious will to domination and/or covert worship of some ‘hidden god’.¹⁹ Fortunately, while even pure flux can be identified as such, pure flux is hard to find in a universe where entropy operates: there are generally local stabilities (or impurities), and these have identities that are the sum of their local conditions of stability. And without local conditions of stability (which we call ‘identities’ when we like them, ‘stereotypes’ when we don’t) thinking of any kind, modern or postmodern, would be impossible. Indeed, keeping at least some things categorically stable is *how we think*: nor could it be otherwise, or the sheer volume of chaotic difference would overwhelm us and drive us mad. Somewhere between pure identity and pure difference, within the lively play of intersections, hybridities, and inflections, is where human life is lived from day to day.²⁰

If this is so, then this big middle ground is also where to focus historical attention.²¹ Hence, if postmodernism is not actually ‘post’ modernism but its original nemesis,

ries,” *Cultural Critique* 7 (Fall 1987): 187-206. Both of these arguments recognize the practical power of centers that poststructuralists/ postmodernists are often at pains to deny, dismiss, or play around with.

¹⁹The practical result of such a stance is paralysis, which is a luxury that only pure intellectuals with secure incomes can enjoy. “I have not found words ugly enough to designate this intellectual movement [postmodernism] — or rather, this intellectual immobility through which humans and non-humans are left to drift. I call it ‘hyper-incommensurability.’” Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. To this lazy nullity of pure abstract difference Latour opposes the laborious empirical ethnography of the practical arrangements through which knowledge, power, and practices are constituted and organized in the actual modern world.

²⁰For further discussion of these issues see also Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 1995).

²¹This middle ground is the subject of this whole study, but I have not discovered it alone — indeed, there is a growing literature. See, e.g., (in addition to Livingston, Latour and Featherstone),

then the pure distinctiveness of contemporary postmodernism becomes harder to sustain; nor is it likely that there will not always already be hybrids of modernity and postmodernity. Even in the late 20th century there are certainly people to be found who neatly will fit one side or another of this basic opposition on any given question. But who gets to be labeled which is not so clear, nor is when — and whether — some decisive threshold can be identified in historical time or personal conceptual development where postmodernism replaces modernism, as my little stories about Hume and Kant, Nietzsche and Lyotard should indicate.

The present work is a bigger instance of these little stories, told about parts of the hybrid conceptual field of European social and political theory in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In its less polemical moments, it seems to me, postmodernism's message resolves into a sensible caution not to get too comfortable with categories, to keep them open, flexible, and contingent. Accordingly, the best thing I have learned from postmodernism, have indeed been forced to learn by postmodernism, is how to find resources in familiar texts that it would not have occurred to me to look for otherwise. In the process, I have found part of the prehistory of postmodernism in the very texts against which postmodern social theory has attempted to stake its decisive novelty. This is only just: for no movement that is defined by a strategy of finding multiplicity and hybridity within seeming unity can afford to be surprised to find a long historical hybridity of its own core insights within the conceptual dominion of the opposition.

A Word on Method

Here at the end of the 20th century, if there is one thing intellectuals should have learned (with the possible exception of Jürgen Habermas, the last of the *philosophes*) it is that the coherence of systems is fictional. Metanarratives always hide ruptures, suspicious silences, contradictions, 'residual categories', space maintainers of various kinds that tell different stories. It has always been assumed that the strength of systems lies in their coherence, and we have been taught to admire — and require — systematic think-

Dunn's *Identity Crises* and Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Fin de Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* (London/New York: Verso, 1995), the latter for extended reflections on the possibility of "postpositivist" social theory that combines the strengths of the modernist and postmodernist imaginations. I will have more to say below about the mistargeting of critiques of positivism at modernism *tout court*.

ing. But what if, instead, the strength of systems lies in their elasticity, their capacity to accommodate all of these contradictory resources for the actual ‘work’ that they enable?²² If, as I think, ideas are a kind of tools, then a good toolbox will need both a hammer to drive in nails and a wrecking bar to yank them out, even though their simultaneous application would clearly be ‘contradictory’. In this instance, the public performance of coherence would require a theorist to hide one another of these implements, perhaps even from herself.

My work in what follows will be based on this second, pragmatic premise. I read texts for the conceptual resources that are there, not for their consistency with the programmatic statements of their authors. These I take to be required public performances of fictive coherence: legitimating gestures. From them we can learn what theorists are expected to do, but little about what they actually do do. I assume that authors frequently learn things, forget things, pick up stuff that’s lying around, put it down again, take their time, get in a hurry, and let context rather than system drive analysis. Ideas and conceptual systems are situational responses to perceived problems. I take ‘residual categories’ to be potentially every bit as integral to the conceptual problem-solving resources of any given author as the systematic overlay, just as every toolbox contains devices used all the time and devices used only once or twice.

I find fussy little arguments about ‘epistemological breaks’ and elaborate periodizations of this or that thinker’s thought irritating and unilluminating, and this method allows me to sidestep all of that. It allows me not to feel betrayed (or worse, superior) if one of my heroes buys a new screwdriver without throwing out the old one, or gets a chisel to do the paint-scraping that was being done with a screwdriver before, or picks up some new tools to do a new job, or uses one set of tools when people are around and another when no one is watching, or gets frustrated and takes a wild swing with a pickaxe. The

²²In substance this methodological argument is not dissimilar to that advanced by Dominick LaCapra, e.g. “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982). This collection documents a ‘linguistic turn’ that I would say has now turned and turned over, so there are few working intellectual historians these days who would be quite so willing to turn the whole world into a text as LaCapra was in this essay. What I am arguing is perhaps a ‘pragmatic turn’, but pragmatists are by definition quite permissive about the tools and techniques that can be used, so long as they work.

feelings of betrayal or superiority come from a disappointed expectations of coherent, continuous system, and again, I think systems are always fictions.

What this means is that I am prepared to guarantee that what I say about the various people and conceptual movements I discuss in this book is accurate, and that it makes some sense of them. They did in fact say the things I say they said, and my interpretations of these utterances are plausible ('correct' would be a wild claim, and I do not make it). What I am not prepared to certify is that the inventories of tools and their uses I have assembled is exhaustive, or that it captures 'the essence' of various systems. I have just said that such a project is at least irritating, probably naive, and almost certainly untrue to how we now think thinking happens.

Nor, to widen the field of this discussion a bit, have I included in this study everyone who is relevant to it. Different readers will be disappointed by the absence of different favorites — I honor them all. We have all read hundreds of justifications and apologies for such omissions in the prefaces and introductions of books and articles that fail to accomplish the omniscience that is the meta-fantasy of systematic thinking. It is not lazy not to be omniscient; what is lazy is constructing a closed account that simulates omniscience by its hermetic limitations. As my last overt methodological gesture I freely admit that I have not here discussed everything I might have; but I refuse to construct a just-so story about why the story I am telling is nonetheless complete. I do hope, however, that it will be productively stimulating.