

*Political Theory and Postmodernism*, by Stephen K. White. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

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Stephen White recognizes the absurdity of writing a few chapters to describe the "postmodern problematic," but he turns an impossible task into two distinct accomplishments. He uses these chapters as a stepping stone to reach more interesting issues for those already familiar with postmodernism and he issues a sensible invitation to those who still don't get the postmodern point.

White suggests four principal "landmarks" in the postmodern problematic. I would identify two as epistemological: an incredulity toward traditional metanarratives, on the one hand, and a new awareness of the costs of societal rationalization on the other. Alongside these are two shifts in the social environment to which postmodern theorists usually attend: the explosion of information technologies on the one hand and the emergence of new social movements on the other. It is probably more useful to work with the postmodern as a disposition rather than a societal condition, however. Modernity has not passed us by, but we seem to have a different attitude toward it. The postmodern may then be best described as a mood, exemplified by a series of oppositions.

Although these oppositions are not entirely parallel, we have on the one hand figures like Jürgen Habermas, the ethical discourse surrounding the "responsibility to act," and an understanding of language based on its action-coordinating functions. Set up against this combination are the French theorists Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida, a "responsibility to otherness," and an emphasis on the world-disclosing functions of language. The postmodern is generally associated with the latter combination. White's principal ambition is to discover a new form of ethical/political reflection based on the maintenance of a fruitful tension between these three pairs of oppositions. Although remaining rather Habermasian and ultimately sympathetic to the responsibility to act, White's focus on the postmodern does suggest novel ways to consider the normative foundations of a critical sociology.

The postmodern barrage is launched against both "bourgeois" and "Marxist" forms of discourse. While certainly the latter is based on a critique of the former, envisioning the supersession of a socialist over a bourgeois consciousness for both ruling classes and their intellectuals, the postmodern suggests that both discourses are fixed on reason and will in the legislation of societies and with the location of that reason and will shifting from the individual to the collective subject in the making of socialism (White, p. 3). Both are inattentive to difference, the construction of subjectivities and the problem of understanding otherness. By now, of course, this is a well-worn critique even if insufficiently received

in most intellectual and political circles. White infuses the debate with something new, however, by his invocation of Heidegger.

Why Heidegger? White finds a certain problem in the work derived from this French-inspired project. While the postmodern critique was based on a combination of moral and aesthetic sensibilities, the tendency to deconstruct whatever unity that comes along risks elevating an aesthetic of intellectual impertinence above the moral injunction to respect otherness (p. 72). Heidegger's project is different, and potentially useful, for its approach to otherness.

After explicating Heidegger, White goes on to explain how Heidegger's work might engage issues raised by Habermas, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Reiner Schurmann, Richard Rorty, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Walzer. To cover so many theorists and so much ground in a little more than 150 pages of text boggled my mind. Indeed, his engagement with these other theorists seemed, of necessity, a bit superficial, but one must keep in mind that his intention was not to analyze them. Rather, it seems, their engagement is designed to show how ideas from the late Heidegger might transform the responsibility to otherness central to the postmodern problematic.

Unlike the postmoderns, Heidegger draws our attention to the continuous presencing which enables the discontinuities that postmoderns celebrate to be seen. In order to recognize this presencing, one must embrace a different kind of action which Heidegger called "*Gelassenheit*" or "letting be," so that one might suspend the action characteristic of this ontology of presencing, an action guided by reason and will. As White describes it,

*Gelassenheit* is not a praxis that is assigned a goal by thinking or theory. Rather, to learn 'other thinking' means first practicing an attitude or posture of human being toward being or presencing. It is an orientation that 'complies' with the character of presencing as plural, unstable, motile and unhierarchical. Moreover, this posture is inherently political in the broad sense: It both constitutes an *intervention* in our teleocratic, technocratic disposition over words, deeds, and things, and it *prepares the site* for — but cannot directly will — a new postmodern anarchic disposition within which an other politics can emerge (p. 47, emphasis in original).

This kind of intervention is designed to deflate the claims of the rational animal and the drive toward infinitude, on the one hand, and, on the other, to allow things to exist in their particularity and let humans exist in finitude by them. It requires that we be near death even as we live.

Heidegger's notion of *Nahe* ("nearness") incorporates the very ambiguity that postmodern thought so celebrates: to being at home in homelessness, to being close so that otherness can be recognized, to be so close as to understand but to be unable to label. In this, near and far are not

opposites, but two sides of the same coin playing off one another. Creativity in this nearness is simultaneously bringing something into one's presence, but also letting go, allowing it to exist in its particularity, simultaneously recognizing limits. While this kind of responsibility to otherness and affirmation of ambiguity may not be so prominent in bourgeois and Marxist discourses, they are, of course, central to "difference" feminism.

His chapter on feminism too seems a bit cursory, but White invokes the spirit of Carol Gilligan and others mainly to point out their affinities with Heidegger. The former elevate an ethic of care, for instance, which also demands a greater willingness to listen to the "other" and the creation of a space in which the "other's" particularity can emerge. Difference feminism approaches Heidegger's notion of nearness, too, when this feminism's celebration of an ethic of care for others does not simultaneously mean a loss of self in dependency. And also like Heidegger, a contradictoriness of mood also resides in this care, containing good humor, grief, delight, and humility.

This attitude is thus designed to engender a humility, one that contrasts rather dramatically with the hubris of both bourgeois and Marxist rational politics. The dilemma, of course, is that without such hubris it is difficult to construct an alternative politics. Anarchic praxis, like civil disobedience, only hopes to transform the scene so that a better politics might be discovered. One cannot derive an "other politics" from Heidegger's theory, even if one's sensitivity to the other, in her or its particularity, is heightened. We thus only have an affinity of this and other postmodern philosophies with the radical democratic politics most postmoderns embrace, as White notes. For all of these postmodern approaches have difficulty, with Heidegger not the exception, of translating this responsibility to otherness into a different kind of responsibility to act.

White doesn't offer a synthetic solution for this divorce between theories sensitive to the responsibility to otherness and those to the responsibility to act. While White is critical of Nancy Fraser's replacement of the ethic of care for the ethic of solidarity, her work may be the best available for synthesizing these critical strands, his point notwithstanding (see her *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Nevertheless, I find his invitation to a different mood for critical theory compelling and more disturbing for my assumptions than is Fraser's work.

While we might locate the source of emancipatory knowledge and practices in subjugated knowledges and local resistances, which are themselves motivated by an affective orientation that confirms the *concrete* other, White suggests that a mood of "grieving delight" might help sustain the form of interaction that characterizes these efforts. The following puts it in a nutshell:

By cultivating the mood and measure that sustain such a listening, we begin to become at home in homelessness: in finitude, in radical contingency, in a world that continually pushes over, edges around, and seeps through our attempts to freeze it within frames of interpretation. This mood carries within in an indissoluble ambiguity. First, there is mournfulness and grief at the fragility and momentary quality of all that we value and affirm. It is out of this affective pole that we might come to a greater sense of the tragic dimension of political life. But at the same time there is the sense of delight in the continual presencing of difference, of the other. It is out of this affective pole that we might be motivated toward ways of responding to the other in political life that go beyond simple tolerance, without, however, sliding into paternalism (p. 110).

The institutional manifestation of this mood is the following:

The positive valuation of difference, as opposed to mere tolerance, could give us grounds for a stronger commitment to public policies that do not merely *protect* the formal right of individual or collective concrete others to express themselves, but go further and do more to *empower* or to *foster* the emergence of such voices (p. 110, emphasis in original).

And with this challenge to the liberal notion of individualism, White concludes his useful book on postmodernism and political ethics. Nevertheless, I felt cheated in the end, even if it isn't White's fault. Unlike him, I am not a political theorist whose primary concern is ethics. I am driven to ask, at the end, for whom are these ethics meant? What role do they play in emancipatory transformation? While there are no explicit answers in the book, there are implicit ones.

The book concludes with suggestions for public policy, for a different kind of state which actively fosters pluralism and difference. Is the ethic he advocates one that we might expect from the new generation in the White House? This ethic, after all, doesn't seem to be grounded in any particular location in social relations. But when he links this ethic to post-structuralism and feminism in particular, the mood that underlies the ethic is more typically found in "subjugated" discourses, even if those discourses are without the rhetorical flourishes that legitimate the post-modern as a cutting-edge academic speciality. (In a social theory seminar, Jane Mildred of the University of Michigan gently suggested to me that much of this postmodern emphasis on contradictoriness of subject positions, and multiplicities of identity, is something intuitively known by people in subjugated identities, and that white, male academics in positions of power require complicated expositions not only to understand it, but then to control it too!) But if linked to the subjugated and not to the Clintons and Gores, then how is this mood supposed to be translated into

state policy? One possible link is, of course, through the mediation of critical intellectuals who inhale the mood and help formulate public policies based on it. I like the idea.

From Gramsci through Bourdieu, most sociological theories of critical intellectuals explain, and hope to influence, their politics on the basis of their location in power relations. The culture *per se* of intellectuals is usually smuggled in, as Gramsci does by locating it in reference to class struggle and competing hegemonies, or as Bourdieu does by identifying it as strategies and power resources characterizing the intellectual's setting. Where culture gets a little closer to entry, it usually does so by invoking the explanatory power of "ideology." The mood of ambivalence and contradictoriness, based in a respect for finitude and openness, might be forced into an ideological frame, but I think it is too difficult to freeze this mood into a sufficiently coherent set of positions so that it merits the ideological label. It is a mood. But as White identified, the problem of translating this difference-valuing mood into an action program that institutionalizes it does not emerge from the mood itself. That problem is ideal for critical sociologists to explore.

What are the conditions that translate such a mood into a strategy for promoting and honoring diversity in a non-paternalistic way? Even more fundamentally, how can we identify such a mood so that we know when it exists? This seems to be rather important, for when policies are put in place that ostensibly promote diversity, like those institutionalized at my own University of Michigan, we cannot assume that those who implement them are informed by such a progressive postmodern mood. A certain "bad faith" could describe the mood of some administrators, which then turns a theoretically good policy into another yet more insidious form of racism and patriarchy, claiming to combat oppression while in fact reproducing it in new ways.

While I might derive these sociological questions from White's work, another set seems more important because it encourages me to rethink my sense of critical intellectuals. While recognizing the pervasiveness of power in constituting knowledge requires a terrific reflexivity on the part of any intellectual, this need not cultivate the kind of lightness of care a humility before finitude is likely to generate. I am indebted to White for encouraging me to reconsider the alternative moods which might underlie the critical disposition. It's a shame that it takes a discourse on Heidegger for me to recognize the contradictoriness of being, but then that's White's and Heidegger's point: we are caught in the *Gestell* of action that demands singleness of purpose. At least many of us are.