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**Richard Wolin: The Seduction of Unreason**

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## · INTRODUCTION ·

# Answer to the Question: What Is Counter-Enlightenment?

IN HONOR of the Enlightenment the eighteenth century was commonly known as the century of *lumière*, or light. Its advocates viewed themselves as the “party of humanity”: they sought to represent the “general will” rather than the standpoint of particular interests, estates, or castes. The champions of Enlightenment counterposed reason as an analytical solvent to dogma, superstition, and unwarranted social authority. Their compendium of political grievances culminated in the *cahiers de doléances* submitted to Louis XVI in conjunction with the summoning of the Estates General in 1788—a damning indictment of the injustices and corruptions that prevailed under the absolute monarchies of Louis and his predecessor, Louis XV. With one or two notable exceptions (e.g., Jean-Jacques Rousseau), the *philosophes* were political moderates. They confidently believed that the monarchy could be progressively restructured, and, consequently, put their faith in piecemeal political reform from above. As such, most were proponents of either “Enlightened Despotism” or, in the case of the so-called Anglomaniacs, English-style constitutional monarchy. Yet, time and again, monarchical intransigence pushed them in the direction of democratic republicanism. When on June 27, 1789, the deputies representing the Third Estate—whose members had been bred on Enlightenment precepts—took their seats in the National Assembly on the *left* side of the hall, the modern political left was born.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the same sequence of events precipitated the birth of the modern political right, whose adherents elected to sit on the

opposite side of the Versailles assembly hall on that fateful day in 1789. But in reality the political battle lines had been drawn decades earlier. By mid-century defenders of the *ancien régime* knew that the cultural momentum lay with the “party of humanity.” A new breed of anti-philosophe emerged to contest the epistemological and political heresies proposed by the Party of Reason—the apostles of Counter-Enlightenment. Relying mainly on theological arguments, the anti-philosophes cautioned against the spirit of critical inquiry, intellectual hubris, and the misuse of reason. Instead, they emphasized the need to preserve order at all costs. They viewed altar and throne as the twin pillars of political stability. They believed that any challenge to their unquestioned primacy threatened to undermine the entire social edifice. They considered self-evident the view—one in effect shared by many of the philosophes themselves—that men and women were fundamentally incapable of self-governance. Sin was the alpha and omega of the human condition. One needed both unquestioned authority and the threat of eternal damnation to prevent humanity from overreaching its inherently fallible nature. Unfettered employment of reason as recommended by the philosophes was an invitation to catastrophe. As one of the leading spokesmen of the Counter-Enlightenment, Antoine de Rivarol (one of the major sources for Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*), remarked in 1789, “From the day when the monarch consults his subjects, sovereignty is as though suspended . . . When people cease to esteem, they cease to obey. A general rule: peoples whom the king consults begin with vows and end with wills of their own.”<sup>2</sup>

Rivarol and company held “philosophy” responsible for the corruption of morals, carnal licentiousness, depravity, political decay, economic decline, poor harvests, and the precipitous rise in food prices. The social cataclysms of revolutionary France—mob violence, dechristianization, anarchy, civil war, terror, and political dictatorship—convinced the anti-philosophes of their uncanny clairvoyance.

In a much-cited essay Isaiah Berlin contended that one could trace the origins of fascism to Counter-Enlightenment ideologues like Joseph de Maistre and Johann Georg Hamann.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a cer-

tain plausibility marks Berlin's claim. For one of fascism's avowed goals was to put an end to the Enlightenment-derived nineteenth-century worldview: the predominance of science, reason, democracy, socialism, individualism, and the like. As Goebbels pithily observed a few months after Hitler's rise to power, "The year 1789 is hereby erased from history."<sup>4</sup> Maistre and his contemporaries were horrified by the specter of radical change. As such, they preferred the "contrary of revolution" (reform from above) to the specter of "counter-revolution," which would merely perpetuate the cycle of violence.

The fascists, conversely, crossed the Rubicon and never looked back. They knew that, in an age of total war, a point of no return had been reached: there could be no going back to the tradition-bound cocoon of the *ancien régime*. They elected to combat the values of the French Revolution with revolutionary means: violence, war, and total mobilization. Thereby, they ushered in an alternative vision of modernity, one that was meant to supersede the standpoint of the philosophes and the political champions of 1789.

### *Who's Afraid of Enlightenment?*

Surely, one of the more curious aspects of the contemporary period is that the heritage of Enlightenment finds itself under attack not only from the usual suspects on the political right but also from proponents of the academic left. As one astute commentator has recently noted, today "Enlightenment bashing has developed into something of an intellectual blood-sport, uniting elements of both the left and the right in a common cause."<sup>5</sup> Thus, one of the peculiarities of our times is that Counter-Enlightenment arguments once the exclusive prerogative of the political right have attained a new lease on life among representatives of the cultural left. Surprisingly, if one scans the relevant literature, one finds champions of post-modernism who proudly invoke the Counter-Enlightenment heritage as their own. As the argument goes, since democracy has been and continues to be responsible for so many political ills, and since the critique of modern democracy began with the anti-philosophes,

why not mobilize their powerful arguments in the name of the postmodern political critique? As a prominent advocate of postmodern political theory contends, one need only outfit the Counter-Enlightenment standpoint with a new “articulation” (a claim couched in deliberate vagueness) to make it serviceable for the ends of the postmodern left.<sup>6</sup> Yet those who advocate this alliance of convenience between extreme right and extreme left provide few guarantees or assurances that the end product of the exercise in political grafting will result in greater freedom rather than a grandiose political miscarriage.

One of the crucial elements underlying this problematic right-left synthesis is a strange chapter in the history of ideas whereby latter-day anti-philosophes such as Nietzsche and Heidegger became the intellectual idols of post-World War II France—above all, for poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. Paradoxically, a thoroughgoing cynicism about reason and democracy, once the hallmark of reactionary thought, became the stock-in-trade of the postmodern left.<sup>7</sup> As observers of the French intellectual scene have frequently noted, although Germany lost on the battlefield, it triumphed in the seminar rooms, bookstores, and cafés of the Latin Quarter. During the 1960s Spenglerian indictments of “Western civilization,” once cultivated by leading representatives of the German intellectual right, migrated across the Rhine where they gained a new currency. Ironically, Counter-Enlightenment doctrines that had been taboo in Germany because of their unambiguous association with fascism—after all, Nietzsche had been canonized as the Nazi regime’s official philosopher, and for a time Heidegger was its most outspoken philosophical advocate—seemed to best capture the mood of *Kulturpessimismus* that predominated among French intellectuals during the postwar period. Adding insult to injury, the new assault against *philosophie* came from the homeland of the Enlightenment itself.

One of the linchpins of the Counter-Enlightenment program was an attack against the presuppositions of humanism. By challenging the divine basis of absolute monarchy, the unbelieving philosophes had tampered with the Great Chain of Being, thereby undermining morality and inviting social chaos. For the anti-

philosophes, there existed a line of continuity between Renaissance humanism, Protestant heresy, and Enlightenment atheism. In *Considerations on France* (1797) Maistre sought to defend the particularity of historical traditions against the universalizing claims of Enlightenment humanism, which had culminated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of August 20, 1789. In a spirit of radical nominalism, the French royalist observed that he had encountered Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, and even *Persians* (if only in the writings of Montesquieu). But “humanity” or “man in general,” he claimed, was a figment of a feverish and overheated philosophe imagination. “Man” as such did not exist.<sup>8</sup>

An assault on humanism was also one of French structuralism’s hallmarks, an orientation that in many respects set the tone for the more radical, poststructuralist doctrines that followed. As one critic has aptly remarked, “Structuralism was . . . a movement that in large measure *reversed* the eighteenth-century celebration of Reason, the credo of the *Lumières*.”<sup>9</sup> In this spirit, one of the movement’s founders, Claude Lévi-Strauss, sought to make anthropology useful for the ends of cultural criticism. Lévi-Strauss famously laid responsibility for the twentieth century’s horrors—total war, genocide, colonialism, threat of nuclear annihilation—at the doorstep of Western humanism. As he remarked in a 1979 interview, “All the tragedies we have lived through, first with colonialism, then with fascism, finally the concentration camps, all this has taken shape not in opposition to or in contradiction with so-called humanism . . . but I would say almost as *its natural continuation*.”<sup>10</sup> Anticipating the poststructuralist credo, Lévi-Strauss went on to proclaim that the goal of the human sciences “was not to constitute, *but to dissolve man*.”<sup>11</sup> From here it is but a short step to Foucault’s celebrated, neo-Nietzschean adage concerning the “death of man” in *The Order of Things*.<sup>12</sup>

For Lévi-Strauss, human rights were integrally related to the ideology of Western humanism and therefore ethically untenable. He embraced a full-blown cultural relativism (“every culture has made a ‘choice’ that must be respected”) and argued vociferously against cross-cultural communication. Such a ban was the only way, he felt, to preserve the plurality and diversity of indigenous cultures.<sup>13</sup> His

strictures against cultural mixing are eerily reminiscent of the positions espoused by the “father of European racism,” Comte Arthur de Gobineau. In *The Origins of Inequality Among Human Races* (1853–55) the French aristocrat claimed that miscegenation was the root cause of European decline. The ease with which an antiracism predicated on cultural relativism can devolve into its opposite—an unwitting defense of racial separatism—was one of the lessons that French intellectuals learned during the 1980s in the course of combating the ideology of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front.<sup>14</sup>

Lévi-Strauss’s polemical critique of Western humanism represents a partial throwback to J. G. Herder’s impassioned defense of cultural particularism at the dawn of the Counter-Enlightenment in *Yet Another Philosophy of History* (1774). For Herder, a dedicated foe of universal Reason’s leveling gaze, it was self-evident that “Each form of human perfection is . . . national and time-bound and . . . Individual. . . Each nation has its center of happiness within itself, just as every sphere has its center of gravity.”<sup>15</sup> While Herder’s standpoint may be viewed as a useful corrective to certain strands of Enlightenment thought (e.g., the mechanistic materialism of the High Enlightenment; La Mettrie, after all, sought to view “man as a machine”), in retrospect his concerted defense of cultural relativism ceded too much ground vis-à-vis the political status quo. To achieve their ends, the advocates of political emancipation required a more radical and uncompromising idiom. Unsurprisingly, they found it in the maxims of modern natural right as purveyed by philosophes such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and Condorcet.

During the 1960s among many French intellectuals cultural relativism came to supplant the liberal virtue of “tolerance”—a precept that remained tied to norms mandating a fundamental respect for human integrity. When combined with an antihumanist-inspired Western self-hatred, ethical relativism engendered an uncritical Third Worldism, an orientation that climaxed in Foucault’s enthusiastic endorsement of Iran’s Islamic Revolution.<sup>16</sup> Since the “dictatorship of the mullahs” was antimodern, anti-Western, and antiliberal, it satisfied *ex negativo* many of the political criteria that Third Worldists had come to view as “progressive.” Similarly, Lévi-Strauss’s unwillingness to differentiate between the progressive and regres-

sive strands of political modernity—for instance, between democracy and fascism—suggests one of the perils of structuralism. By preferring the “view from afar” or the “longue durée,” the structuralists, like the anti-philosophes of yore, denigrated the human capacities of consciousness and will. Instead, in their optic, history appeared as a senseless fate, devoid of rhyme or reason, consigned a priori to the realm of unintelligibility.<sup>17</sup>

The parallels between the core ideas of Counter-Enlightenment and postwar French thought have been shrewdly analyzed in a recent study of Maistre’s intellectual legacy. With tact and discernment, Owen Bradley phrases the problem as follows:

Maistre’s absence from current debates is a yet much greater surprise given the uncanny resemblance between his work and the dominant trends in recent French thought. Bataille on the sacred as the defining feature of human existence . . . Blanchot on the . . . violence of all speech and writing; Foucault on the social function of punishment in pre-Revolutionary Europe; Derrida on violence and difference . . . all of these themes . . . were anticipated and extensively elaborated in Maistre’s writing.<sup>18</sup>

In many respects, these suggestive remarks concerning the strangely underresearched affinities between Counter-Enlightenment and the postmodernist credo form the core of the study that follows.

### *“The Sovereign Enterprise of Unreason”*

In the concluding pages of *Madness and Civilization* Foucault praised the “sovereign enterprise of Unreason,” forever irreducible to practices that can be “cured.” Foucault’s contrast between the exclusionary practices of the modern scientific worldview, whose rise was coincident with Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, and the nonconformist potentials of “madness” qua “other” of reason, would help to redefine the theoretical agenda for an entire generation of French intellectuals. Even in the case of Derrida, who formulated a powerful critique of Foucault’s arguments, there was little disagreement with the Foucault’s central contention that Reason is essentially a

mechanism of oppression that proceeds by way of exclusions, constraints, and prohibitions. Derrida's own indictment of "logocentrism," or the tyranny of reason, purveys a kindred sentiment: since the time of Plato, Western thought has displayed a systematic intolerance vis-à-vis difference, otherness, and heterogeneity. Following the precedents established by Nietzsche and Heidegger, deconstruction arose to overturn and dismantle Reason's purported life-denying, unitarian prejudices.

In a similar vein, Jean-François Lyotard attained notoriety for his controversial equation of "consensus" with "terror." The idea of an uncoerced, rational accord, argues Lyotard, is a fantasy. Underlying the veneer of mutual agreement lurks force. This endemic cynicism about linguistically adjudicating disputes is another one of post-structuralism's hallmarks. Yet one cannot help but wonder how Lyotard expects to convince readers of the rectitude of his position if not via recourse to time-honored discursive means: the marshaling of supporting evidence and force of the better argument. If, as Lyotard insinuates, "force" is all there is, on what grounds might we prefer one position to another? One cannot help but suspect that, ultimately, there is something deeply unsatisfying about the attempt by Lyotard and his fellow poststructuralists to replace the precepts of argumentation with rhetoric, aesthetics, or agonistics.<sup>19</sup>

*The Seduction of Unreason* is an exercise in intellectual genealogy. It seeks to shed light on the uncanny affinities between the Counter-Enlightenment and postmodernism. As such, it may also be read as an archaeology of postmodern theory. During the 1970s and 1980s a panoply of texts by Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard were translated into English, provoking a far-reaching shift in American intellectual life. Many of these texts were inspired by Nietzsche's anticivilizational animus: the conviction that our highest ideals of beauty, morality, and truth were intrinsically nihilistic. Such views found favor among a generation of academics disillusioned by the political failures of the 1960s. Understandably, in despondent times Nietzsche's iconoclastic recommendation that one should "philosophize with a hammer"—that if something is falling, one should give it a final push—found a ready echo. Yet, too often, those who rushed to mount the Nietzschean bandwagon downplayed or ignored the

illiberal implications of his positions. Moreover, in retrospect, it seems clear that this same generation, many of whose representatives were comfortably ensconced in university careers, had merely exchanged *radical* politics for *textual* politics: unmasking “binary oppositions” replaced an ethos of active political engagement.<sup>20</sup> In the last analysis it seems that the seductions of “theory” helped redirect formerly robust political energies along the lines of acceptable academic career tracks. As commentators have often pointed out, during the 1980s, while Republicans were commandeering the nation’s political apparatus, partisans of “theory” were storming the ramparts of the Modern Language Association and the local English Department.

Ironically, during the same period, the French paradigms that American academics were so busy assimilating were undergoing an eclipse across the Atlantic. In France they were perceived as expressions of an obsolete political temperament: *gauchisme* (“leftism”) or “French philosophy of the 1960s.”<sup>21</sup> By the mid-1980s French intellectuals had passed through the acid bath of antitotalitarianism.<sup>22</sup> Under the influence of Solzhenitsyn’s pathbreaking study of the Gulag as well as the timely, if slick, anticommunist polemics of the “New Philosophers” such as André Glucksmann and Bernard Henri-Lévy, who were appalled by the “killing fields” of Pol Pot’s Cambodia (the Khmer Rouge leader had been educated in Paris during the 1950s) and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, French intellectuals began returning to the indigenous tradition of democratic republicanism—thereby leaving the 1960s leftists holding the bag of an outmoded philosophical anarchism. The tyrannical excesses of Third Worldism—China’s Cultural Revolution, Castro’s Cuba, Idi Amin’s Uganda, Mobutu’s Zaire, Duvalier’s Haiti—finally put paid to the delusion that the “wretched of the earth” were the bearers of a future socialist utopia. Suddenly, the nostrums of Western humanism, which the poststructuralists had emphatically denounced, seemed to merit a second look.

During the 1960s the poststructuralists sought to supplement Marx with more radical critiques of “civilization” set forth by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Their indictments of Western humanism seemed well-suited to the apocalyptic mood of the times, framed

by the war in Vietnam and the reigning superpower nuclear strategy of “mutually assured destruction.” The experience of totalitarianism, however, which remained a reality in Eastern Europe until 1989, suggested that the idea of human rights had become the *sine qua non* of progressive politics. In another one of history’s profound ironies, during the 1970s and 1980s *marxisant* French intellectuals were reinstructed in the virtues of civic humanism by their Eastern European counterparts: courageous dissidents such as Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik, George Konrad, and Andrei Sakharov. At this point “French philosophy of the 1960s” ceded to the neohumanism of “French philosophy of the 1980s.”<sup>23</sup>

Another reason for poststructuralism’s demise related to a series of embarrassing political scandals that dated from the 1930s but only came to light in the course of the 1980s. The first concerned revelations that during the 1930s French literary critic Maurice Blanchot, one of deconstruction’s seminal forebears, had published a number of compromising articles in the profascist, anti-Semitic journal *Combat*. In 1936 Blanchot, referring to the Popular Front government, bemoaned “the detestable character of what is called with solemnity the Blum experiment . . . a splendid union, a holy alliance, this conglomerate of Soviet, Jewish, and capitalist interests.”<sup>24</sup> At the time, the opprobrious litany associating communists, Jews, and capitalists (in defiance of rudimentary considerations of political logic) was the standard fare of French rightists, whose watchwords were “France for the French” and “better Hitler than Blum.”

Although efforts to limit the fallout associated with Blanchot’s youthful political transgressions were largely successful, the same cannot be said for two subsequent scandals, bearing on the compromised pasts of Heidegger and deconstruction’s American ambassador, Paul de Man. Since both of these “affairs” have now been rehearsed *ad nauseum* in countless books and articles, I will refrain from discussing them at length.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the damaging revelations about the compromised intellectual pedigree of French “theory” raised a number of troubling questions that poststructuralism’s defenders never seem to answer satisfactorily. The deliberative ineptitude of poststructuralism’s champions when it came

to proffering a credible defense has been as injurious as the facts themselves. Thus, at a pivotal moment in the debate over de Man's fascist past, Derrida "deconstructed" one of the young Belgian's articles from the early 1940s that enthusiastically endorsed the deportation of European Jews—at the very moment the Nazi Final Solution was being implemented—by claiming, counterintuitively, that it demonstrated de Man's status as a closet *résistant*.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in the debate over Heidegger's Nazism, several poststructuralists argued implausibly that the German philosopher had succumbed to Nazism's allure owing to a surfeit of humanism. It was the later Heidegger, they claimed—the avowed "antihumanist"—who was the genuine antifascist.

The poststructuralists may be distinguished from their predecessors, the structuralists, by virtue of having rejected the concepts of "totality" and "totalization." According to Derrida, poststructuralism's basic lesson teaches that the idea of a textual coherence is a chimera. Poststructuralism demonstrates that the "center does not hold"; attempts to achieve epistemological "finality" or "closure" are unsustainable. Language is inherently polysemic and plurivocal. As such, its fissures and slippages militate against the Hegelian ideal of Absolute Knowledge. By glorifying the ideal of "scientific closure," by trying to limit the free play of signification, the structuralists merely repeated the errors of Western metaphysics. By succumbing to the foundationalist urges of traditional metaphysics, structuralism reveals itself to be "logocentric"—merely another species of "first philosophy."

According to the conventional wisdom, both poststructuralism and postmodernism are movements of the political left. One of the goals of the present study is to challenge this commonplace. After all, historically, the left has been staunchly rationalist and universalist, defending democracy, egalitarianism, and human rights. One of the hallmarks of the political left has been a willingness to address questions of "social justice," systematically calling into question parochial definitions of liberty that sanction vast inequalities of wealth, demanding instead that proponents of formal equality meet the needs of socially disadvantaged groups. Time and again, the left

has forced bourgeois society to live up to democratic norms, challenging narrowly individualistic conceptions of rights as well as the plutocratic ambitions of political and economic elites.<sup>27</sup> Thus, if one examines the developmental trajectory of modern societies, one discerns a fitful progression from civic to political to social equality.

On almost all of these questions, postmodernists remain out of step with left-wing concerns. Since their approach has been resolutely “culturalist,” questions of social justice, which have traditionally preoccupied the left, have remained imperceptible. Since postmodernists are self-avowed “post-Marxists,” political economy plays a negligible role in their work. Yet in an age of globalization, when markets threaten to become destiny, this omission proves fatal to any theory that stakes a claim to political relevance.<sup>28</sup>

From latter-day anti-philosophes like Nietzsche and Heidegger, poststructuralists have inherited a distrust of reason and democracy. The ideas they have recommended in their stead—“*différance*” (Derrida), “transgression” (Foucault), “schizophrenia” (Deleuze and Guattari)—fail to inspire confidence. Their denunciations of reason’s inadequacies have an all-too-familiar ring: since the dawn of the Counter-Enlightenment, they have been the standard fare of European Reaction. By engaging in a neo-Nietzschean assault on “reason” and “truth,” poststructuralists’ criticisms remain pitched at a level of theoretical abstraction that lets capitalism off the hook. Ultimately, their overarching pessimism about prospects for progressive political change—for example, Foucault contended that the idea of emancipation is a trap laid by the forces of “governmentality” to inscribe the “subject” in the clutches of “power-knowledge”—seems conducive to resignation and inaction. After all, if, as Foucault claims, “power” is everywhere, to contest it seems pointless. Instead of challenging domination practically, postmodernists prefer to remain on the relatively safe terrain of “metapolitics”—the insular plane of “theory,” where the major risks are “conceptual” and concrete politics are rendered ethereal.

But “culturalist” approaches to power leave the structural components of domination untouched—and, ultimately, unchallenged. The complacency of this approach surfaces in Foucault’s recommendation in *The History of Sexuality* that, in the place of traditional

left-wing paradigms of social change, which he considers discredited, we seek out a “different economy of bodies and pleasures.”<sup>29</sup> One thereby runs the risk of substituting a narcissistic “lifestyle politics” for “movement politics.” “Identity politics” usurps the traditional left-wing concern with social justice. To be sure, differences need to be respected—but not fetishized. An uncritical celebration of “difference” can readily result in a new “essentialism” in which questions of group identity are elevated to the rank of a first principle. Since efforts to achieve consensus are a priori viewed with derision and mistrust, it seems virtually impossible to restore a meaningful sense of political community. Historically, the end result has been the cultural left’s political marginalization and fragmentation. Instead of spurring an attitude of active contestation, a narrow-minded focus on group identity has encouraged political withdrawal. As one astute commentator has pointed out, today the apostles of “cultural politics”

do not even bother to pretend to be egalitarian, impartial, tolerant, or solidary with others, or even fair. In its worst guise, this politics has turned into the very opposite of egalitarian and democratic politics—as the emergence of virulent forms of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and intolerant group particularism all over the world witness. One begins to wonder whether the [new culturalist approaches] have played into the hands of the antidemocrats by depriving us of the language and conceptual resources indispensable for confronting the authoritarian assertions of difference so prevalent today.<sup>30</sup>

*Identity is not an argument.* It represents an appeal to “life” or brute existence as opposed to principles that presuppose argumentative give-and-take. As a European friend once put it: “identity politics—that’s what they had in Germany from 1933–45.” The failures of cultural politics mirrors the decline of the New Left as chronicled by Christopher Lasch and Richard Sennett: the renunciation of an oppositional, public sphere politics in favor of an inner-directed and self-absorbed “culture of narcissism.”<sup>31</sup>

That postmodernists rely unwittingly on arguments and positions developed by proponents of Counter-Enlightenment does not

mean they are conservative, let alone reactionary. The study that follows is not an exercise in guilt-by-association. Nevertheless, such reliance suggests that their standpoint is confused, that the disjunction between their epistemological radicalism and their political preferences (supposedly “progressive,” though often difficult to pinpoint) results in a fundamental incoherence. Nor are postmodernists, as their right-wing detractors maintain, particularly “dangerous.” Despite their antipathy to democracy and their radical political longings, they, too, are the beneficiaries of a modern political culture in which tolerance has been enshrined as a fundamental value.

In his *History of Structuralism*, François Dosse remarks that the poststructuralist aversion to democracy represents an expression of intellectual self-hatred.<sup>32</sup> He points out how, ironically, this hostility has become pronounced in the homeland of Rousseau, modern republicanism, and the “ideas of 1789.” Although it was the French Revolution that put democracy on the map of European political culture, of late it seems more a source of embarrassment than an index of national pride.<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, whereas a visceral rejection of political modernity (rights of man, rule of law, constitutionalism) was once standard fare among counterrevolutionary thinkers, it has now become fashionable among advocates of the cultural left. Postmodernists equate democracy with “soft totalitarianism.” They argue that by privileging public reason and the common good, liberal democracy effectively suppresses otherness and difference. Of course, one could very easily make the converse argument: historically speaking, democracy and rule of law have proved the best guarantors of cultural diversity and political pluralism. During the 1980s the debate on “difference” would take an insidious turn as the European New Right, led by France’s Jean-Marie Le Pen, embraced the “right to difference” as a justification for racial separatism.<sup>34</sup> The shock of recognition resulting from Le Pen’s electoral successes pushed the European left firmly back into the democratic republican camp.

Although Derrida has recently professed a sly interest in a nebulous “democracy to come” (*democratie à venir/avenir*), what he

might have in mind by this metapolitical decree—long on rhetoric and short on empirical substance—is anybody’s guess. By denying the basic emancipatory potentials of democracy, by downplaying the significant differences between it and its totalitarian antithesis, the postmodern left has openly consigned itself to the political margins. For, whatever their empirical failings, states predicated on rule of law contain a basic capacity for internal political change fundamentally absent from illiberal political regimes. Over the last forty years, the qualified successes of the women’s, antiwar, ecological, civil, and gay rights movements have testified to this political rule of thumb.

Poststructuralism arose at a peculiar juncture in French political history, one marked by the depredations of civil war (the Algerian conflict and its aftermath), a delirious Third Worldism, a Gaullist regime that had gained power via extraconstitutional means (and which many observers viewed as a dictatorship), and the eclipse of a viable political left. At the time, all inherited theoretical and political options seemed bankrupt, and the need for a total break with tradition desirable. But attempts to translate the élan of this unique intellectual moment beyond the circumstances of its origination seem dubious. One of the major problems with the North American encounter with French “theory” is that its reception has been radically decontextualized. Little attention has been paid to the peculiarly French conditions of its genesis. Consequently, especially among acolytes, its reception has been distinctly uncritical. By filling in these historical and intellectual gaps, the present study hopes to expand significantly the parameters of debate.

Part I, “The German Ideology Revisited,” reexamines the legacy of three German thinkers who have exerted a major influence on contemporary intellectual life. One of my main concerns is the enduring influence German *Existenzphilosophie* (existentialism) has had on postwar French thought. In this respect Nietzsche’s work represents an indispensable point of reference. The landscape of contemporary French thought would be unrecognizable without his momentous and controversial impact. Moreover, the “French Nietzsche”—

the antifoundationalist, literary stylist, and proponent of aesthetic self-fashioning—has in turn become canonical for North American postmodernism.

But the appropriation of Nietzsche for the ends of postmodernism raises a number of troubling interpretive dilemmas. To begin with, there is the important question of periodization. After all, Nietzsche was a contemporary of Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Dostoevsky, all of whom were classical “modernists.” In what sense, then, can he justifiably be appropriated for the ends of postmodernism, which, at the very earliest, dates from the post–World War II period?

Moreover, upon closer inspection, the attempt to pass Nietzsche off as an aesthete appears selective and arbitrary. This interpretive gambit was clearly adopted to put as much distance as possible between Nietzsche and the Nazis, among whom he enjoyed the status of “court philosopher.” One of the major questions that surfaces in the postmodernist reception of Nietzsche is, When so much of the original doctrine is intentionally left to one side, to what extent can one claim one is still dealing with Nietzsche?

With the advent of postmodernist feminism, Jung’s theories began to make significant inroads in the academy.<sup>35</sup> Jung’s doctrines proved attractive insofar as they supplanted Freud’s scientism with elements of fable and myth. Among the broader public, Jung’s influence on popular psychology and New Age thought has long been prodigious. Whereas among both of these constituencies Freud has been perceived as a conservative advocate of Victorian morality, Jung stood out as someone who was willing to take risks. In vintage Enlightenment fashion, Freud sought to subject the unruly forces of the unconscious to the pacifying balm of analytical Reason. Jung, conversely, displayed a willingness to confront the irrational on its own terms—hence, his manifest affinities with the postmodernist devaluation of Reason. Unlike his Viennese mentor, Jung felt the need to reestablish psychoanalysis as a vehicle of personal salvation—as a new religion. Thus, in keeping with the irrationalist vogue of his day (the rise of Theosophy, Anthroosophy, and so forth), Jung experimented freely with the mysteries of Aryan reli-

gion, from which his core doctrines—the theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious—derive.

Yet, like a modern-day Faust, Jung would pay the price for this fascination with forbidden wisdom. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, brandishing swastikas and advocating neopaganism, it seemed like an instance of preestablished harmony: Jung thought he was witnessing his own theories come to life. Since the break with Freud, Jung had been convinced of the phylogenetic superiority of Aryan archetypes. Having rejected reason as an inferior mode of cognition, he found the National Socialists' recourse to Aryan symbols and myths highly congenial. Hitler, he was convinced, was Wotan reincarnate, a modern-day shaman. From his safe haven in Switzerland, Jung jumped aboard the Nazi bandwagon with alacrity.

For a long time the career of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) seemed to be one of the Federal Republic of Germany's unequivocal success stories. Unlike his mentor, Heidegger, Gadamer never joined the Nazi Party. In an era marked by totalitarian extremism, he seemed to possess an uncanny knack for remaining above the political fray. During the Nazi years, Gadamer allegedly sought refuge in "inner emigration." But a closer look at his orientation during this period demonstrates how difficult it was both to achieve professional success and to steer clear of compromises with the reigning dictatorship.

During the early 1940s Gadamer proved a willing propagandist on behalf of the regime, traveling to Paris to present a lecture on "Volk and History in Herder's Thought," which explicitly justified the idea of a Nazi-dominated Europe. Enlightenment ideals were bankrupt, argued Gadamer. Germany's battlefield triumphs reflected the superiority of German *Kultur*. In the New Europe, the Volk-Idea, as set forth by Herder and his successors, would predominate. This dubious chapter of Gadamer's political biography represents a paradigmatic instance of the ideological affinities between Counter-Enlightenment and the forces of political reaction.

Philosophically, Gadamer remains one of the leading representatives of hermeneutics, a view that stresses the situated and partial nature of all truth claims as well as the irremediably contextual basis

of human knowledge. The traditionalist orientation of Gadamer's thought—his stress on the “happening of tradition”—would seem unambiguously *unpostmodern*. Yet in American pragmatist circles, his “anti-foundationalism” (his rejection of “first principles” and universal morality à la Kant) has been widely viewed as an important harbinger of the postmodernist rejection of objective truth.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the postmodernist embrace of hermeneutics may not be as strange as it might seem on first view.

In “Fascism and Hermeneutics: Gadamer and the Ambiguities of ‘Inner Emigration,’” I suggest that Gadamer's acquiescence vis-à-vis the Nazi dictatorship possesses a philosophical as well as a biographical basis. Hermeneutics' skepticism about Enlightenment reason made the Nazi celebration of German particularism—the ideology of the German “way”—seem unobjectionable, and, in certain respects, politically attractive. The German mandarin tradition had long held that the sphere of politics was corrupt. From this vantage point, to make a devil's bargain with Hitler and company seemed no worse than the compromises required by other political regimes. At this juncture, relativist conceptions of ethics and politics begin to unravel and cry out for an unmediated dose of cognitive and moral “truth.”

In *L'Idéologie française*, Bernard-Henri Lévy took note of a phenomenon that the majority of his countrymen had been unwilling to explore until quite recently: modern French history, far from demonstrating the progressive triumph of Republican ideals, betrays a well-nigh constant preoccupation with the regressive temptations of “integral nationalism”—the redefinition of citizenship in accordance with the illiberal values of “blood” and “soil.” From the Boulanger and Dreyfus Affairs of the 1880s and 1890s, to the proto-fascistic “leagues” of the 1930s, to the authoritarian paternalism of Pétain's Vichy and de Gaulle's Fifth Republic, the lure of a “revolution from the Right” has proved a constant seduction among French intellectuals.

Part II, “French Lessons,” explores this lure in the case of Georges Bataille, one of poststructuralism's key intellectual forebears. Until recently, Bataille was perhaps best known as the founding editor of *Critique*, one of France's most prestigious literary reviews. Con-

versely, during the 1930s he belonged to a series of avant-garde cultural groupings, several of which were avowedly anti-Republican. For this was an age of political “non-conformism”: an era of boundary-crossers and taboo-breakers, of intellectuals and politicians in search of a “Third Way” between communism and liberalism. Acting under the assumption that democracy had been discredited by the Crash of ’29 and the political uncertainty that followed, large strata of the French intelligentsia succumbed to the proverbial “fascination with fascism.” The fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler seemed to restore a measure of social cohesion that, in liberal democracies, remained in distinctly short supply. Perhaps, reasoned many, the idea of a fascism *à la française* was worth a closer look.

It was in this context that Bataille and his associates at the College of Sociology assumed the role of “sorcerer’s apprentices”: a self-appointed elite capable of restoring the elements of myth, charisma, and community, the absence of which seemed to be one of the most debilitating features of modern society. The members of the college thought of themselves as a secret society, akin to the medieval Knights of the Templar or a monastic order, ready to lead should political conditions prove ripe. They viewed the *Ordensburgen* of Nazi Germany—the elite training centers for the SS—as a contemporary equivalent. In 1939, the College’s final year, Bataille presented a lecture on “Hitler and the Teutonic Order,” whose title betrays the intellectual risks that he and his fellow nonconformists were willing to take in the name of a “Third Way” between communism and liberalism.

One of the recurrent themes of postwar French thought concerns the deficiencies of “representation”: the ontological gap separating our linguistic capacities from reality. In his *Course on General Linguistics*, Saussure famously proclaimed the arbitrariness of the signifier, implying that no necessary correlation existed between the phonemes we employ and the concepts or “signifieds” they designate. For a subsequent generation of French intellectuals influenced by structuralism, Saussure’s insight seemed akin to a revelation. When one thinks of the intellectual traditions that dominated French intellectual life during the previous two hundred years—Cartesian rationalism, Enlightenment materialism, Comtean positivism, and

neo-Kantianism—one can begin to appreciate the distance that post-modern French intellectuals have traveled.

In “Maurice Blanchot: The Use and Abuse of Silence,” I suggest, via an examination of Blanchot’s strange career and “double life” (right-wing political journalist during the 1930s, and one of postwar France’s premier literary critics thereafter), that the critique of representation is itself historically conditioned. The loss of faith in traditional intellectual paradigms is attributable, at least in part, to a series of real historical and political traumas: the setbacks of war, defeat, occupation, and decolonization robbed the French intelligentsia of their traditional confidence in the supremacy of Reason. As a result, a strange process of inversion occurred whereby the intellectual values traditionally held in high esteem by the French intellectual mandarin—lucidity, certainty, and objectivity—suddenly became objects of opprobrium. This new generation of thinkers valorized indeterminacy, relativism, and flux.

Jacques Derrida is one of Bataille’s—and Blanchot’s—spiritual progeny. Several of his early essays appeared in *Critique* (founded by Bataille), and his first book, *Writing and Difference*, contained an extended meditation on Bataille’s theory of “general economics”—an approach to exchange that transcends the utilitarian orientation of political economy. Bataille’s concern with “otherness”—phenomena that escape the economic and logical imperatives of bourgeois society—would also become one of the signatures of Derridean “*écriture*” or “writing.” Lastly, both Bataille and Derrida are known for generating “texts” that flaunt the traditional genre distinction between literature and philosophy.

One of Derrida’s most cited maxims has been: “there is nothing outside the text” (“*il n’y a pas de hors texte*”). Few would disagree that deconstruction’s forte has been its “close readings” of demanding literary and philosophical works. Conversely, its undeniable weakness has been its lack of effectiveness in dealing with the “non-textual” spheres of history, politics, and society. Hence, by the early 1990s deconstruction had been surpassed by a number of more politically engaged paradigms: “cultural studies” and the Foucault-inspired model of “new historicism.”<sup>37</sup>

Over the last ten years Derrida has made a concerted effort to redress this perceived weakness, writing widely on questions of justice, ethics, and politics. But have these forays into the realm of “the political” in fact made a “difference”? When all is said and done, one suspects that discussions of “the political” are merely a metapolitical pretext for circumventing the realm of “real” politics.

Endemic to Derrida’s perspective is the problem that, early on, he attained renown by reiterating a “total critique” of the West that derived from Heidegger’s antihumanism. According to this view, humanism culminates in the Cartesian “will to will.” The twentieth century’s political horrors—genocide, totalitarianism, nuclear war, and environmental devastation—are merely the logical consequences thereof. The dilemma besetting Derrida’s approach to politics is that once one accepts the frameworks of “antihumanism” and “total critique,” it becomes extremely difficult—if not impossible—to reconcile one’s standpoint with a partisanship for reasonable democracy. In “Down By Law: Deconstruction and the Problem of Justice,” I reassess Derrida’s theoretical legacy, concluding that the shortcomings of “really existing democracy” cannot be remedied by recourse to the antidemocratic methods recommended by Heidegger and Nietzsche.

Derrida is by no means a Counter-Enlightenment thinker. Nevertheless, in the lexicon of deconstruction, “reason” is identified as a fundamental source of tyranny and oppression. An analogous prejudice afflicts Foucault’s concept of “discursive regime.” Here, too, “discourse” is primarily perceived as a source of domination. Whatever deconstruction’s methodological intentions may be, its pragmatic effect accords with the anti-intellectual orientation of the anti-philosophes. By the time deconstruction gets through with the history of philosophy, very little remains. One is tempted to seek refuge in myth, magic, madness, illusion, or intoxication—all seem preferable to what “civilization” has to offer. The end result is that deconstruction leaves its practitioners in a theoretical no-man’s land, a forlorn and barren landscape, analogous to one described by Heidegger: an “age of affliction” characterized by the flight of the old gods and the “not yet” of the gods to come.

Following Part I and Part II, I have included two political excurses. Both chapters may be understood as cautionary tales concerning the dangers of Counter-Enlightenment orientations in modern politics. They illustrate that the Counter-Enlightenment program is not merely a thing of the past. The European New Right has inherited the counterrevolutionary critique of modern natural law; it privileges the values of ethnicity (*ethnos*) over democracy (*demos*). According to this optic, the prerogatives of cultural belonging trump considerations of “right.” Thereby, New Right politicians seek to advance a type of *parliamentary ethnic cleansing*. As with the proponents of interwar fascism, today’s antidemocrats seek to exploit the openness of the constitutional state to undermine democratic norms. Postmodern political philosophy plays into their hands by suggesting that human rights are a logocentric atavism: a discourse of pseudo-emancipation that serves to conceal our entanglement in “power.”

The first excursus treats the rise of the German New Right, whose advocates viewed reunification as an occasion to purvey revisionist canards about the German past. That these attempts failed is a tribute to the strength of German democracy. For the first time, democracy in Germany has become a matter of heartfelt conviction rather than mere lip service.

The second excursus discusses a parallel phenomenon in contemporary French politics: the rise of the French New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*) in conjunction with the political success of the National Front’s Jean-Marie Le Pen. Over the last two decades authoritarian national populist parties, such as Jörg Haider’s Austrian Freedom Party, have registered disconcerting electoral gains across the European political landscape. More seriously, in an era of intense global competition and economic retrenchment, they have been able to steal the political thunder from the mainstream parties and reframe public discourse in keeping with their own xenophobic, anti-immigrant agenda.

The conclusion, “‘Site of Catastrophe’: The Image of America in Modern Thought,” examines “anti-Americanism” as an enduring component of Counter-Enlightenment and postmodernist discourse. Legitimate criticism of America, directed toward the excesses and miscalculations of its foreign and domestic policy, is welcome and

indispensable. One might even argue that, in the context of the post-1989 New World Order, in which American power reigns virtually unchecked, such criticism has become an imperative. Yet, in the discourses in question, rarely is the “real” America at issue. Instead, these discourses address an imaginary or metaphorical America—the New World as a projection of European fears concerning progress, modernity, democracy, and an escalating rate of social change.

Traditionally, dystopian views of America have been the stock-in-trade of counterrevolutionary writers such as Maistre, Arthur de Gobineau, and Oswald Spengler. More recently, they have made inroads among champions of the postmodern left, such as Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek. In their theories, America represents the epitome of a postmodern, technological Moloch: a land devoid of history and tradition in which the seductions and illusions of a media-dominated mass culture have attained unchallenged hegemony. The postmodernists allege that the traditional orientations of family, community, and politics have ceded to the febrile delusions of “hyperreality.” Today, we experience the reign of “simulacra”: media-generated copies, shorn of originals, that circulate autonomously. This attitude helps explain the enthusiasm with which Baudrillard greeted the September 11 attacks: a “dream come true.” According to Baudrillard, although terrorists committed the actual deed, it was something that, given the conceit of American power, the whole world had wished for.<sup>38</sup>