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Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault

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Introduction

This excellent little volume, by an objectivist philosopher possessed of acute understanding and broad learning, asks and answers two pertinent questions: First, why have "postmodernist" intellectuals of the kind you find in English departments and Women Studies programs, but not the Chemistry department, rejected Enlightenment belief in reason while embracing epistemological relativism and metaphysical nihilism instead? Second, why does postmodernist rhetoric display blatant disregard for accuracy and obvious contempt for civility?

These questions are pertinent for two reasons. First, the epistemological relativist says, in effect "I know a truth; no truth is known," and the metaphysical nihilist says in effect "The reality we must recognize is that there is no reality to recognize." So, both doctrines are pretty plainly self-refuting, which makes one doubt whether they can be sincerely held. Second, "postmodernism" is a fashionable name for the political left, where the superiority of socialism to capitalism was originally declared to be a corollary, not a contrary, of reason. So, postmodernism is not only self-refuting; it also represents a complete turnabout, and this is cause for puzzlement.

Hicks has solved the puzzle and done so in fine style. According to his analysis, which I find entirely convincing, socialist hopes and ideals optimistically proclaimed in the 19th century by such intellectual luminaries as Karl Marx got mugged in the 20th century by the dark and dismal reality of socialist practice. In the Soviet Union and elsewhere, socialist regimes killed or starved to death an estimated 110 million of their own people and terrorized the rest before collapsing from inefficiency and ineptitude, a failure of unprecedented proportion.

At the same time, capitalist regimes in the United States and elsewhere flourished and their free-wheeling populations prospered, falsifying confident socialist predictions of a contrary fate. In addition, the seemingly firm grounds on which Marx and other 19th century thinkers had confidently built their condemnations of capitalism and their apologies for socialism were shown by such 20th century critics as Von Mises and Hayek to be quicksand. Socialism has been resoundingly refuted both in practice and in theory.

This ought to have been the end for socialism, but that is not how things have turned out. Unable either to deny the damning facts or to refute capitalist logic, many leftists have chosen another option: they have kept their faith in socialism and their animosity towards capitalism while abandoning, or pretending to abandon, their belief in fact and logic. Where, formerly, they had touted socialist "truth" as Truth absolute, they now say that there is no such thing as truth, just so many different interpretations, each true for the person who believes it, none true absolutely. As for logic, they declare it to be just one more device that clever folk use to exploit the poor and the weak; what we need in their opinion is less logic and more compassion, less attention to fact and more concern for feeling.

In short, although they have lost the game, the socialists have refused to concede. Instead, declaring that the rules were rigged, they have kicked over the board. Practitioners of the hard sciences scoff at such childishness, but it has become the dominant fashion in many university departments of humanities and social science.

What Hicks wants to tell us is how this state of affairs came about. Because postmodernism is reminiscent of the skepticism and relativism that were introduced into Western thought by the sophists of ancient Greece, he could have begun there. But for good reasons, Hicks begins his story with Immanuel Kant, who formulated the epistemology that became the basis for German, then French, and now American rejection of Enlightenment (viz., Western) ideals.

German Gibberish

Hicks's focus on Kant will surprise those who believe that the "sage of Konigsberg" was himself a devotee of the Enlightenment; but Hicks has read objectivist philosopher Leonard Peikoff with profit. Like the estimable Peikoff, he understands that Kant did not write his famous *critiques* to promote reason. As Kant said himself, he wrote to save faith by cutting reason down to size. If, despite this, Kant is sometimes counted as an

Enlightenment rationalist, it is perhaps because he confused the issue when he divided "reason" into *vernunft,* which he preferred, and *verstehen,* which he regarded as needing restraint. But the Enlightenment had the reverse priority; it favored verstehen (understanding attendant on ratiocination) over *vernunft* (intuitive, or unreasoning, grasp of first principles).

In my opinion, Hicks's summary of Kant's epistemology is excellent and very much to the point. As Hicks emphasizes, Kant denied that human reason can encompass reality. What the human being can know, said Kant, is phenomena, the appearances of things; the things themselves are forever beyond human ken. Natural, or physical, science makes a systematic study of phenomena, but it cannot reach behind them to their causes, the reality of which must be taken on faith, because it cannot be proved.

Furthermore, said Kant, such meaning as phenomena have is invested in them by the mind itself, not put there by the things that are presumed to cause them. In other words, the world studied by the scientist is his construction and exists only in his mind. This doctrine was so far from being an expression of Enlightenment rationalism as to be a deliberate and self-conscious challenge to Enlightenment confidence in the power of reason to penetrate below the surface to the essence of physical nature.

Kant at least paid lip service to the existence of a "noumenal" world outside his mind and independent of it, even as he maintained that we can know nothing about it. The same cannot be said of Kant's German followers. Anxious to buttress Christian dogma against doubts raised by the atheists who had initiated the French Enlightenment, the philosopher Fichte and the theologian Schliermacher declared that, since Kant had shown that empirical scientists live in a glass house, they should not throw stones at religion. In the opinion of these two thinkers, the world of physical phenomena studied by the scientist was inferior to the spiritual and moral "reality" that had been revealed by Christian faith. So, "religious truth" had to be regarded as a higher form of truth than "scientific truth," and feeling and instinct had to count as better ways of discovering truth than the methods of natural science.

Hegel agreed but added that, to think of something is to have it in mind. Then, taking this metaphor literally, he concluded that talk of a world external to mind is nonsense; mind necessarily encompasses all that can be known. Furthermore, he said, mind is governed not by the static principle of non-contradiction, as had previously been thought, but by the dialectic of history, the moving principle of which is conflict, which Hegel confusedly mislabeled contradiction. Reveling in paradox (e.g., "Being is nothing."), Hegel rejected belief that a self-contradiction is a sign of faulty logic.

Instead, he took it as proof of profundity. Hegel believed that all "contradiction" would eventually be resolved by the development of the German state; but, in the meanwhile, it was necessary to acknowledge that what is true at one time and place might be false at another.

This endorsement of relativism was music to the ears of the Danish thinker and writer Soren Kierkegaard, who admitted that his Christian faith might be "objectively false" but assured his readers that it was "subjectively true"—true for the Christian believer. Kierkegaard had been troubled by the fact that Christianity required belief in impossibilities. Now his heart was at peace. Denying that conformity to logic was necessary to subjective truth, Kierkegaard praised belief in self-contradiction (e.g., "Christ is at once divine and human." or "God is three persons in one."—his examples) as indication of the depth and sincerity of true faith. Thus, relativism gave birth to irrationalism.

Schopenhauer, the atheist in the crowd, found proof of an external world in resistance to our wills, which was an improvement over Kant and Hegel; but, even he remained confined to the solipsistic prison to which Kant had consigned German philosophizing.

Therefore, after nearly a century of some of the most obscure and tortured writing ever produced, German philosophy would come down to the "phenomenology" of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, who would search for salvation in "the ground of one's being," viz., the contents of one's own consciousness. Philosophy, which had begun as an effort by rationalist minded Greeks to understand the world they lived in, had been turned by the Germans into narcissistic navel gazing. Such was Kant's philosophical legacy.

Having recounted this legacy, Hicks has an easy time showing how postmodernist relativism, skepticism, and nihilism grew out of German philosophy. For this purpose, Hicks pays most attention to the French "deconstructionists" Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard and the American pragmatist Richard Rorty—all of whom were introduced at the beginning of Hicks's book. As Hicks points out, all were directly influenced by Heidegger and all deny, or appear to deny, that there is any such thing as a free standing truth or an independent reality. According to the three French intellectuals, every group "constructs" its own "reality," presumably out of whole cloth, to suit itself. According to Rorty, "truth" is just a laudatory name for whatever one chooses to believe, and "proof" is just a name for rhetoric that one finds convincing.

Anglophonic Analysis

Although all four of these men were trained as philosophers, and Rorty once taught at Princeton, I think it is noteworthy that the method and metaphysics they preach have not found homes in philosophy departments in America, Britain, or Australia. If you want a deconstructionist, go to the English Department. Philosophy departments in Anglophonic countries, are still predominantly homes for linguistic and logical analysis, the whole tone and tenor of which are very much in opposition to subjectivist nihilism. In fact, analytic philosophy of all styles began in self-conscious opposition to such Germanic gobbledegook. Rorty was very much alone at Princeton and has left to become a professor of humanities at Stanford.

Despite this fact, Hicks says that leading English and American philosophers promoted a Kantian epistemology when they declared that perception is "theory laden," and he adds that some of them have encouraged subjectivism by arguing that truth is relative to conceptual schemes. Hicks also cites Thomas Kuhn's talk of scientific "paradigms" as evidence of the pervasiveness of relativism, and he claims that the nominalism and conventionalism of such as Goodman and Quine entails radical relativism.

But although Rorty has promoted the same conclusion, I think it is dubious. That perception is theory laden just means that our beliefs influence how we perceive things, not that we don't sometimes perceive them correctly, much less that we don't perceive them at all. As for the pragmatists, the best among them—e.g., Peirce and Quine—have always insisted that conceptual schemes have to be tested against reality and that some such schemes work better in practice because they get us closer to the truth than others. Although Kuhn carelessly said things that encouraged the postmodernists, he has explicitly repudiated the kind of silly relativism that leads some of them to declare that witchcraft is as good as quantum mechanics.

It is a complicated issue and cannot be settled with a sentence or two, but I have to conclude that Hicks's all too sketchy account of Anglophonic philosophy is the least satisfactory part of his book. Postmodernism can't be blamed on analytic philosophy or pragmatism. To find its roots, we have to go back to Heidegger.

Romantic Fantasies

But while the connection to Heidegger tells us where the postmodernists got their subjectivist epistemology and nihilist metaphysics,

Hicks knows and says that we must look elsewhere for an explanation of their leftist politics. The old left got its politics from Marx. As Hicks observes, the new left sometimes skips over Marx to go back to Rousseau. We shall see why later.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, the "father of romanticism," lived during the French Enlightenment and knew its leading figures, but he disliked everything about their project, which was to build a social order of rational individuals who, freed from the superstitions of religion, would use science, technology, and capitalist economics to make themselves prosperous.

As Rousseau explained in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, he believed that this project would exacerbate the competition for wealth, power, and status that seemed to him to be the source of all evil, because it had destroyed compassion. According to Rousseau's highly speculative history, human beings in an aboriginal state of nature had been equal and care free. The growth of civilization, which came with the institution of property, had changed that, making the propertied few indifferent to the plight of the destitute many, who were forced to become slaves, serfs, or servants in order to survive. What is worse, the rise of civilization had also destroyed other natural virtues—e.g., the strength, hardiness and physical agility that men had when they lived, as God had intended, without luxuries, mindlessly eating acorns from the trees, drinking water from the streams, and coupling with any woman who happened by.

Rousseau saw no way of returning to this idyllic state, but in *The Social Contract*, he spelled out what he thought would be a workable compromise—a social order in which citizens would surrender their persons and property to a collective body in exchange for a promise of economic and political security. In this new society, citizens would contribute according to their ability and be provided according to their needs. To manage public affairs, they would elect magistrates who would seek not their personal well being but the general welfare and enact not their personal wishes but the general will. To prevent anybody in the society from acquiring markedly greater property and power than others, "excess" wealth would be confiscated and given to those who needed it most.

In Rousseau's utopia, emphasis would be on the prosperity of the collective; not, as in capitalist economies, on the prosperity of the individual who had earned it; and the guiding principle of the whole would be the preservation of equality, without regard for personal desert. People would be motivated by humane concern for each other, not by calculations of how to get rich or attain rank. A state religion would help to promote conformity

with this altruistic morality and willing compliance with the dictates of the ruling authorities.

As Hicks emphasizes, everything about this fantasy is in opposition to the ideals of the Enlightenment, which favored not religion but reason, not socialism but capitalism, not collectivism but individualism, not submission to nature but technological mastery of nature. Regarding the Enlightenment, Rousseau was a complete reactionary. So, his writings naturally became holy texts for the leaders of the French revolution, especially during the Terror, when heads were lopped off and estates confiscated so that the lands of the aristocracy could be redistributed in small parcels to common folk, who lacked knowledge of how to use them profitably.

The dictator Napoleon Bonaparte would later set aside such reforms in the name of Enlightenment, but Rousseau's ideas would then just go to Germany, where they would be welcomed, partly out of nationalistic fervor, by the very same intellectuals that Hicks introduced earlier. Having preached subjective idealism Fichte, Hegel, and Heidegger would also preach collectivism. Following Kant, the Germans would argue that duty to the state should take precedence over the lives and desires of individuals.

Evolutionary Politics

Unless I missed something, Hicks does not undertake to explain why belief in collectivist altruism and authoritarian statism finds a home in the very same minds that reject Enlightenment reason and calculation in favor of Romantic sentiment and feeling. He does not tell us why socialism had, and still has, such appeal to a certain kind of intellectual. Therefore, with your forbearance, I will now give it a try. My explanation will differ from that of Nietzsche and that of Hayek.

By some estimates, fully evolved human beings have been on this earth for about a million years. For all but the last 10,000 years of that time, they lived in nomadic kinship groups—in other words, extended families, tribes run by a patriarch, clans. Furthermore, tribalism continued to be the dominant pattern even after settled agriculture was established. In the tribal group, the rule was indeed "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Except for small personal possessions, private property was unknown; the stock of the clan belonged to every member alike; there was no distinction between *mine* and *thine*; there was only *ours*. In this situation, the collective welfare took precedence over the individual's well being, and love of one's kin was strong. Willingness to sacrifice

oneself for the welfare of the group was the principal virtue; clans in which this virtue was lacking did not survive long.

So, for 99% of the time we human beings have existed, we have been conditioned by the harsh logic of evolutionary selection to life in a community of persons governed by collectivist values and usually run by a single paternalistic authority. That has made a difference. The altruistic sentiments and faith in paternalism necessary for life in such a community have been hard wired, as it were, into our very genes. These sentiments and emotions are part of the warp and woof of the human nature in which we all share. So, it is not surprising that these same sentiments find expression in the utopian fantasies of intellectuals, who have convinced themselves that they and their societies should be governed not by such latecomers as impersonal reason and objective science but by archaic family feeling. Nor is it surprising that, seen from such a perspective, capitalist individualism and commercial self-seeking look to be not merely unnatural but the very embodiments of moral evil.

I think this evolutionary hypothesis explains why most intellectuals (and most people) find socialism so appealing and unrestricted capitalism so appalling. Of course, when constructing their socialist utopias, intellectuals must overlook two critically important facts. First, larger societies, which typically embrace many clans, have members who are not bound to each other by close ties of blood or kinship. So, the morality that is appropriate for an exclusionary clan cannot be expanded so readily to more inclusive social units, because affection for cousins will not be extended so easily to foreigners.

Second, as the human population has increased in number, it has expanded its range, bringing separate kinship groups into increasing contact with each other. If these contacts are not to take the form of mutually destructive conflict and war, they must take the form of mutually advantageous commercial exchange, which means that friendly relations must be maintained with strangers. This new situation requires a new morality. In fact, it requires the virtues—e.g., prudence, sobriety, industry, trustworthiness, and self-restraint—associated with capitalism and a market economy.

But I have been free wheeling. Before this digression, I was reviewing Hicks's account of the intellectual provenance of postmodernism, and I had taken note of the fact that the very same German intellectuals who disliked Enlightenment commitment to reason also disliked its commitment to capitalist individualism; the very same men who thought sentiment and feeling would provide better access to reality also thought that socialist

collectivism would accord better with natural morality. German epistemology and German politics were two sides of one and the same coin. Let us now look at what that coin bought.

The Crises of Socialism

As Hicks says, it bought the colossal disasters of the twentieth century, the most destructive century in history.

All of these disasters were brought about by one of two opposed varieties of socialists. Some were communists, who endorsed international socialism; others were fascists, who advocated national socialism. Seeking to create "heaven on earth" socialists of both the left and the right created the most tyrannical hells ever known to man. Promising to guarantee that men would be not only safe but also well fed, they murdered or starved tens of millions of their own citizens. In the name of what Kant had called perpetual peace, they caused some of the most vicious and devastating wars ever known. Guaranteeing to foster prosperity, they spread poverty and destitution wherever they went. Of course, WWII got rid of rightist socialism, leaving only leftist socialism. Hicks tells this story very well indeed.

He also tells how reluctant realization of the failure and crimes of leftist socialism caused crises of faith that led to a redefinition of socialism and a reordering of its priorities. The first crisis occurred with realization that capitalist economies were not collapsing from internal contradictions as Marx had predicted but were outstripping socialist economies in their provision for the poor; so the increasingly contented workers were not overthrowing their employers as expected. This tested faith in the accuracy of Marxist analysis and the efficiency of socialist organization. The second crisis occurred when Nikita Khrushchev revealed the extent of Joseph Stalin's murderous tyranny, which had exceeded that of Adolph Hitler in perpetrating evil. This tested faith in the superior morality of socialist polity.

The typical socialist response to the first crisis was to redefine poverty. It was no longer absolute but relative. Maybe capitalism fed and clothed the poor better than socialism, but socialism did not allow such great disparities of wealth. Besides, capitalism fostered a wasteful and environmentally destructive consumerism, with its resulting conformity to shallow convention—the one dimensional man of Herbert Marcuse. So, socialists changed their goals, giving up the eradication of poverty for the

elimination of inequality. Along the way, they also changed their identification of exploited groups. Where formerly they had talked of oppressed workers, they now talked about oppressed females and oppressed people of color. Proletarian mentality gave way to multiculturalism.

Socialist response to the second, and more serious moral, crisis was twofold. Some apologists for socialism denied that it had ever existed in the Soviet Union, although they had not said so before it collapsed. Others replied that what mattered was not the past but the future, and the ideal of socialist equality held out hope for a brighter future than the racially and sexually repressive societies that presently existed. Hicks does a nice job detailing and documenting both responses.

As Hicks notes, however, these responses to the crises of socialism were not always convincing, even to socialists. If capitalism was to be defeated, more extreme measures would be needed. Taking up guns, socialists outside the academy turned to terrorism; they constituted the Weathermen, the Black Panthers and other violent groups. Possessing only words, socialists inside the academy decided to use them as weapons; they would wreak verbal and intellectual havoc by attacking capitalist social order at its intellectual foundations, the ideals of truth and logic and the related ideal of individual liberty. Both the gun wielders and the rhetoricians would undertake a relentless and all out assault on "Western," meaning capitalist, society and institutions. Nothing would go unscathed. Everything would be condemned, including the supermarkets, refrigerators, and automobiles of which the friends of capitalism were so proud.

Enter postmodernism and the demise of civilized debate. Since, according to the postmodernist, there is no necessary connection between words and things, the political rhetorician could now use words as she pleased, without regard for accuracy. All whites would be called racists; all men rapists; all soldiers terrorists; all hunters murderers; etc. Never mind that such hyperbolic claims were not true; truth was in the eye of the beholder. Besides, the aim was not to establish the facts but to intimidate and silence one's opponents.

Never mind, either, that there is self-refutation in saying "On the one hand, all truth is relative and all reality is a social construction; on the other hand, we tell it like it is" or "All values are subjective, but racism and sexism really are evils." As Hegel had showed, contradiction could itself be a weapon in verbal wars, enabling one to have it both ways. Never mind, finally, that some postmodernist claims (e.g., that the West is racist and sexist) are refuted by plain fact (e.g., that the Western societies have done

more than any others to eliminate sexism and racism). The more absurd the claim the better it would serve to throw one's opponents off balance.

In short, never mind the inconvenient fact that relativism and nihilism are philosophically and psychologically untenable. They are verbal bombs that the leftist can throw into any conversation that is going in a direction she does not like.

Conclusion

Stephen Hicks has written a very fine book, one that reveals both the historical roots and the current strategies of postmodernism. As he acknowledges, his account has done little or nothing to refute the skeptical and relativist epistemology on which postmodernism rests. Nor, I suspect, has he done much to counter the baneful influence postmodernism has had on the departments of humanities and social science of most universities. He has, however, helped to reduce the puzzlement of those of us who have wondered how the truly amazing form of madness called postmodernism has managed to take over the minds of people who in other ways seem both sane and intelligent.

Buy two copies and give one to a postmodernist acquaintance. It will ruin his week.

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