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**History, Civilization, and
Progress: Outline for a
Criticism of Modern
Relativism**

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I

Rarely have the concepts that literally define the best of Western culture — its notions of a meaningful History, a universal Civilization, and the possibility of Progress — been called so radically into question as they are today. In recent decades, both in the United States and abroad, the academy and a subculture of self-styled postmodernist intellectuals have nourished an entirely new ensemble of cultural conventions that stem from a corrosive social, political, and moral relativism. This ensemble encompasses a crude nominalism, pluralism, and skepticism, an extreme subjectivism, and even outright nihilism and antihumanism in various combinations and permutations, sometimes of a thoroughly misanthropic nature. This relativistic ensemble is pitted against coherent thought as such and against the “principle of hope” (to use Ernst Bloch’s expression) that marked radical theory of the recent past. Such notions percolate from so-called radical academics into the general public, where they take the form of personalism, amoralism, and “neoprimitivism.”

Too often in this prevailing “paradigm,” as it is often called, eclecticism replaces the search for historical meaning; a self-indulgent despair replaces hope; dystopia replaces the promise of a rational society; and in the more sophisticated forms of this ensemble a vaguely defined “intersubjectivity” — or in its cruder forms, a primitivistic mythopoesis — replaces all forms of reason, particularly dialectical reason. In fact, the very concept of reason itself has been challenged by a willful antirationalism. By stripping the great traditions of Western thought of their contours, nuances, and gradations, these relativistic “post-historicists,” “postmodernists,” and (to coin a new word) “post-humanists” of our day are, at best, condemning contemporary thought to a dark pessimism or, at worst, subverting it of all its meaning.

So grossly have the current critics of History, Civilization, and Progress, with their proclivities for fragmentation and reductionism, subverted the coherence of these basic Western concepts that they will literally have to be defined again if they are to be made intelligible to present and future generations. Even more disturbingly, such critics have all but abandoned attempts to define the very concepts they excoriate. What, after all, is *History*? Its relativistic critics tend to dissolve the concept into eclectically assembled “histories” made up of a multiplicity of disjointed episodes — or even worse, into myths that belong to “different” gender, ethnic, and national groups and that they consider to be ideologically equatable. Its nominalistic critics see the past largely as a series of “accidents,” while its subjectivistic critics overemphasize ideas in determining historical realities, consisting of “imaginaries” that are essentially discontinuous from one another. And what, after all, is *Civilization*? “Neoprimitivists” and other cultural reductionists have so blackened the word that its rational components are now in need of a scrupulous sorting out from the irrationalities of the past and present. And what, finally, is *Progress*? Relativists have rejected its aspirations to freedom in all its complexity, in favor of a fashionable assertion of “autonomy,” often reducible to personal proclivities. Meanwhile, antihumanists have divested the very concept of Progress of all relevance and meaning in the farrago of human self-denigration that marks the moods of the present time.

A skepticism that denies any meaning, rationality, coherence, and continuity in History, that corrodes the very existence of premises, let alone the necessity of exploring them, renders discourse itself virtually impossible. Indeed, premises

as such have become so suspect that the new relativists regard any attempts to establish them as evidence of a cultural pathology, much as Freudian analysts might view a patient's resistance to treatment as symptomatic of a psychological pathology. Such a psychologization of discussion closes off all further dispute. No longer are serious challenges taken on their own terms and given a serious response; rather, they are dismissed as symptoms of a personal and social malaise.

So far have these tendencies been permitted to proceed that one cannot now mount a critique of incoherence, for example, without exposing oneself to the charge of a having a "predisposition" to "coherence" — or a "Eurocentric" bias. A defense of clarity, equally unacceptable, invites the accusation of reinforcing the "tyranny of reason," while an attempt to uphold the validity of reason is dismissed as an "oppressive" presupposition of reason's existence. The very attempt at definition is rejected as intellectually "coercive." Rational discussion is impugned as a repression of nonliterate forms of "expression" such as rituals, howling, and dancing, or on an ostensibly philosophical scale, of intuitions, pre-sciences, psychological motivations, of "positional" insights that are dependent on one's gender or ethnicity, or of revelations of one kind or another that often feed into outright mysticism.

This constellation of relativistic views, which range from the crude to the intellectually exotic, cannot be criticized rationally because they deny the validity of rationally independent conceptual formulations as such, presumably "constricted" by the claims of reason. For the new relativists, "freedom" ends where claims to rationality begin — in marked contrast to the ancient Athenians, for whom violence begins where rational discussion ends. Pluralism, the decentering of meanings, the denial of foundations, and the hypostasization of the idiosyncratic, of the ethically and socially contingent, and of the psychological — all seem like part of the massive cultural decay that corresponds to the objective decay of our era. In American universities today relativists in all their mutations too often retreat into the leprous "limit experiences" of a Foucault; into a view of History as fragmentary "collective representations" (Durkheim), "culture-patterns" (Benedict), or "imaginaries" (Castoriadis); or into the nihilistic asociality of postmodernism.

When today's relativists do offer definitions of the concepts they oppose, they typically overstate and exaggerate them. They decry the pursuit of foundations — an endeavor that they have characteristically turned into an "ism," "foundationalism" — as "totalistic," without any regard for the patent need for basic principles. That foundations exist that are confined to *areas of reality where their existence is valid and knowable* seems to elude these antifoundationalists, for whom foundations must either encompass the entire cosmos or else not exist at all. Reality would indeed be a mystery if a few principles or foundations could encompass all that exists, indeed, all its innovations unfolding from the subatomic realm to inorganic matter, from the simplest to the most complex life-forms, and ultimately to the realm of astrophysics.

Some historical relativists overemphasize the subjective in history at the expense of the material. Subjective factors certainly do affect obviously objective developments. In the Hellenistic Age, for example, Heron reputedly designed steam engines, yet so far as we know they were never used to replace human labor, as they were two thousand years later. Subjective historians, to be sure, would emphasize the subjective factors in this fact. But what *interaction* be-

tween ideological and material factors explains why one society — capitalism — used the steam engine on a vast scale for the manufacture of commodities, while another — Hellenistic society — used it merely to open temple doors for the purposes of mass mystification? Overly subjectivistic historians would do well to explore not only how different traditions and sensibilities yielded these disparate uses of machines but what *material* as well as broadly social factors either fostered or produced them.¹

Other historical relativists are nominalistic, overemphasizing the idiosyncratic in History, often begging basic questions that it is necessary to explore. A small people in ancient Judea, we may be told, formulated a localized, ethnically based body of monotheistic beliefs that at a chronologically later point became the basis of the Judeo-Christian world religion. Are these two events unrelated? Was their conjunction a mere accident? To conceive this vast development in a nominalistic way, without probing into *why* the Roman emperors adopted the Judeo-Christian synthesis — in an empire composed of very different cultures and languages that was direly in need of ideological unity to prevent its complete collapse — is to produce confusion rather than clarity.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of relativism is its moral arbitrariness. The moral relativism of the trite maxim “What’s good for me is good for me, and what’s good for you is good for you,” hardly requires elucidation.² In this apparently most formless of times, relativism has left us with a solipsistic morality and in certain subcultures a politics literally premised on chaos. The turn of many anarchists these days toward a highly personalistic, presumably “autonomous” subculture at the expense of serious, indeed, responsible social commitment and action reflects, in my view, a tragic abdication of a serious engagement in the political and revolutionary spheres. This is no idle problem today, when increasing numbers of people with no knowledge of History take capitalism to be a natural, eternal social system. A politics rooted in purely relativistic preferences, in assertions of personal “autonomy” that stem largely from an individual’s “desire,” can yield a crude and self-serving opportunism, of a type whose prevalence today explains many social ills. Capitalism itself, in fact, fashioned its primary ideology on an equation of freedom with the personal autonomy of the individual, which Anatole France once impishly described as the “freedom” of everyone to sleep at night under the same bridge over the Seine. Individuality is *inseparable* from community, and autonomy is hardly meaningful unless it is embedded in a cooperative community.³ Compared with humanity’s potentialities for freedom, a relativistic and personalistic “autonomy” is little

¹Moreover, despite this tendency to bifurcate objectivity and subjectivity, the two do not exclude each other. There is a subjective dimension to objectivity, and it is precisely the *relationship* between the two that requires explication.

²Moral relativism has recently been the breeding ground of a purely functional or instrumental form of rationality, which in my view is one of the greatest impediments to serious social analysis and a meaningful ethics. “Subjective reason,” to use Max Horkheimer’s phrase from *The Eclipse of Reason*, on which a relativistic approach rests, has been one of the major afflictions of Anglo-American thinking, not merely within the academy but within the general public.

³Predicated as their self-realization is in their own potentialities, human beings *nevertheless cannot do as they please*, despite the assertions of “beautiful souls,” to use Hegel’s phrase, who live in an aerie of personal liberation and self-contained “autonomy.” Here, Marx was a good deal ahead of today’s individualistic anarchists who, spray can in hand, have a bad habit of disrupting serious attempts at organization and theoretical inquiry with cries of “Freedom now!”

more than psychotherapy writ large and expanded into a social theory.

Far too many of the relativistic critics of History, Civilization, and Progress seem less like serious social theorists than like frightened former radical ideologues who have not fully come to terms with the failures of the Left and of “existing socialism” in recent years. The incoherence that is celebrated in present-day theory is due in no small part to the one-sided and exaggerated reaction of French academic “leftists” to the May-June events of 1968, to the behavior of the French Communist Party, and in even greater part to the various mutations of Holy Mother Russia from Czarism through Stalinism to Yeltsinism. Too often, this disenchantment provides an escape route for erstwhile “revolutionaries” to ensconce themselves in the academy, or embrace social democracy, or simply turn to a vacuous nihilism that hardly constitutes a threat to the existing society. From relativism, they have constructed a skeptical barrier between themselves and the rest of society. Yet this barrier is as intellectually fragile as the one-sided absolutism that the Old Left tried to derive from Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. But fairness requires me to emphasize that contrary to the conventional wisdom about the Left today,

there has never been any “existing socialism,” the erstwhile claims of Eastern European leaders to have achieved it notwithstanding. Nor was Hegel a mere teleologist; nor Marx a mere “productivist”; nor Lenin the ideological “father” of the ruthless opportunist and counterrevolutionary, Stalin.⁴ In reaction to the nightmare of the “Soviet” system, today’s relativists have not only overreacted to and exaggerated the shortcomings of Hegel, Marx, and Lenin; they have concocted an ideological prophylaxis to protect themselves from the still-unexorcised demons of a tragically failed past instead of formulating a credible philosophy that can address the problems that now confront us at all levels of society and thought.

Current expositions of oxymoronic “market socialisms” and “minimal statisms” by “neo-” and “post-Marxists” suggest where political relativism and assertions of “autonomy” can lead us.⁵ Indeed, it is quite fair to ask whether today’s fashionable political relativism itself would provide us with more than a paper-thin obstacle to totalitarianism. The dismissal of attempts to derive continuity in History, coherence in Civilization, and meaning in Progress as evidence of a “to-

⁴Nothing is easier, more mystifying, and more smug these days than to advance sweeping, ahistorical generalizations about figures like Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. It is evidence of the ugly intellectual degradation of our time that people who should know better make them so flippantly. One might as well claim that Stalin’s totalitarianism had its roots in Machiavelli’s so-called “Atlantic Republican Tradition” since the latter was the author of *The Prince*; or in Plato, as Karl Popper so notoriously did. Yet Hegel would undoubtedly have resolutely opposed Marx’s view of the dialectic; Marx might very well have disowned Lenin, as the Marxist Rosa Luxemburg and the council communists Görter and Pannekoek did; and Stalin would certainly have imprisoned Lenin, as Lenin’s widow bitterly reproached Trotsky in 1925, after the former Red Army commander belatedly began to attack Stalin.

⁵Many of these former Marxists (particularly “New Left” students and their professors) polluted the sixties with their pet dogmas, only to “grow up” after they had “had their fun” (to rephrase a cynical expression of many Parisian veterans of 1968) and are now polluting the nineties with skepticism, nihilism, and subjectivism. The most serious obstacles to the development of an authentic New Left today are the Alain Touraines, André Gorzes, and Michael Walzers who have rallied variously to “market socialism,” to “minimal statism,” or to pluralized concepts of justice and freedom that are perfectly compatible with modern capitalism. The worst fate that an idea can meet is to be kept artificially alive, long after it has died historically, in the form of graduate courses at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

talizing” or “totalitarian” mentality in pursuit of all-encompassing foundations directly or indirectly imbricates reason, particularly that of the Enlightenment era, with totalitarianism, and even significantly *trivializes* the harsh reality and pedigree of totalitarianism itself. In fact, the actions of the worst totalitarians of our era, Stalin and Hitler, were guided less by the objectively grounded principles or “foundational” ideas they so cynically voiced in public than by a kind of relativistic or situational ethics. For Stalin, who was no more a “socialist” or “communist” than he was an “anarchist” or “liberal,” theory was merely an ideological fig leaf for the concentration of power. To overlook Stalin’s sheer opportunism is myopic at best and cynical at worst. Under his regime, only a hopelessly dogmatic “Communist” who had managed to negotiate and survive Stalin’s various changes in the “party line” could have taken Stalin seriously as a “Marxist-Leninist.” Hitler, in turn, exhibited amazing flexibility in bypassing ideology for strictly pragmatic ends. In his first months in power, he decimated all the “true believers” of National Socialism among his storm troopers at the behest of the Prussian officer caste, which feared and detested the Nazi rabble.

In the absence of an objective grounding — notably, the very real human potentialities that have been formed by the natural, social, moral, and intellectual development of our species — notions like freedom, creativity, and rationality are reduced to “intersubjective” relations, underpinned by personal and individualistic preferences (nothing more!) that are “resolved” by another kind of tyranny — notably, the tyranny of consensus. Lacking foundations of any kind, lacking any real form and solidity, notions of “intersubjectivity” can be frighteningly homogenizing because of their seemingly “democratic” logic of consensuality — a logic that precludes the dissensus and ideological dissonance so necessary for stimulating innovation. In the consensual “ideal speech situation” that Jürgen Habermas deployed to befof the socialist vision of the 1970s, this “intersubjectivity,” a transcendental “Subject” or “Ego” like a mutated Rousseauian “General Will,” replaces the rich elaboration of reason. Today this subjectivism or “intersubjectivity” — be it in the form of Habermas’s neo-Kantianism or Baudrillard’s egoism — lends itself to a notion of “social theory” as a matter of personal taste. Mere constructions of “socially conditioned” human minds, free-floating in a sea of relativism and ahistoricism, reject a potential objective ground for freedom in the interests of avoiding “totalitarian Totalities” and the “tyranny” of an “Absolute.” Indeed, *reason itself* is essentially reduced to “intersubjectivity.” Juxtaposed with literary celebrations of the “subjective reason” of personalism, and its American sequelae of mysticism, individual redemption, and conformity, and its post-1968 French sequelae of postmodernist, psychoanalytic, relativist, and neo-Situationist vagaries, Marx’s commitment to thorough thinking would be attractive.

Ideas that are objectively grounded, unlike those that are relativistically asserted, can provide us with a *definable* body of principles with which we can seriously grapple. The foundational coherence and in the best of cases the rationality of objectively grounded views at least make them explicit and tangible and free them from the vagaries of the labyrinthine personalism so very much in vogue today. Unlike a foundationless subjectivism that is often reducible, under the rubric of “autonomy,” to personal preferences, objective foundations are at least subject to challenges in a *free* society. Far from precluding rational critique, they invite it. Far from taking refuge in an unchallengeable nominalist elusiveness, they open themselves to the test of coherence. Paul Feyerabend’s

corrosive (in my view, cynical) relativism to the contrary notwithstanding, the natural sciences in the past three centuries have been among the most emancipatory human endeavors in the history of ideas — partly because of their pursuit of unifying or foundational explanations of reality.⁶ In the end, what should always be of concern to us is the *content* of objective principles, be they in science, social theory, or ethics, not a flippant condemnation of their claims to coherence and objectivity per se.

Indeed, despite claims to the contrary, relativism has its own hidden “foundations” and metaphysics. As such, because its premises are masked, it may well produce an ideological tyranny far more paralyzing than the “totalitarianism” that it imputes to objectivism and an expressly *reasoned* “foundationalism.” Insofar as our concerns should center on the *bases* of freedom and the *nature* of reason, modern relativism has “decentered” these crucial issues into wispy expressions of personal faith in an atmosphere of general skepticism. We may choose to applaud the relativist who upholds his or her strictly personal faith by reiterating Luther’s defiant words at Worms, *Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders* (“Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise”). But to speak frankly, unless we also hear a rational argument to validate that stand, one based on more than a subjective inclination, who gives a damn about this resolve?

II

Which raises again the problem of what History, Civilization, and Progress actually are.

History, I wish to contend, is the *rational* content and continuity of events (with due regard for qualitative “leaps”) that are grounded in humanity’s *potentialities* for freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation, in the self-formative development of increasingly libertarian forms of consociation. It is the rational “infrastructure,” so to speak, that coheres human actions and institutions over the past and the present in the direction of an emancipatory society and emancipated individual. That is to say, History is precisely what is *rational* in human development. It is what is rational, moreover, in the *dialectical* sense of the implicit that unfolds, expands, and begins in varying degrees through increasing differentiation to actualize humanity’s very *real* potentialities for freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation.⁷

It will immediately be objected that irrational events, unrelated to this actualization, explode upon us at all times and in all eras and cultures. But insofar as they defy rational interpretation, they remain precisely *events*, not History, however consequential their effects may be on the course of other events. Their impact may be very powerful, to be sure, but they are not dialectically rooted in humanity’s potentialities for freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation.⁸

⁶It is easy, when criticizing scientism as an ideology, to forget the role that the natural sciences themselves played in subverting beliefs in witchcraft and superstition, and in fostering a secular and naturalistic approach to reality. I would like to think that we no longer believe in Dracula, or in the power of the crucifix to fend off vampires, or in the occult power of women to communicate with demons — or do we?

⁷See my “Introduction: A Philosophical Naturalism,” in *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990); the revised edition is forthcoming from Black Rose in 1994.

⁸Indeed, there may be a “logic to events,” but it would be the logic of conventional reason,

They can be assembled into *Chronicles*, the stuff out of which a Froissart constructed his largely anecdotal “histories,” but not History in the sense I am describing. Events may even “overtake History,” so to speak, and ultimately submerge it in the irrational and the evil. But without an increasingly self-reflexive History, which present-day relativism threatens to extinguish, we would not even know that it had happened.

If we deny that humanity has these potentialities for freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation — conceived as one ensemble — then along with many self-styled “socialists” and even former anarchists like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, we may well conclude that “capitalism has won,” as one disillusioned friend put it; that “history” has reached its terminus in “bourgeois democracy” (however tentative this “terminus” may actually be); and that rather than attempt to enlarge the realm of the rational and the free, we would do best to ensconce ourselves in the lap of capitalism and make it as comfortable a resting place as possible for ourselves.

As a mere adaptation to what exists, to the “what-is,” such behavior is merely animalistic. Sociobiologists may even regard it as genetically unavoidable, but my critics need not be sociobiologists to observe that the historical record exhibits a great deal of adaptation and worse — of irrationality and violence, of pleasure in the destruction of oneself and others — and finally to question my assertion that History is the unfolding of human potentialities for freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation. Indeed, humans have engaged in destruction and luxuriated in real and imaginary cruelties toward one another that have produced hells on earth. They have created the monstrosities of Hitler’s death camps and Stalin’s gulags, not to speak of the mountains of skulls that Mongol and Tartar invaders of Eurasia left behind in distant centuries. But this record hardly supplants a dialectic of unfolding and maturing of potentialities in social development, nor is the *capacity* of humans to inflict cruelties on each other equivalent to their *potentialities* for freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation.

Here, human capacities and human potentialities must be distinguished from each other. The human capacity for inflicting injury belongs to the realm of natural history, to what humans share with animals in the biological world or “first nature.” First nature is the domain of survival, of core feelings of pain and fear, and in that sense our behavior remains animalistic, which is by no means altered with the emergence of social or “second nature.” *Unknown* animals merely try to survive and adapt to one degree or another to the world in which they exist. By contrast, humans are animals of a very *special* kind; they are *knowing* animals, they have the intelligence to calculate and to devise, even in the service of needs that they share with nonhuman life-forms. Human reason and knowledge have commonly served aims of self-preservation and self-maximization by the use of a formal logic of expediency, a logic that rulers have deployed for social control and the manipulation of society. These methods have their roots in the animal realm of simple “means-ends” choices to survive.

But humans also have the *capacity* to *deliberately* inflict pain and fear, to use their reason for perverse passions, in order to coerce others or merely for cruelty for its own sake. Only *knowing* animals, ironically animals capable of intelligent innovation, with the *Schadenfreude* to enjoy vicariously the torment

based on mere cause-and-effect and the principle of identity, “A = A,” not dialectical reason.

of others, can inflict fear and pain in a coldly calculated or even passionate manner. The Foucauldian hypostasization of the body as the “terrain” of sado-masochistic pleasure can be easily elaborated into a metaphysical justification of violence, depending, to be sure, on what “pleases” a particular perpetrating ego.⁹ In this sense, human beings are too intelligent *not* to live in a rational society, *not* to live within institutions formed by reason and ethics, institutions that restrict their capacity for irrationality and violence.¹⁰ Insofar as they do not, they remain dangerously wayward and unformed creatures with enormous powers of destruction as well as creation.

Humanity may have a “potentiality for evil,” as one colleague has argued. But that over the course of social development people have exhibited an explosive capacity to perpetrate the most appallingly evil acts does not mean that human potentiality is constituted to produce evil and a nihilistic destructiveness. The capacity of certain Germans to establish an Auschwitz, indeed the means and the goal to exterminate a whole people in a terrifyingly industrial manner, was inherent neither in Germany’s development nor in the development of industrial rationalization as such. However anti-Semitic many Germans were over the previous two centuries, Eastern Europeans were equally or even more so, while ironically, industrial development in Western Europe may have done more to achieve Jewish juridical emancipation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than all the Christian pieties that marked the preindustrial life during the Middle Ages. Indeed, evil may have a “logic” — that is to say, it may be explained. But most general accounts explain the evolution of evil in terms of adventitious evil acts and events, if this can be regarded as explanation at all. Hitler’s takeover of Germany, made possible more by economic and political dislocations than by the racial views he espoused, was precisely a terrible *event* that cannot be explained in terms of any human potentiality for evil. The horror of Auschwitz lies almost as much in its *inexplicability*, in its appallingly extraordinary character, as in the monstrosities that the Nazis generally inflicted on European Jews. It is in this sense that Auschwitz remains hauntingly *inhuman* and that it has tragically produced an abiding mistrust by many people of Civilization and Progress.

When explanations of evil are not merely narrations of events, they explain evil in terms of instrumental or conventional logic. The knowing animal, the human being, who is viciously harmful, does not use the developmental reason of dialectic, the reason of ethical reflection; nor a coherent, reflective reason, grounded in a knowledge of History and Civilization; nor even the knowing of an ambiguous, arbitrary, self-generated “imaginary,” or a morality of personal taste and pleasure. Rather, the knowing animal uses instrumental calculation to serve evil ends, including the infliction of pain.

The very existence of irrationalism and evil in many social phenomena today compels us to uphold a clear standard of the “rational” and the “good” by which to judge the one against the other. A purely personalistic, relativistic, or functional approach will hardly do for establishing ethical standards — as many critiques of subjectivism and subjective reason have shown. The personal tastes from which subjectivism and relativism derive their ethical standards are as transient and fleeting as moods. Nor will a nominalistic approach suffice: To

⁹See James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

¹⁰See my forthcoming book *Reenchanting Humanity* (London: Cassell, 1995), for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

reduce History to an incomprehensible assortment of patterns or to inexplicable products of the imagination is to deny social development all internal *ethical* coherence.¹¹ Indeed, an unsorted, ungraded, unmediated approach reduces our understanding of History to a crude eclecticism rather than an insightful coherence, to an overemphasis on differentiae (so easy to do, these mindless days!) and the idiosyncratic rather than the meaningful and the universal, more often attracting the commonsensical individual to the psychoanalytic couch than helping him or her reconstitute a left libertarian social movement.

If our views of social development are to be structured around the *differences* that distinguish one culture or period from another, we will ignore underlying tendencies that, with extraordinary universality, have greatly expanded the material and cultural conditions for freedom on various levels of individual and social self-understanding. By grossly emphasizing disjunctions, social isolates, unique configurations, and chance events, we will reduce shared, clearly common social developments to an archipelago of cultures, each essentially unrelated to those that preceded and followed it. Yet many historical forces have emerged, declined, and then emerged again, despite the formidable obstacles that often seemed to stand in their way. One does not have to explain “everything” in “foundational” terms to recognize the existence of *abiding* problems such as scarcity, exploitation, class rule, domination, and hierarchy that have agonized oppressed peoples for thousands of years.¹² If critics were correct in dubbing dialectics a mystery for claiming to encompass *all* phenomena by a few cosmic formulas, then they would be obliged to regard human social development as a mystery if they claimed that it lacks any continuity and unity — that is, the bases for a philosophy of History. Without a notion of continuity in History, how could we explain the extraordinary efflorescence of culture and technique that *Homo sapiens sapiens* produced during the Magdalenian period, some twenty or thirty thousand years ago? How could we explain the clearly unrelated evolution of complex agricultural systems in at least three separate parts of the world — the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Mesoamerica — that apparently had no contact with one another and that were based on the cultivation of very different grains, notably wheat, rice, and maize? How could we explain the great gathering of social forces in which, after ten thousand years of arising, stagnating, and disappearing, cities finally gained control over the agrarian world that had impeded their development, yielding the “urban revolution,” as V. Gordon Childe called it, in different zones of the world that could have had no contact with one another?

Mesoamerica and Mesopotamia, most clearly, could not have had any contact with each other since Paleolithic times, yet their agriculture, towns and cities, literacy, and mathematics developed in ways that are remarkably similar. Initially Paleolithic foragers, both produced highly urbanized cultures based on grain cultivation, glyphs, accurate calendrics, and very elaborate pottery, to cite only the most striking parallels. Even the wheel was known to Mesamericans, although they do not seem to have used it, probably for want of appropriate

¹¹Ironically, it even vitiates the meaning of *social* anarchism as an ethical socialism.

¹²I find no solace in the notion that preliterate peoples “enjoyed” an “affluent society,” as Marshall Sahlins would have it. Their lives were all too often short, their cultures burdened by superstition and bereft of a syllabic system of writing, and they normally were at war with each other, to cite only their major afflictions, notwithstanding pastoral New Age images of their lives to the contrary.

draft animals, as well as the zero, despite the absence of any communication with Eurasian societies. It requires an astonishing disregard for the unity of Civilization on the part of historical relativists to emphasize often minor differences, such as clothing, some daily customs, and myths, at the expense of a remarkable unity of consciousness and social development that the two cultures exhibited on two separate continents after many millennia of total isolation from each other.

The unity of social evolution is hardly vitiated by such nominalistic perplexities as “Why didn’t a Lenin appear in Germany rather than Russia in 1917–1918?” In view of the great *tidal* movements of History, it might be more appropriate to explore — Lenin’s strong will and Kerensky’s psychological flaccidity aside — whether the traditional proletariat was *ever* capable of creating a “workers’ state,” indeed, what that statist concept really meant when working men and women were obliged to devote the greater amount of their lives to arduous labor at the expense of their participation in managing social affairs. Caprice, accident, irrationality, and “imaginaries” certainly enter into social development for better or worse. But they have literally no meaning if there is no ethical standard by which to define the “other” of what we are presupposing with our standard.¹³ Seemingly accidental or eccentric factors must be raised to the level of *social theory* rather than shriveled to the level of nominalistic minutiae if we are to understand them.

Despite the accidents, failures, and other aberrations that can alter the course of *rational* social and individual development, there is a “*legacy of freedom*,” as I named a key chapter in my book *The Ecology of Freedom*, a tradition of increasing approximation of humanity toward freedom and self-consciousness, in ideas and moral values and the overall terrain of social life. Indeed, the existence of History as a coherent unfolding of real emancipatory potentialities is clearly verified by the existence of *Civilization*, the potentialities of History embodied and partially actualized. It consists of the concrete advances, material as well as cultural and psychological, that humanity *has* made toward greater degrees of freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation, as well as rationality itself. To have transcended the limitations of the kinship tie; to have gone beyond mere foraging into agriculture and industry; to have replaced the parochial band or tribe with the increasingly universal city; to have devised writing, produced literature, and developed richer forms of expression than nonliterate peoples could have ever imagined — all of these and many more advances have provided the conditions for evolving increasingly sophisticated notions of individuality and expanding notions of reason that remain stunning achievements to this very day.

It is dialectical reason rather than instrumental reason that apprehends the development of this tradition. Indeed, dialectical logic can hardly be treated coequally with eruptions of brutality, however calculated they may be, since in no sense can *episodic capacities* be equated with an *unfolding potentiality*. A dialectical understanding of History apprehends differentiae in quality, logical continuity, and maturation in historical development, as distinguished from the kinetics of mere change or a simple directivity of “social dynamics.” Rarefying projects for human liberation to the point that they are largely subjective “imaginaries,” without relevance to the realities of the overall human experience and

¹³Indeed, even nominalistic historians who see History as a series of accidents often tacitly presuppose the existence of the “nonaccidental” (perhaps even the *rational*) in a social development.

the insights of speculative reason, can cause us to overlook the existential impact of these developments and the promise they hold for ever-greater freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation. All too easily we take these achievements for granted without asking what kinds of human beings we would be if they had not occurred as a result of historical and cultural movements more fundamental than eccentric factors. These achievements, let us acknowledge quite clearly, *are* Civilization, indeed a civilizing continuum that is nonetheless infused by terribly barbaric, indeed animalistic features. The civilizing process has been ambiguous, as I have emphasized in my “Ambiguities of Freedom,”¹⁴ but it has nonetheless historically turned folk into citizens, while the process of environmental adaptation that humans share with animals has been transformed into a wide-ranging, strictly human process of *innovation* in distinctly alterable environments.¹⁵ It is a process that reached its greatest universality *primarily* in Europe, however much other parts of the world have fed into the experience. Those of us who understandably fear that the barrier between Civilization and chaos is fragile actually *presuppose* the existence of Civilization, not simply of chaos, and the *existence* of rational coherence, not simply of irrational incoherence.

Moreover, the dialectic of freedom has emerged again and again in *recurring struggles for freedom*, ideological as well as physical, that have abidingly *expanded* overall goals of freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation — as much in social evolution as a whole as within specific temporal periods. The past is replete with instances in which masses of people, however disparate their cultures were, have tried to resolve the same millennia-old problems in remarkably similar ways and with remarkably similar views. The famous cry for equality that the English peasants raised in their 1381 revolt — “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” — is as meaningful for contemporary revolts as it was six hundred years ago, in a world that presumably had a far different “imaginary” from our own. The denial of a rational universal History, of Civilization, of Progress, and of social *continuity* renders any historical *perspective* impossible and hence any revolutionary praxis meaningless except as a matter of personal, indeed, often *very* personal, taste.

Even as social movements attempt to attain what they might call a rational society, in developing humanity’s potentialities for freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation, History may constitute itself as an ever-developing “whole.” This whole, I should emphasize, must be distinguished from a terminal Hegelian “Absolute,” just as demands for coherence in a body of views must be distinguished from the worship of such an “Absolute” and just as the capacity of speculative reason to educe in a dialectically logical manner the *very real potentialities* of humanity for freedom is neither teleological or absolutist, much less “totalitarian.”¹⁶ There is nothing teleological, mystical, or absolutist about

¹⁴See chapter 11 of my *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982; reprinted by Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992).

¹⁵I find no view more one-sided and noxious than Theodor Adorno’s dictum, “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.” This inflated, less than thought-out pronouncement, taken together with Adorno’s commitment to a negativity that rejected sublation (*Aufhebung*), or social and ideological advances, was a step toward nihilism, indeed, an ugly demonization of humanity, that belied his affirmations of reason. See *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 320.

¹⁶I deliberately eschew the words *Totality* and *Spirit* to preclude any such suggestion.

History. “Wholeness” is no teleological referent, whose evolving components are merely parts of a predetermined “Absolute.” Neither the rational unfolding of human potentialities nor their actualization in an eternally given “Totality” is predestined.

Nor is the working out of our potentialities some vague sort of suprahuman activity. Human beings are not the passive tools of a Spirit (*Geist*) that works out its complete and final self-realization and self-consciousness. Rather, they are *active agents*, the authentic “constituents” of History, who may or may not elaborate their potentialities in social evolution. Aborted the revolutionary tradition has been here, and discontinuous it has been there — and for all we know it may ultimately be aborted for humanity as such. Whether an “ultimate” rational society will even actually exist as a liberatory “end of history” is beyond anyone’s predictive powers. We cannot say what the scope of a rational, free, and cooperative society would be, let alone presume to claim knowledge of its “limits.” Indeed, insofar as the historical process effected by living human agents is likely to expand our notions of the rational, the democratic, the free, and the cooperative, it is undesirable to dogmatically assert that they have any finality. History forms its own ideal of these notions at various times, which in turn have been expanded and enriched. Every society has the possibility of attaining a remarkable *degree* of rationality, given the material, cultural, and intellectual conditions that allow for it or, at least, are available to it. Within the limits of a slave, patriarchal, warrior, and urban world, for example, the ancient Athenian *polis* functioned *more* rationally than Sparta or other Greek *poleis*. It is precisely the task of speculative reason to educe *what should exist* at any given period, based on the very real potentialities for the expansion of these notions. To conclude that “the end of history” has been attained in liberal capitalism would be to jettison the historical legacy of these magnificent efforts to create a free society — efforts that claimed countless lives in the great revolutions of the past. For my part, I and probably many revolutionaries today want no place in such an “end of history”; nor do I want to forget the great emancipatory movements for popular freedom in all their many forms that occurred over the ages.

History, Civilization, and Progress are the *rational* social dispensations that form, even with all the impediments they face, a dialectical legacy of freedom. The existence of this legacy of freedom in no way denies the existence of a “legacy of domination,”¹⁷ which remains within the realm of the irrational. Indeed, these “legacies” intertwine with and condition each other. Human ideals, struggles, and achievements of various approximations to freedom cannot be separated from the cruelties and barbarities that have marked social development over the centuries, often giving rise to new social configurations whose development is highly unpredictable. But a crucial historical problematic remains, to the extent that reason can foresee a given development: Will it be freedom or domination that is nourished? I submit that *Progress* is the advance — and as everyone presumably hopes, the ascendancy — of freedom over domination, which clearly cannot be conceptually frozen in an ahistorical eternity, given the growing awareness of both hopes and oppressions that have come to light in only a few recent generations. Progress also appears in the overall improvement, however ambiguous, of humanity’s material conditions of life, the emergence of a rational ethics, with enlightened standards of sensibility and

¹⁷The name of another chapter in *The Ecology of Freedom*.

conduct, out of unreflexive custom and theistic morality, and social institutions that foster continual self-development and cooperation. However lacking our ethical claims in relation to social practice may be, given all the barbarities of our time, we now subject brutality to much harsher judgments than was done in earlier times.

It is difficult to conceive of a rational ethics — as distinguished from unthinking custom and mere commandments of morality, like the Decalogue — without *reasoned* criteria of good and evil based on real potentialities for freedom that speculative reason can educe *beyond a given reality*. The “sufficient conditions” for an ethics must be explicated rationally, not simply affirmed in public opinion polls, plebiscites, or an “intersubjective” consensus that fails to clarify what constitutes “subjectivity” and “autonomy.” Admittedly, this is not easy to do in a world that celebrates vaporous words, but it is necessary to discover truth rather than work with notions that stem from the conventional “wisdom” of our times. As Hegel insisted, even commonplace moral maxims like “Love thy neighbor as thyself” raise many problems, such as what we really mean by “love.”¹⁸

III

I believe that we lack an adequate Left critique of the theoretical problems raised by classical Hegelianism, Marxism, anarchism, social democracy, and liberalism, with the result that there are serious lacunae in the critical exploration of these “isms.” A comprehensive critical exploration would require an analysis not only of the failings of the subject matter under discussion, but of the hidden presuppositions of the critic. The critic would be obliged to clearly define what he or she *means* by the concepts he or she is using. This self-reflexive obligation cannot be bypassed by substituting undertheorized terms like “creativity,” “freedom,” or “autonomy” for in-depth analysis. The complexity of these ideas, their sweep, the traditions that underpin and divide them against one another, and the ease with which they can be abused and, in the academic milieu in which they are bandied around, detached from the lived material and social conditions of life — all require considerable exploration.

Among the important concepts and relationships that require elucidation is the tendency to reduce objectivity to the “natural law” of physical science.¹⁹ In the conventional scientific sense of the term, “natural law” preordains the kinetic future of objects colliding with each other. It may even preordain an individual plant will become under the normal conditions required for its growth. Objectivity, however, has a multiplicity of meanings and does not necessarily correspond to the “laws” that the natural sciences seek to formulate. It involves not only the materiality of the world in a very broad sense but also its *potentialities*, as a very real but as yet unrealized form structured to undergo elaboration.

¹⁸G.W.F. Hegel, “Reason as Lawgiver,” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 252–56.

¹⁹Hegel, for all his entanglements with the notion of *Geist* or “Spirit” and despite his conception of a predetermined “Absolute,” at least had the good sense to distinguish the self-development of nonhuman life-forms, for instance, from the self-development of humanity or, for that matter, society. See G.W.F. Hegel, “Introduction,” *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955, 1968; New York: The Humanities Press), pp. 22–23.

The evolution of key life-forms toward ever-greater subjectivity, choice, and behavioral flexibility — *real* potentialities and their degrees of actualization — and toward human intellectuality, language, and social institutionalization, is transparently clear. An objective potentiality is the *implicit* that may or may not be actualized, depending upon the conditions in which it emerges. Among humans, the actualization of potentiality is not *necessarily* restricted by anything besides aging and death, although it is not free to unfold unconditionally. But minimally, the actualization of humanity’s potentialities consists in its attainment of a rational society. Such a society, of course, would not appear ab novo. By its very nature it would require development, maturation, or, more precisely, a History — a rational development that may be fulfilled by the very fact that the society *is* potentially constituted to be rational. If the self-realization of life in the nonhuman world is survival or stability, the self-realization of humanity is the degree of freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation, as well as rationality in society. Reduced merely or primarily to scientific “natural law,” objectivity is highly attenuated. It does not encompass potentiality and the working of the dialectic in existential reality, let alone its presence, so to speak, as a standard for gauging reality against actuality in the unfolding of human phenomena.²⁰

Marx’s claim to have unearthed “the natural laws of capitalist production” was absurd, but to advance relativism as an alternative to it is equally absurd. In a younger, more flexible time, Marx insightfully claimed, “It is not enough that thought should seek its actualization; actuality itself must strive toward thought.”²¹ Thought, qua dialectical reason, becomes transformative in shaping the present and the future insofar human rational praxis objectively actualizes the implicit. Today, when subjectivism reigns supreme and when the common response even to significant events is to erase any meaning and coherence from History, Civilization, and Progress, there is a desperate need for an objectivity that is immensely broader than natural science and “natural laws,” on the one hand, and an emphasis on the idiosyncratic, “imaginary,” and adventitious, on the other. If vulgar Marxists used “science” to turn the *ethical* claim that “socialism is necessary” into the *teleological* assertion that “socialism is inevitable,” today’s “post-Marxist” critics repeat a similar vulgarity by mordantly celebrating incoherence in the realm of social theory. The claim of socialism’s inevitability was crudely deterministic; the claim of its necessity was a rational and ethical explication.

“Intersubjectivity” and “intersubjective relations,” for their part, cannot explain in any meaningful way *how* humanity is rooted in biological evolution, or what we broadly call “Nature,” least of all by deftly using the phrase “social construction” to bypass the very objective evolutionary reality that “Nature” connotes. Just as a subjectivized nexus of “intersubjective relations” dissolves the objectivity of social phenomena, so a subjectivized nexus of “social construction” dissolves the objectivity of natural evolution, as if neither social phenomena nor natural evolution had any actuality, aside from being a pair of simplistic epistemological categories. Here Kant reappears with a vengeance, with the possible difference that even his noumenal or unknowable external

²⁰Present-day cosmology and biophysics, however, are coming up against phenomena whose explanation requires the flexible concepts of development advanced by dialectical naturalism.

²¹Karl Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1967), p. 259.

reality has disappeared.

Dialectic, it should be emphasized, cannot be reduced merely to a “method” on the grounds that such disparate dialectical thinkers as Aristotle, John Scotus Eriugena, Hegel, and Marx comprehended different realms of knowledge and reality in different ways and periods. Humanity’s knowledge of dialectic *has itself been a process*, and dialectical thinking has itself undergone development — a *cumulative* development, not a so-called “paradigm shift” — just as scientists have been obliged in the give-and-take or sublation of ideas to resolve one-sided insights into the nature of reality and its becoming.²²

Although the broader objectivity that dialectical reasoning educes does not dictate that reason *will* prevail, it implies that it *should* prevail, *thereby melding ethics with human activity* and creating the basis for a truly objective ethical socialism or anarchism. Dialectical reason permits an ethics in history by upholding the rational influence of “what-should-be” as against “what-is.” History, qua the dialectically rational, exercises a pressing “claim,” so to speak, on our canons of behavior and our interpretation of events. Without this liberatory legacy and a human practice that fosters its unfolding, we have absolutely no basis for even *judging* what is creative or stagnant, rational or irrational, or good or evil in any constellation of cultural phenomena other than personal preference. Unlike science’s limited objectivity, dialectical naturalism’s objectivity is ethical *by its very nature*, by virtue of the kind of society it identifies as rational, a society that is the actualization of humanity’s potentialities.²³ It sublates science’s narrow objectivity to advance by rational inferences drawn from the objective nature of human potentialities, a society that increasingly actualizes those potentialities. And it does so on the basis of what *should be* as the fulfillment of the rational, that is to say, on rational knowledge of the “Good” and a conceptual congruence between the Good and the socially rational that can be embodied in free institutions.

It is not that social development is dialectical because it is *necessarily* rational as a traditional Hegelian might suppose, but rather that where social development *is* rational, it is dialectical or historical. We aver, in short, that we can educe from a uniquely human potentiality a rational development that advances human self-realization in a free, self-conscious, and cooperative society. Speculative reason here stakes out a claim to discern the rational development (by no means immune to irrational vicissitudes) of society as it *should be* — given human potentiality, as we know it in real life, to evolve from a tribal folk

²²W. T. Stace’s *Critical History of Greek Philosophy*, for example, shows how a series of ancient Greek thinkers rounded out increasingly full but still one-sided views to produce the most advanced dialectical philosophy of their time, particularly that of Aristotle. Certainly the development of insight into the dialectical nature of reality did not end with the Greeks; nor will it end with thinkers in our time, any more than science ended in the nineteenth century, when so many physicists thought little more could be added to complete Newtonian physics. In his history of philosophy, Hegel pointed out not only different *degrees* of dialectical reason, which approximated different degrees of truth (which in no way means that he was a “relativist”), but different *kinds* of rationality — “Understanding” or *Verstand*, of the commonsensical kind, and “Reason” or *Vernunft*, of the dialectical kind.

²³Recently, dialectical naturalism has been criticized for committing the “epistemological fallacy,” in which a priori concepts become their own conditions of validity, rendering dialectics as such a self-validating system. This, as if dialectic naturalism were not structured around the *reality* of potentiality and were purely an a priori speculative form of reason. Yet these critics themselves usually use the kind of logic that employs the most a priori, indeed tautological of all concepts, the principle of identity, *A equals A*, in preference to dialectical reason.

to a democratic citizenry, from mythopoesis to reason, from the submission of personhood in a folklike collectivity to individuality in a rational community — all as rational ends as well as existential realities. Speculative reason should always be called upon to understand and *explain* not only what has happened with respect to these problematics but *why* they recur in varying degrees and how they can be resolved.

In a very real sense, the past fifteen or more years have been remarkably *ahistorical*, albeit highly *eventful*, insofar as they have not been marked by any lasting advance toward a rational society. Indeed, if anything, they would seem to tilting toward a regression, ideologically and structurally, to barbarism, despite spectacular advances in technology and science, whose outcome we cannot foresee. There cannot be a dialectic, however, that deals “dialectically” with the irrational, with regression into barbarism — that is to say, a strictly *Negative Dialectics*. Both Adorno’s book of that name and Horkheimer and Adorno’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which traced the “dialectical” descent of reason (in Hegel’s sense) into instrumentalism, were little more than mixed farragoes of convoluted neo-Nietzschean verbiage, often brilliant, often colorful, often excitingly informative, but often confused, rather dehumanizing and, to speak bluntly, irrational.²⁴ A “dialectic” that lacks *any* spirit of transcendence (*Aufhebung*) and denies the “negation of the negation” is spurious at its very core.²⁵ One of the earliest attempts to “dialectically” deal with social regression was the little-known “retrogression thesis,” undertaken by Josef Weber, the German Trotskyist theorist who was the exile leader of the Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands (IKD). Weber authored the IKD’s program “Capitalist Barbarism and Socialism,” which was published in November 1944 in Max Schachtman’s *New International* during the bitterest days of the Second World War and posed the question that many thinking revolutionaries of that distant era faced: What forms would capitalism take *if* the proletariat failed to make a socialist revolution after the Second World War?²⁶ As the title of the IKD document suggests, not all Marxists, perhaps fewer than we may think, regarded socialism as “inevitable” or thought that there would necessarily be a socialist “end to history” after the war. Indeed, many who I knew as a dissident

²⁴This view is not new for me. In *The Ecology of Freedom*, completed in 1980 and published in 1982, I was at pains to indicate that “*The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is actually no dialectic at all — at least in its attempt to explain the negation of reason through its own self-development” (p. 382). My respect for the Frankfurt School rested largely on its insightful critique of positivism, which was the dominant philosophical fad in American universities and social theory (so-called “sociology”) in the 1940s and 1950s, and on its various insights into Hegelian philosophy. Today, these valuable contributions are far and away outweighed by the ease with which the Frankfurt School’s work has fostered postmodern views in the United States and Germany and by the extent to which its products, especially Adorno’s writings, have become academic commodities.

²⁵Nor does a verbal paradox that contrasts seemingly related but opposing ideas, or colorful expressions of alterity, constitute a dialectic in the sense in which I have discussed it here, however much it seems to resemble formulations in Hegel and the best of Marx. Adorno’s provocative endeavors of this kind often turn out to be little more than that — provocations.

²⁶Presented by the IKD’s Auslands Komitee (Committee Abroad), this huge document long predated *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The ideas that it advanced, however, are moot today. Extrapolating Hitler’s seeming war aims of the early 1940s — to reduce industrialized Western European countries to mere satellites of German capital and to agrarianize and depopulate the East — to the world at large, this theory of imperialism (and barbarism) argued that not capital but deindustrialization would be exported to undeveloped countries, as old Marxist theories of imperialism had assumed in the prewar period.

Trotskyist fifty years ago were convinced that barbarism was as serious a danger for the future as socialism was its greatest hope.²⁷ The prospect of barbarism that we face today may differ in form from what revolutionary Marxists faced two generations ago, but it does not differ in kind. The future of Civilization is still very much in the balance, and the very memory of alternative emancipatory visions to capitalism are becoming dimmer with each generation.

Although the “imaginary” and subjective are certainly elements in social development, contemporary capitalism is steadily dissolving the uniqueness of “imaginaries” of earlier, more diverse cultures. Indeed, capitalism is increasingly leveling and homogenizing society, culturally and economically, to a point that the same commodities, industrial techniques, social institutions, values, even desires, are being “universalized” to an unprecedented degree in humanity’s long career. At a time when the mass-manufactured commodity has become a fetish more potent than any archaic fetish that early cultures “imagined”; when the glossy tie and three-piece suit is replacing traditional sarongs, cloaks, and shoulder capes; when the word “business” requires fewer and fewer translations in the world’s diverse vocabularies; and when English has become the lingua franca not only of so-called “educated classes” but people in ordinary walks of life (need I add more to this immensely long list?), it is odd that the idiosyncratic in various cultural constellations are now acquiring a significance in academic discourse that they rarely attained in the past. This discourse may be a way of side-stepping a much-needed examination of the challenges posed by recent capitalist developments, and instead mystifying them in convoluted discussions that fill dense academic tomes and, particularly in the case of Foucault and post-modernism, satisfying the “imaginaries” of self-centered individuals, for whom the paint spray can has become the weapon of choice with which to assault the capitalist system and hair shaved into a rooster comb the best way to affront the conventional petty bourgeoisie.

Stated bluntly: no *revolutionary* movement can grow if its theorists essentially deny Bloch’s “principle of hope,” which it so needs for an inspired belief in the future; if they deny universal History that affirms sweeping common problems that have besieged humanity over the ages; if they deny the shared interests that give a movement the basis for a common struggle in achieving a rational dispensation of social affairs; if they deny a processual rationality and a growing idea of the Good based on more than personalistic (or “intersubjective” and “consensual”) grounds; if they deny the powerful civilizatory dimensions of social development (ironically, dimensions that are in fact so useful to contemporary nihilists in criticizing humanity’s failings); and if they deny historical Progress. Yet in present-day theoretics, a series of events replaces History, cultural relativism replaces Civilization, and a basic pessimism replaces a belief in the possibility of Progress. What is more sinister, mythopoesis replaces reason, and dystopia the prospect of a rational society. What is at stake in all these displacements is an intellectual and practical regression of appalling proportions — an especially alarming development today, when theoretical clarity is of the utmost necessity. What our times require is a *social*-analysis that calls for a revolutionary and ultimately popular movement, not a *psycho*-analysis that issues self-righteous disclaimers for “beautiful souls,” ideologically dressed in cloaks of

²⁷Nor did we, by the late 1940s, regard the workers’ movement — indeed, “workers’ councils” or “workers’ control of industry” — as revolutionary, especially with the sequelae of the great strike movements of the late 1940s which directly affected my own life as a worker.

personal virtue.

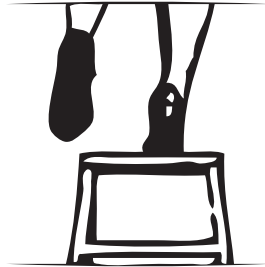
Given the disparity between what rationally *should be* and what currently *exists*, reason may not necessarily become embodied in a free society. If and when the realm of freedom ever does reach its most expansive form, to the extent that we can envision it, and if hierarchy, classes, domination, and exploitation are ever abolished, we would be obliged to enter that realm only as *free beings*, as truly rational, ethical, and empathetic “knowing animals,” with the highest intellectual insight and ethical probity, not as brutes coerced into it by grim necessity and fear. The riddle of our times is whether today’s relativists would have equipped us intellectually and ethically to cross into that most expansive realm of freedom. We cannot merely be *driven* into greater freedom by blind forces that we fail to understand, as Marxists implied, still less by mere *preferences* that have no standing in anything more than an “imaginary,” “instincts,” or libidinal “desires.”²⁸ The relativists of our time could actually play a sinister role if they permitted the “imaginative” to loosen our contact with the objective world. For in the absence of rational objective standards of behavior, imagination may be as demonic as it may be liberatory when such standards exist; hence the need for *informed* spontaneity — and an *informed* imagination. The exhilarating events of May-June 1968, with the cry “Imagination to Power!” were followed a few years later by a surge in the popularity of nihilistic postmodernism and poststructuralism in academy, an unsavory metaphysics of “desire,” and an apolitical call for “imagination” nourished by a yearning for “self-realization.” More than ever, I would insist, we must invert Nietzsche’s dictum “All facts are interpretations” and demand that all interpretations be rooted in “facts,” that is, in objectivity. We must seek out broader interpretations of socialism than those that cast socialist ideals as a science and strangled its movements in authoritarian institutions. At a time when we teeter between Civilization and barbarism, the current apostles of irrationality in all their varied forms are the chthonic demons of a dark world who have come to life not to explicate humanity’s problems but to effect a dispiriting denial of the role of rationality in History and human affairs. My disquiet today lies not in the absence of scientific “guarantees” that a libertarian socialist society will appear — at my age, that will never be my privilege to see — but in *whether it will even be fought for* in so decadent and desperate a period.

February 15, 1994

²⁸The notion of an “instinct for freedom,” touted by many radical theorists, is a sheer oxymoron. The compelling, indeed necessitarian character of instinct makes it the very antithesis of freedom, whose liberating dimensions are grounded in choice and self-consciousness.

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