Bereft of Reason

On the Decline of Social Thought and Prospects for Its Renewal

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WHY THEORETICAL NOW?

The comedians Mike Nichols and Elaine May used to have a routine going back to their days with the Second City Comedy Club in Chicago, in which they would toss words back and forth which would qualify as "cleans" and "dirties." For example, the term "Lake Michigan" is a clean, while "Lake Titicaca"—enunciated very slowly—is a dirty. "Sword" is a clean, while "rapier" is a dirty. Are you with me, dear reader? We can apply the same method to a number of terms in intellectual life today.

In this general mindset, contingency, pluralism, and social constructionism are cleans, while essences, foundations, experience, and universals are all dirties. "Reality" is a dirty while "fiction" is a clean. The "I" is a dirty, and so is "we." An "author" is a dirty, while a "text" is a clean. "The body," formerly a dirty, can be redefined as a text and made into a clean. Local cultures are clean, while "humanity" is a dirty. "Privileging" and "valorizing" something is a dirty, while using the terms "privilege" and "valorize" as verbs is a clean. Postmodernism is a clean, while modernism is a dirty. Nonhierarchical multiculturalism is a clean, while a canon is a dirty. Both those who characterize certain people as "politically correct" and those who are so characterized agree that it is a dirty. John Dewey used to be a dirty for most post-World War II academic philosophers, but now that "the public intellectual" has become a clean, Dewey has become a clean. Even more remarkable—Dewey, the philosopher who lamented what he termed "the eclipse of community," has become a clean for many who also regard "communitarianism" as a dirty. Figure that one out!

Central to contemporary intellectual life is the assumption that "the big picture" traditionally sought by philosophy is a dirty, while "little pictures" are clean. I wish to claim that fallible big pictures are not only still possible but are requisite for comprehending the modern and postmodern world. Also central to intellectual life today, although more problematic, is the assumption that organic nature is a dirty, while culture is a clean.

When the term "nature" is used in the context of ecology it can be put safely within a political context and then regarded as a clean. But the idea that organic biology may have some direct and inward influence on persons, institutions, societies, and civilizations, that human conduct cannot be completely reduced to socialhistorical cultural constructions categorically distinct from nature—such an idea is a dirty, even if John Dewey, the newly reconstructed clean public intellectual, might have sought such a naturalistic basis for human conduct. That side of Dewey is declared a dirty and consigned to the dungheap of history.

The term "public intellectual" is clearly a clean, while for many the term "tenured radical" is a dirty. Philosophy is regarded by many today as a dirty, while social theory is a clean. There is, of course, a long tradition, going back at least to Marx's last thesis on Feuerbach, to call for the end of philosophy. But today anti-philosophical philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, to take a notorious example, gloatingly decry as obsolete the very idea of the love of wisdom—philosophia—and the quest toward a comprehensive understanding the term connotes.

Social theory has attained a curious currency today among intellectuals. Many literary critics and philosophers, for example, view theory as liberating, as a means of breaking down unnecessary boundaries and overturning literary and philosophical canons. High-powered social theories are often regarded, ironically enough, as a means of making literary and philosophical questions more "practical," by showing how these questions need to be viewed in their proper social or historical contexts. In this sense, social theory seems to signify a radical break with the disciplines of literary studies and philosophy and, more broadly, with disciplinary thought in general. Literary studies have become "cultural studies" in this new order, with the promise of breaking out of the arid specialization that has characterized the development of the twentieth-century university.

One prominent philosopher, Rorty, prefers the term "social theory" to "philosophy," because it does not imply "the love of wisdom," or a pursuit of and devotion to something more than a "mere idiosyncratic historical product." He prefers instead the etymological visual sense of the term "theory" as looking at something or taking an overview. In Rorty's perspective of "ironist theory," which is representative of the postmodern temper, theory has the advantage of "taking a view of a
large stretch of territory from a considerable distance” rather than “the belief in, and love of, an ahistorical wisdom.” As he says in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, such a belief in and love of wisdom “is the story of successive attempts to find a final vocabulary which is not just the final vocabulary of the individual philosopher but a vocabulary final in every sense—a vocabulary which is no mere idiosyncratic historical product but the last word, the one to which inquiry and history have converged, the one which renders further inquiry and history superfluous. The goal of ironist theory is to understand the metaphysical urge, the urge to theorize, so well that one becomes entirely free of it. Ironist theory is thus a ladder which is to be thrown away as soon as one has figured out what it was that drove one’s predecessors to theorize.”

In Rorty’s statement we see the now conventional urge to overthrow or transcend philosophy or metaphysics, which numerous philosophers, including Marx, Nietzsche, Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the logical positivists have undertaken. Rorty’s ladder metaphor is taken directly from early Wittgenstein. His aim to replace philosophy with social theory inverts Marx’s call to replace philosophy with a criticism capable of changing practical life. Rorty does not believe that there are connections between private and public life, or in a general historical development or in a greater human condition or community, whether in Marx’s sense or any other, as shown in Chapter 7. The goal of theory, according to Rorty, is to understand the metaphysical “urge to theorize” and, in so doing, to become “entirely free of it.”

Thus one can see how the “urge to theorize” which has gripped contemporary intellectual life signals the desire for liberation from metaphysics—from the idea that literary works of art depend on aesthetic qualities of feeling communicated by authors to readers, and from the idea that truth, goodness, or beauty may cause wisdom in devoted pursuers. The objects of literary or philosophical criticism do not compel or inspire the gaze of the theorist, but seem to function as transitory or arbitrary images.

Postmodern literary theorists have come to value the social context of literature as more significant for interpretation than literature itself, a tendency at least more understandable among sociologists of literature and art, if equally erroneous. These theorists, following Jacques Derrida, would attack “logocentrism,” yet they are suffering from what could only be called “sociologocentrism.” The “Eureka, it is social!” insight need not override the inherent communicative qualities imparted by a work of art. Only a willful and uncritical self-inflation would blind critics to the art of literature or cause them to declare that the difference between criticism and art has become obsolete. In considering literature as worthwhile only when it serves some critical purpose, such as illustrating themes of class, gender, or race, thereby denying that literature is a primary activity and criticism or critique a secondary one, postmodern lit critters reflect the way that the contemporary mind has come a cropper.

One gets a sense of the postliterary theorist in Stanley Fish, who went from a decidedly objectivist position in his first book on Milton, advocating a version of “reader response” in which the author sets strict limits of control on the interpretation of the work, almost as the objective stimulus to determinate responses—to a postworld in which objectivity and other “metaphysical” concepts are obsolete. Fish claimed, and apparently later repudiated that critical theory “relieves me of the obligation to be right . . . and demands only that I be interesting.” Though the pendulum may swing between authorial objectivity and critical subjectivism, there remains the supremely self-confident and self-possessed critic in Stanley Fish, who seems to have increasingly replaced the object of literature with the object of his own “interesting” protean persona.

Like Rorty, Fish illustrates the temper of the time toward antimetaphysical relativism. In his view knowledge consists of what a given community of interpretation happens to believe. Beliefs are not capable of being shaped by compelling facts or truths which transcend the community but only by the power and authority of persuasion. For, according to Fish, “we live in a rhetorical world” determined by persuasion in a radical sense involving “the characterization of persuasion as a matter entirely contingent, rational only in relation to reasons that have themselves become reasons through the mechanisms of persuasion . . . [and] the insight that contingency, if taken seriously, precludes the claims for theory as they are usually made. . . . It might seem that in travelling this road one is progressively emancipated from all constraints, but, as we have seen, the removal of independent constraints to which the self might or might not conform does not leave the self free but reveals the self to be always and already constrained by the contexts of practice (interpretive communities) that confer on it a shape and a direction.” No one could deny Fish’s claim that we “live in a rhetorical world” in the sense that human conduct is irremovably situated within interpretation. Only Fish’s view of what constitutes interpretation is utterly narcissistic, incapable of allowing that genuine spontaneity and brute otherness are also involved in interpretation and reasonableness.

As with Rorty, one is instead locked between a fixed set of arbitrary beliefs and pure contingency: both Fish and Rorty reify objectivity and truth and then
declare it obsolete in the name of contingency. Does Fish really mean to characterize "persuasion as a matter entirely contingent," or is he just ritually intoning the magic postmodern word "contingency"? In his antifoundationalist enthusiasm, Fish ignores the possibility of knowledge as capable of being both antifoundational and fallibly true. Though power, authority, and prestige clearly pervade social practices, rhetorical persuasion might also involve something more than converting someone from one set of beliefs to another on the basis of ultimately contingent beliefs: persuasion is more than a hinge between convention and contingency. It might sometimes require our changing our beliefs in the face of objectively better beliefs or of undeniable experiences. This is called learning and is a functional and contingency. It might sometimes require our changing our beliefs in the face of objectively better defined as the art of learning through mutual dialogue. There is, quite simply, more to being human than living in Fish's rhetorical pond, with its definition of the situated self as "a self whose every operation is a function of the conventional possibilities built into this or that context." In this definition one sees the hidden connection between contemporary antifoundationalism and foundationalist positivism: both deny to the self the ability to engage in spontaneous conduct by reducing it to a "function" of its conventional or behavioral context.

It gets even curiouser when one realizes that Fish and Rorty are associated with pragmatism, which, after all, was a philosophy of purport and not a religion of contingency. The pragmatists are distinguished for the ways they included contingency and spontaneity within a philosophy of self-interpretive conduct, but the purposive side of pragmatism does not fit the postmodernist's outlook, so it is dispensed with while the shell or name of pragmatism is retained. For this reason such an outlook should not be called "neopragmatism," and should not be confused with "pragmatism," but rather I propose that it be called "fragmatism." 6

Nothing could be further from the philosophy of pragmatism than Fish's slippery denial of the possibility of achieving fallible truth through inquiry when he says:

The difference then between science or law, on the one hand, and literary criticism, on the other, is not the difference between rhetoric (or style) and something else, but between the different rhetorics that are powerful in the precincts of different disciplines; and the difference between the rhetoric of science—the rhetoric of proof, deduction, and mathematical certainty—and other rhetorics in modern society is a difference between a prestige discourse, a discourse that has for historical reasons become associated with the presentation of truth, and the discourses that will for a time measure themselves against it. I am not saying that these differences are illusory or that they don't have real consequences, only that their reality and their consequentiaity are historical achievements—achievements fashioned on the anvil of argument and debate—and that as historical achievements they can be undone in much the same way as they were achieved. 6

Fish seems to be saying that rhetorical persuasion is based purely on power and prestige, yet the "prestige discourse" of science and law is a historical achievement "fashioned on the anvil of argument and debate," which makes it seem as though it is tempered by experience. But the historical achievements "can be undone in much the same way as they were achieved," implying here, and explicitly stated throughout Fish, that persuasion is grounded neither in a fallible conception of truth nor in experience but simply in the power and prestige of cultural conventions and the persuaders who speak for them. Rhetorical persuasion is a power game, much like advertising.

Where such unbridled subjectivism can lead can be found in the marvelous parodies of Fish and the "literature racket" in David Lodge's novels Changing Places and Small World. There, Fish is portrayed as Morris Zapp, and, in a lecture comparing reading to watching strip-tease, Zapp/Fish expounds a basic postulate of contemporary theoretical naturalism: "The attempt to peer into the very core of a text, to possess once and for all its meaning, is vain—it is only ourselves that we find there, not the work itself." No wonder then that Fish, in a discussion with students and faculty cited in The New Republic, says: "I want them to do what I tell them to. . . . I want to be able to walk into any first-rate faculty anywhere and dominate it, shape it to my will. I'm fascinated by my own will." So, one might add, were Hitler and Stalin and other great dictators, with whom Fish's words and ego resonate ominously.

Earlier in the twentieth century, the logical positivists sought to eradicate metaphysics through hard universal scientificism. Today theorists in the humanities seek to eradicate metaphysics through soft forms of relativistic conceptualism. Both share, however, the desire to obliterate metaphysics, possibly because it involves the threat that general reason may be as much or more a producer of humans as humans are producers of it, and because reason may therefore place unavoidable limits on human conduct. 8 It is obvious to many today that the positivist attempt to deny metaphysics only resulted in the extreme metaphysics of semantic reference—an inarticulate pointing at "facts" as the foundation of knowledge. Yet contemporary antipositivists such as Rorty and Fish little suspect
that their dismissal of metaphysics may also result in a revenge of the repressed: that they may be merely living an unconscious metaphysics rather than becoming, as Rorty puts it, "entirely free of it." I will claim throughout this book that both modernists and postmodernists have, in fact, been living within the metaphysics of the "ghost in the machine," a worldview combining reified materialism and spectral knowledge.

The term "ghost in the machine" was coined by Gilbert Ryle as a way of depicting the Cartesian outlook, with its dualism of incorporeal mind and mechanistic body. It resonates with the old expression "deus ex machina," the god out of the machine, which derived from the use in Greek theater of a device to transport a god to the scene of the action or to rescue someone from an otherwise unsalvageable situation. Ryle meant to counter the dualism with a physicalistic philosophy which would evict the ghost but not the machine. I believe his expression to imply a broader critique than he made of it, however, and I will be using the term to denote the split worldview which arose in modern Western civilization, usually associated with the Cartesian/Kantian outlook, which implies a dualism between the material world and a spectral mind or culture. One side of the split implies a positivist scientism, the other side implies that culture is simply conventions. Both sides of the modern split-brained worldview are inadequate to account for human social life in my view.

"The Big Picture," whether of a Platonic realm of ideas beyond human history, or of the idea of History itself as a progressive unfolding of some grand design, is one of the chief targets of contemporary criticism. For many thinkers today, the Big Picture view of the world represents mistaken tendencies toward foundationalism and metaphysics, which obscure socially rooted conventions. The Big Picture is seen as a particular kind of ideology, whether disguised as Philosophy, Evolution, or Religion, or as seen in recent debates over the presumed canonical texts or universality of Western Civilization. At the end of the twentieth century, we ought to be skeptical of the kinds of Big Pictures which have dominated modern life, including the modern worldview itself. Yet rejecting infallible foundationalism does not by itself assure that there might not be large historical narratives and forms of reasonableness greater than human cultures have thus far constructed, and which we can at best fallibly, or even dimly, understand. Even the rejection of big pictures can become a form of dogmatism, if not foundationalism. It strikes me as peculiar that critics of the Big Picture modes of thinking never seem to ask whether a non-foundationalist and thoroughly fallible Big Picture is not only still possible to

The peculiar situation in contemporary intellectual life is further revealed in the ways in which literary critics attempted to transform themselves into social theorists, particularly those under the influence of French deconstructionists of the 1980s, Americans had made Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstructionism into a quasi-vernacular buzzword, an "ism" guaranteed to ward off anxieties about "the end of isms." The downsides of modernism and deconstructionism into a quasi-vernacular buzzword, an "ism" can become a foundationalist and thoroughly fallible Big Picture is not only still possible to ward off anxieties about "the end of isms" which the downfalls of modernism and deconstructionism into a quasi-vernacular buzzword, an "ism" guarantees to ward off anxieties about "the end of isms."
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other academic disciplines since the turn of the century. Professionalized and insti-
ification of "classic" social theory and its implications for contemporary thought. 
example, by Clifford Geertz's 1980 essay "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of So-
ical Thought"—the end of the decade revealed a new orthodoxy of "politically 
correct" postmodernism busily institutionalizing itself.

While a number of sociological social theorists have been influenced by the 
same impulses toward genre blurring, there has also been a strong counteren-
dency to reestablish the grand tradition of social theory "classics." Sociologists, 
forever theorizing about "the problem of order," also provide fascinating soci-
ological data in the ways they invoke orthodoxy to solve "the problem of theoretical 
order." At the moment, the battle lines are drawn between "rational choice" orth-
odoxers and "classics" orthodoxers. And, oddly enough, despite an apparent 
blurring of boundaries and promiscuous intermingling of disciplines, many soci-
ologists continue to view social theory as a subdiscipline within academic soci-
ology. Admittedly, though, "theory" is an accepted subdiscipline within all of the 
academic disciplines. For the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the cod-
ification of "classic" social theory and its implications for contemporary thought.
But the ongoing codification of contemporary social theory will remain a central 
concern throughout the book.

The transformation of what in earlier times was known as social philosophy 
into social theory is perhaps due, in part, to the professionalizing of sociology and 
other academic disciplines since the turn of the century. Professionalized and insti-
tutionalized sociology has resulted in a perceived tradition of "classical" social the-
ory, and an intense socialization of students into the perceived tradition. Karl 
Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim constitute a virtual triumvirate of "classi-
cal" social theory for sociologists, though some would want to include George 
Simmel, George Herbert Mead, Talcott Parsons, and a few others within the "classi-
cal" pantheon.

In effect, the term "classical" is an honorific term used by sociologists both 
in a vague sense to mean "old"—and thereby authoritative—and also to signify 
the creation myth of sociology in which a few select authors and their foundational 
texts form a pantheon of "theorists." That these authors may have viewed them-

Perhaps the exacerbated Nietzschean lunacies of deconstruction would be better 
understood in a vague sense to mean "old"—and thereby authoritative—and also to signify 
the creation myth of sociology in which a few select authors and their foundational 
texts form a pantheon of "theorists." That these authors may have viewed them-
selves as philosophers, historians, economists, as well as sociologists, but rarely, if 
ever, as "theorists" is seldom considered. The concept of "classical social theory" 
resembles the conditions under which the ancient Mesopotamian scribes attri-
buted the transmission of divine knowledge to the seven mythic sages from before 
the Great Flood. These antediluvian sages were thenceforth regarded as the au-
thors of the scholarly canon of texts.

The institutionalizing of sociology, philosophy, and other disciplines in uni-
versities over the past hundred years, far from signaling the progress of reason, was 
a process of bureaucratic codification, or even worse, of progressive pettifaction: 
Professor Pigeonhole builds a cozy nest for himself or herself out of the expected 
ideas of a discipline or ideology, feathers it with institutional power and reputa-
tion, and trains a brood of students to replicate the idea. The end result of this 
process has been the growth of nearsighted specialists without spirit and grandi-
ose theorists utterly lacking in imaginative, humane vision.

Antidisciplinary postmodernism provides no real alternative to the petrified 
professor syndrome but only a variation of the theme. Take the example of Molefi 
Kete Asante, director of African-American studies at Temple University, author of 
The Afrocentric Idea and Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge, and propagator of 
"Afrocentrism," a racially based form of relativism. Professor Asante says, "We 
are producing the first African-American graduate students with no traditional 
discipline. Their discipline is African-American studies. We are producing the 
next crop of scholars who will leave here and pursue Afrocentricity, not just at 
Temple, but across the country."12 Surely Professor Pigeonhole sees a like-minded 
colleague in Professor Asante, with his desire to clone his beliefs and thereby max-
imize his base of power. Asante is against the claims of "Eurocentrism" to be uni-
versal, and believes that knowledge is basically ethnocentric and therefore 
relativist: white Europeans, Americans, and Australians are Afrocentric, black Af-
ricans and Americans are Afrocentric, and yellow Asians and Americans are Asi-
centric. Biology does not determine ethnicity but will influence a person toward an
ethnic identity in keeping with one's biological inheritance, so that people of mixed races can identify with one or another of their parental lineage.

In the place of disciplines, the new academic post–world order is based on an ideology of “pluralism” in which everything counts the same. In this ideology there are no universal human qualities or essentials, no better or worse, but only conventional signifiers. There is no art or politics to live for or to die for in earnest but only fictions to be made and remade, as lightly as the water spider which dances on the surface of the pond; or there is no art but only politics (we should remember that “the personal is the political,” a popular feminist motto, also happened to serve totalitarian socialist realism quite well); or no politics but only “art”—taken to mean that a public way of life rooted in some community is illusory and that all that one does is to make or live our ideas in no way inspired or bound by or contributory to a greater good. Art becomes synonymous with an effete aestheticism while politics becomes synonymous with power, and both ironically yearn to be egalitarian. Unconscious irony abounds in this world of postmodern pluralism, where opposing ideas are frequently reduced to a singular monolithic position: Western Civilization and its works are reduced to the abstract concept of a canon; critics of feminism, while being reminded that there are a plurality of feminisms, are viewed as holding a one-dimensional view of “antifeminism.” Such a tendency to reify the other position in this way may be called “the pluralism versus the monolith syndrome.” In the name of pluralism, the generalized “other” is reduced to the unitary or monolithic.

Only people divested of passion could actually believe that the myriad qualities which comprise a life or a culture—or an education—can be subsumed under “ideology.” When one sees how the ideologues of a relativist multiculturalism, expressed, for example, in ethnocentric “Afrocentrism,” assert a unidimensional “pluralist” curriculum over the entire educational system, it is clear why postmodern pluralism breeds ideological conformity and theoretical hubris. With every individual educational situation bounded by the same pluralistic quota system, there is little possibility of an educational system in America which could do the work of conveying the knowledge and history of American ethnic groups before college, or in specialized college courses, in order that students could be encouraged to go on in general education courses to learn a broader history of the world, one which could convey a sense of their Western and world identities.

Although it is a truism that humans live in and through institutions, the purpose of institutions is to enhance the human spirit. Individual thought, creative and critical, ought to be the result of intellectual institutions and traditions, but the opposite seems to be the case at the end of the twentieth century. When the struggle for literary interpretation is given up in favor of ideology, as is going on in literature departments throughout the United States, then there is no contradiction between students reading Cliff’s Notes instead of actual works, and their professors’ claims that there is no authorship or intrinsic merit to a work of art but only generic texts to be decoded. According to Houston Baker, the 1992 president of the Modern Language Association, choosing between Pearl Buck and Virginia Woolf is “no different than choosing between a hoagy and a pizza. I am one whose career is dedicated to the day when we have a disappearance of those standards.” Total homogenization is the ultimate standard for the new Levelers of the theory world. The case of Baker, the pizza-hoagie theorist, is particularly dyspeptic, when one sees a person dedicated to the elimination of standards of taste and discrimination raised to the presidency of an association which is the chief representative of literature in higher education. Baker delights in describing how he combines teaching Shakespeare’s Henry V with rap music, with which I have no great quarrel as a possible pedagogical technique. But he goes on to state that rap music is a necessary means of instruction for those between twelve and twenty-five years of age and of how proud he was to be pictured in Jet magazine with rappers. Baker perfectly illustrates why the sordid, looney bin reputation of the Modern Language Association, with its Morris Zapps and celebrity scholarship, is well-deserved. But worse, in his inability to distinguish between the commercial values and technoid, aggressive barbarism of rap music and the sheer power of expression and human tragedy in Henry V, he is a good indicator of the institutional disintegration of intelligence well underway in American life and more broadly in contemporary civilization. That such a person could be elected the president of the Modern Language Association, either out of White Guilt or out of Baker’s hip postmodern political currency, reveals an institution whose intellectual values are deeply corrupted.

The codified intellect has increasingly reproduced itself in its leading social theories today. Such structures as the American Sociological Association, the Modern Language Association, or the American Philosophical Association will undoubtedly continue to exert ideological power and to promote intellectual mediocrity when fueled by research moneys and university affiliations. Yet if “critical thought” is to have any significance in intellectual life beyond that of a cryptoreligious aura, there comes a time when honest questioning is required. Some-