

COMMENT

There are few things in this world more irritating than being told by a salesman in a men's store that a particular style of dress is all the fashion. I am the sort who, lacking the necessary discrimination and money to be sartorially resplendent, adopts a superior attitude toward those who seem always to know whether or not stripes are in for the season. The kind who, while all around me discuss the latest outrage uncovered by Mike Wallace, takes pride in never having viewed *60 Minutes*. And when it comes to ideas, I maintain an even tougher line, stubbornly refusing to read books by those about whom everyone is talking. Much of this, I may as well confess, can be dismissed as a pose, a slightly comic effort to call attention to what I should like people to think is a courageous independence. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for a critical attitude toward fashion, particularly when one enters the sacred groves of philosophy.

One might think that philosophy would be relatively immune to fashion, focusing, one supposes, on eternal verities, or at least on timeless wisdom. Yet modern philosophers have been as subject to the imperatives of novelty as have those who determine the length of the skirt and the depth of the décolletage. It is a rare thinker who has not had thoughts that were, at different times, in and out of season. "I long ago renounced the approbation of my contemporaries," Schopenhauer wrote in 1844. Twenty-five years earlier, when he published *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, he had been unable to unseat Hegel, "that intellectual Caliban," from Germany's philosophic throne. Later, however, when Hegel was no longer fashionable and Weltschmerz had become the mark of an up-to-date sensibility, the great pessimist's ideas attracted serious attention.

But perhaps it is not quite fair, or even accurate, to describe Hegel as "fashionable." He was, after all, a thinker of perennial relevance and, during the first half of the 19th century, his philosophy was more than a fashion—it was an orthodoxy. In much the same way, it would be misleading to characterize contemporary analytic philosophy as a momentary enthusiasm; it has served for some time now as Anglo-American academia's philosophic orthodoxy. Moreover, its high priest, Ludwig Wittgenstein, was a thinker of such power and originality that he is unlikely to become what Merleau-Ponty once called a philosophic "museum piece."

Fashionable philosophers are more likely to be those who flash across the sky and then disappear from view. More the reflectors of their society than its creators, they are forever identified with a particular historical moment. In our time, as Andy Warhol—who is quite familiar with temporary flashiness—once put it, *everyone* is famous for 10 minutes; thus, even philosophers, or those who imagine themselves to be philosophers, have sometimes become public celebrities, heroes to all who prefer inventive and provocative fashion to basic blue.



Since the end of World War II, Western society has witnessed the rise and fall of a host of "public philosophers," including Jean-Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse, and Michel Foucault.

From the German surrender to the 1960's, Sartre was undoubtedly the most fashionable philosopher on both sides of the Atlantic. His major work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), is long and opaque, but even those who did not make their way through its labyrinthine pages sensed that it offered a nihilistic conception of man and freedom that paralleled the after-Auschwitz mood of the postwar world. In the wake of the Nazi death camps, Western men experienced a deep sense of guilt and worthlessness; they were thus easily persuaded by Sartre that life was absurd and that human relationships were invariably exploitative and inauthentic. "Hell," Sartre wrote in *No Exit*, "is other people!" Few were inclined to take issue with him. Existential angst and "bad faith" became so fashionable that those who did not exhibit a furrowed brow or who were unable to toss off cynical remarks about life's emptiness were thought to be—indeed, thought themselves to be—pitiable philistines.

Everyone in those years was an existentialist, though few could provide a coherent account of what Sartre meant when he announced that existence was prior to essence. Even fewer were aware that the sage of the Left Bank had borrowed freely from two philosophers of stature: Husserl and Heidegger. It was a matter of image and publicity. Who could ignore Sartre, the courageous "resistance fighter," sitting alone in a Paris café, confronting the Void? His views on every conceivable question were passionately discussed and his nihilistic novels and dramas were mandatory reading for anyone who wished to be au courant.

But the apostle of anguish was a Parisian after all, and a Parisian is nothing if not fashion conscious. As despair and resignation threatened to become old hat, Sartre discovered

Marxism, devoting the remainder of his life to the invention of an intoxicating brew of existentialism and political radicalism and to the celebration of anti-Western revolutions in the so-called Third World. During the last pathetic years of his life, the most famous French intellectual since Voltaire could often be found distributing Maoist leaflets on the streets of the fashion capital of the world.

Sartre's metamorphosis into a champion of the ideological left was genuine—perhaps I should say authentic—enough, but because of his existentialist past and the fashionmongers' short attention span, others with more impressive radical credentials and less familiar faces began to overtake him as philosophic trend-setters. As the 1960's advanced, one philosopher in particular became fashion's darling—Herbert Marcuse. A rather unlikely candidate for celebrity, Marcuse was born and educated in Germany, where he studied with the formidable Martin Heidegger. He emigrated when Hitler came to power, ending up in the United States, where he joined the Institute for Social Research, then just transplanted from Frankfurt to New York. Under Institute auspices, he began to concoct a peculiar mix of Hegel, Marx, and Freud. After a wartime tour of duty with the State Department's Office of Intelligence Research, Marcuse accepted a teaching position at Brandeis and established a solid, if quiet, reputation in leftist intellectual circles with books such as *Reason and Revolution*, *Soviet Marxism*, and *Eros and Civilization*. Then, quite suddenly, he was discovered and hailed as a prophet by "students" 40 years his junior. Like long hair and careless dress, he was all the rage.

Although Marcuse wrote an almost impenetrable Teutonic prose, his theories of "liberation" appealed to young radicals, some of whom bore an unmistakable resemblance to the Weimar youths he had once known. According to Marcuse, philosophy was criticism of existing reality; its task was to promote political and sexual "freedom" by unmasking a "system" that was, he argued in *One-Dimensional Man*, so sinister that it cunningly disguised its repressive nature and co-opted all potential critics. What appeared to be freedom was, in reality, servitude.

Taking his cue from a careless reading of Heidegger, Marcuse attacked technology and castigated the military as the preserve of madmen, who, were they sane, would be making love, not war in Vietnam. Because he encouraged and applauded the revolutionary worth of irresponsibility, young people attended his every word. He was photographed with intense-looking disciples, who, for once, were listening, not talking; his books were reprinted; books about him proliferated. Frank Kermode decided that he merited enshrinement in the "Modern Masters" series, though the distinguished critic had the good sense to assign the volume to Alasdair MacIntyre, who proceeded to deflate the silver-haired guru's prophetic pretensions.

Fortunately, the radical decade ran its course and the tiresome "revolution" was, at least for the time being, removed from the Western world's agenda. As a result, fashionable people began to cast about for a new guide to right thinking; they discovered him in the person of Michel Foucault, who became an intellectual sensation in the aftermath of the French "events of May 1968," as that breakdown of civilized behavior is often euphemistically described. Unlike the fevered advocates of total and immediate revolution, Foucault prophesied an arduous, piecemeal, and unending struggle for liberation. His was, and is, the perfect philosophy for chastened but unrepentant radicals.

At the center of Foucault's thought is his analysis of power, an analysis that eschews Marxist categories in favor of a panpotency inspired by Nietzsche's "will to power." According to Foucault, power is so all pervasive that it reaches into the very capillaries not only of the metaphorical social body, but of the actual body of every one of society's members. Since the 18th century, this penetration has been accomplished by ever more subtle, yet largely unpremeditated means. By substituting genealogical for his earlier archaeological investigations of the human sciences, Foucault intends to disclose how knowledge itself, in the guise of the various scientific "discourses," exercises a disciplinary power. In particular, he has been concerned with psychiatric, penal, and sexual discourses.

Although Foucault insists that he does not consider all networks of power to be repressive, his books, taken together, add up to a thoroughgoing indictment of Western society, in which, he maintains, the art of control by surveillance and categorization has been mastered. To be sure, he often speaks of power's positive, productive capacities, but this is by way of inspiring the victims of repression to institute a "non-disciplinary form of power." The ultimate political/social burden of his work is evident in the lengthy "discussion with Maoists" that serves as an introduction to *Power/Knowledge* and in his recent observation that the entire analytic of power could only begin "after 1968, that is to say on the basis of daily struggles at grass roots level, among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power."

Foucault has repeatedly emphasized his fundamental differences with Sartre and Marcuse, but what the three men share is their common hatred of the West. They are convinced that what many believe is liberty is nothing but sham and deceit, a mask for a more refined and hence more efficient strategy of subjection. It is largely for this reason that they have all been cult figures. Among Western intellectuals, anti-Westernism is by now so deeply rooted that it is less a fashion than an orthodoxy.

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## Discourse on a French Farrago

**Karlis Racevskis:** *Michel Foucault and the Subversion of Intellect*; Cornell University Press; Ithaca, NY.

**Charles C. Lemert and Garth Gillan:** *Michel Foucault: Social Theory and Transgression*; Columbia University Press; New York.

**Jonathan Culler:** *Roland Barthes*; Oxford University Press; New York.

**Maurice Blanchot:** *The Space of Literature*; University of Nebraska Press; Lincoln, NE.

by Gary S. Vasilash

To get things off on the right foot, a passage from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* about an event of 1763 is in order:

After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, 'I refute it *thus*.'

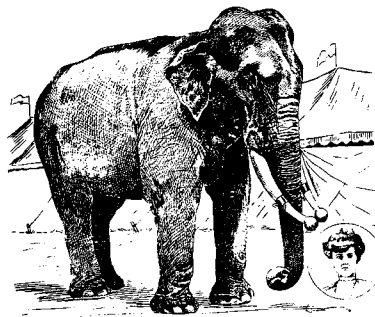
Several things can be gleaned, picked up, measured, and possibly assessed from the preceding about the Imaginary order (Racevskis: "the order in which the subject develops a consciousness centered in itself. . . . [I]t is the Imaginary that represents the fundamental and central structure of our experience") that has shaped my discourse. I admit that it is rather presumptuous to introduce myself blatantly into the text, but, as Foucault—historian, philosopher, all-around savant—says in "What Is an

Author?" (in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*; edited by Donald F. Bouchard; Cornell University Press, 1977), "Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words. Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates." Foucault looks forward to "a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author"; I don't. These unflinching words may not carry any *truth* (i.e., Nietzsche, a favorite of Foucault, wrote: "The different languages, set side by side, show that what matters with words is never the truth, never an adequate expression," and Racevskis, who favors Foucault, writes, "the Imaginary mode of apprehending existence is fundamentally deceitful. . . . The Imaginary leads us to think that we are in full possession of our knowledge"), though I hope that they do. And if they do, there still exists a problem in getting a message across: Foucault might recommend that anyone studying them should skip the "meaning" of the string of signifiers. As he writes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Pantheon, 1972), "discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to language (*langue*) and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe." Or, put more simply, skip the content and observe the form of the discourse

and all that surrounds it throughout the pages of the journal: that's where the *real* message can be located. Hopefully, some have stuck with me through this prologizing (certain author-response critics stress that an author cannot be too sure about his audience anymore) and will try to match up the presented signifiers with what they assume, guess, are my signifieds. Admittedly, this paragraph is rather crowded, prolix. It is so in honor of the subject. For example, Foucault, in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, writes of "the cautious, stumbling manner of this text: at every turn it stands back, measures up what is before it, gropes towards its limits, stumbles against what it does not mean, and digs pits to mark out its own path." Getting over his potholes is a simple thing as compared to risking the chasms in the works of some of those who are presumably his explicators. Lemert and Gillan write about the practice of reading Foucault's writings: "We are obliged to transgress, to go beyond what we know, to let ourselves fall into the strangeness of his language and thought, and to wonder if what we are reading has any worth at all." The two men are certain that the answer to the final phrase is an affirmative one. By the time that they have traversed to the final page of the book, transgressed through the writings of Foucault, they announce:

To write history is to wager against the possibility of error. But only to wager. Neither the philosophy of history overshadowed by the absolute nor historical relativism can understand these risks. But Foucault does. And this is simultaneously the strength and weakness of archaeological discourse. Violence is always an unstable action. All the more so is the violent act that transgresses the will to know, that breaks the spell of anthropological sleep, and that digs its own grave by creating a space to think.

Talk about digging graves.



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