FOUCAULT, THE MODERNIST?

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that it’s theoretically and historically misleading to talk about a break between modernism and postmodernism, and more specifically, that thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, two figures frequently associated with the postmodern turn, are situated within certain rational, enlightenment and modernist traditions. As part of this claim, I explore how features such as essentialism, binarism, determinism, positivism, and productivism are not characteristics that can be applied to all of enlightenment thought and modernism, and that such a description of the enlightenment and modernism would themselves be essentialist and caught up in binaries. To illustrate these arguments, I re-read figures such as Berkeley, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and a range of Modern artists (especially their conceptualizations about essences, representations, and processes), tracing patterns such as plurality, particularity, and absurdity/incoherence throughout their thought. After historical and theoretical overview, I connect the experiential and philosophical patterns existing before our so-called “postmodern turn” to an examination of Foucault’s rational methodology and critical ontology, as well as his theorization of enlightenment thought, power/knowledge, ethics, and resistance (especially in, but not limited to, his later works). Through all of this, I ultimately show that 1) Rather than a break, postmodernism signifies an extrapolation of certain pre-existing enlightenment and modernist trends, and 2) Michel Foucault can be claimed as both an enlightenment thinker and a modernist. Such a set of arguments, if deduced as correct by readers, might restructure traditional understandings of postmodernism and the legacy of enlightenment thought.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Enlightenment, Modernism, Postmodernism, Rationality, Intellectual History

INTRODUCTION

What follows is a case study on Michel Foucault. I will argue that Foucault, one of critical humanities’ most venerated figures of thought and values, is in favor of a kind of rational, enlightenment, and modernist enterprise. If this ends up being an appropriate takeaway, then that may help in removing a veil of anti-rationality, anti-enlightenment, and anti-modernism that I see widespread in much of the aesthetics and rhetoric of Critical Humanities. Rethinking this dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism, between enlightenment and anti/post-enlightenment, just might enable us to increase critical

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scholars’ reputations within and outside of universities, among scholars and across American publics. This in hand may help eliminate some of the popular mischaracterizations on the Right about a ‘Radical Left taking over universities’ and ‘indoctrinating students’ with anti-enlightenment anti-truth ideology (see the likes of Jordan Peterson, Ben Shapiro, James Lindsay, or Ted Cruz when they talk about ‘the Left’ and education).³

In a way, this essay tries to articulate answers to familiar questions posed against postmodernism. Questions such as, 'Isn’t it a universal truth to say that there are no universal truths?', 'Isn’t it modernist to say you want to get beyond modernism?', 'Isn’t it rational to say that it’s not always good to be rational?' and, 'Isn’t it an enlightenment motif to say you want to escape the dogma and authority of reason?' All these questions, I argue, really do raise detrimental critiques against postmodernism as a decisive break in theory or practice. Below, I attempt to show this in detail, ultimately through an assessment of one central question: Was Michel Foucault a modernist?

Analysis begins by looking at precursors to postmodernism, particularly in historical figures of the enlightenment and those reacting to the conditions of modernity, whether philosophers, artists, or political revolutionaries. Then, I offer definitions of modernity, modernism, postmodernism, the enlightenment and rationality, or at the least, I try to make transparent the connections between these floating signifiers. After this theoretical layout, I proceed to explore Foucault’s rational methodology and critical ontology, particularly as they relate to knowledge, power, resistance, and possibility. I conclude with the dual argument that Foucault is a modernist figure, and that what we call postmodernism remains within a modernist paradigm.

Postmodern Precursors

In The Order of Things, Foucault reflects on the arbitrary nature of categories and classifications. To make this point, he interpolates the mid-19th century poet Comte de Lautréamont’s metaphor of the “chance encounter of the umbrella and the sewing-machine on the operating table” (xviii-xix). The metaphor highlights the nonsensical

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³ The Cato Institute is one conservative think tank that falls for the trap of equating postmodernism to anti-enlightenment. And they make this mistake specifically because they turn to self-identifying postmodern and radical scholarship that is upfront in their belief of being anti-Enlightenment. Thus, Cato finds themselves quoting an article from Devin Vartija in Intellectual History Review, who remarks that a “postmodern or postcolonial critique of the Enlightenment” claims that “the Enlightenment is fundamentally compromised by its association with European colonialism” (Vartija 606 cited in Young 14). Even Cato knows that “it is worth noting that the Enlightenment was not nearly as monolithic as the critiques often imply” (Young 14).
juxtaposition of images/signs, asking us to think hard about the space between our categorical binaries that otherwise are supposed to help us make sense of, and operate in, the world. The juxtaposition produces something new, maybe even something exciting. Like surrealist philosophy and Heideggerian poesis, the piece ultimately points to making or bringing something into being that didn't exist before, reconstructing the nature of something, refusing the naturalization of the origin essence as the only essence something can or should be.

Franco Moretti notes the Lautréamont piece as a “small classic of the modernist imagination,” one that “ironically negates any idea of totality” (Morretti 340). Alex Callinicos, writer of Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique, points to this as just one example in which “[Foucault]’s thought is informed by a modernist sensibility” (Callinicos 69). Callinicos goes on to make the argument that these philosophical positions originate in Nietzsche, but that Foucault “regards as having been explored in the greatest depth by certain modernist writers” (Callinicos 70). In fact, Foucault once noted that he only began reading Nietzsche “because of Bataille and Bataille because of Blanchot” (“Structuralism and poststructuralism” 199). In this sense, Foucault makes an argument that his strand of poststructuralism is indebted to literary modernism and their emphasis on the deconstruction of language, the age of science, and ultimately, coherence.

Callinicos is not the only one to note Nietzsche as a precursor to modernist motifs. Jürgen Habermas (Philosophical Discourses of Modernity 122-23) recalls that:

[Nietzsche] is the first to conceptualize the attitude of aesthetic modernity before avant-garde consciousness assumed objective shape in the literature, painting, and music of the twentieth century – and could be elaborated [by Adorno] into an Aesthetic Theory. In the upgrading of the transitory, in the celebration of the dynamic, in the glorification of the current and the new there is expressed an aesthetically motivated time consciousness and a longing for unspoiled, inward presence.

On top of this, a principle Nietzschean thesis is one in which “the plural nature of the self is merely one instance of the inherently multiple and heterogenous character of reality itself” (Callinicos 64). Yet, as fascinating as this dual literary and Nietzschean modernist connection to contemporary postmodern thought may be, we can look even further into the past for a similar strand.

For instance, Bishop Berkeley, one of the primary Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th
century, was an empiricist but was also against mechanistic thinking in human sciences, especially philosophy and communication (Smith and Grene). Berkeley also didn’t believe words or ideas were truly whole. He said, “everything which exists is particular” (cited in Smith and Grene 27). That is, much like Derrida, Stuart Hall, Laclau/Mouffe, and so many others popularly considered a part of the West’s postmodern intelligentsia, Berkeley thought that ideas (not just words for the ideas) were false generalities, falsely totalizing signifiers and signifieds.

He thus took a pluralist and particularist approach regarding essences or ‘the real,’ going as far as to suggest that, as two Berkeleyan scholars put it in the 1940s, the “supposed abstraction [of the idea of a dog] involved in the use of language seemed impossible” (Smith and Grene 3). The Berkeleyans further suggested that in regard to such thinking being extended to more serious socio-political abstractions beyond trying to categorize four legged animals, “the pretense to it [is] fatally confusing” (Smith and Grene 3).

I take this early detour through Berkeleyan thought to reveal that not only was such pluralism and particularism present in the modernist thinkers of the 19th and early 20th century, it was also present in the 18th century in Berkeley. Modernism was not just the high modernism of Joyce, Elliot, Dadaism, Cubism, Surrealism, and so on; it was also at least one 18th skeptical empiricist, and a broad range of 19th century German philosophical traditions—idealism, romanticism, pessimism, existentialism; these were all reactions to the dominant enlightenment thinking/application, but they themselves were still very much a part of the enlightenment project of a knowledge/power (K/P) pursuit. I will speak more on this K/P pursuit in a later section, but for now, it seems to me that to suggest that postmodernist philosophy of language is a revolutionary break from enlightenment and modernist thought is to obfuscate their connections, or as Stuart Hall might put it, obfuscate how the new is also the old.

What postmodernism may be, then, is an emergent—or perhaps in some cases, like in 21st century Critical Humanities departments, a newly hegemonic—philosophical paradigm, one that contrasts itself with what it perceives as an essentialist, universalist, positivist, mechanist/instrumentalist/productivist, paradigm (something that, as I note from the start and which should become more and more clear as we go on, is not quite

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4 It is likely that the degrees vary regarding whether this K/P pursuit was focused more on personal/individual ends or on social/collective ends, depending on the particular enlightenment or modernist philosophy taken up.
appropriate to equate with enlightenment thought in general). We might, after all, following the rationale of Berkeley, call this ‘enlightenment’ label as it is used dominantly today in Critical Humanities, with all the essentialized meaning interpolated in/on to it, a falsely totalizing signifier (or a straw-figure, if you prefer exploring this from a logical fallacy perspective). More particular and willingly provisional labels for discussing historical influences and departures seems a must, as well as better articulations of those labels.

This worthwhile semantic pursuit notwithstanding, the cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg (2022) reminds us that Jacques Derrida argued we’re probably unable to escape the conceptual binarism that was created by the likes of Plato and Descartes. Derrida is of course another one of postmodernism’s favorite figures to interpolate. Grossberg further said that although Derrida’s ambitions were precisely to escape this problem, he always came to the disappointing conclusion that the attempt to escape always ends up producing a new binarism, and that therefore we can’t escape the enlightenment; the project of escaping it is already an enlightenment project. Crucially, Derrida wasn’t suggesting that it’s impossible to escape, say, the constituted binaries that produce racialization, colonization, and other forms of categorical oppression, rather, he’s merely arguing that the notion of “getting beyond” or “escaping” enlightenment and modernist thinking are in fact notions produced by an enlightenment and modernist attitude.

Even without this motif, though, historical discourses of modernity that emphasize the modern experience of both the self and reality as fractured, multipolar, fluid, and incomplete reveals that much of what gets claimed as ‘post’-ing the enlightenment and modernism is actually a deepening and re-working of the logics and reflections made by those 18th-20th century enlightenment thinkers and modernists critical of false totalities (as we are beginning to see and which will be further explored in the next section). In this sense, postmodernism is in part about taking stable identities and logics and opening them up to more critical reflections and possibilities.

There is yet another way to view postmodernism, though, which is to look at it as a project of emancipating cultural and social structures from instrumental rationality. Of course, this already seemed to fit in-line quite nicely with the enlightenment motifs of emancipation, liberty, freedom, autonomy, etc. Yet one of the things that the dominant or hegemonic enlightenment did was establish the creation of the economy and culture as autonomous realms, as if the autonomy were not defined by external determinations. This is a myth, as the economy is always embedded with socio-cultural-political determinations.
Yet the imaginative invention of it as autonomous, acting *as if it is* autonomous, has very real effects for how we as a society think it’s best to manage them. From this example, we see that *postmodern critiques of the institutional constructions of the dominant enlightenment are a rational pursuit of deconstructing myths, taken-for-granted ideas, essences, institutions, and problem-solving practices.*

With this understanding, one might even say that this essay attempts to assume a postmodern mode of critique in its goal to deconstruct historical myths and taken-for-granted ideas about the enlightenment, modernism, rationality, and postmodernism’s relationship to these three. To advance this pursuit, what follows is a deeper exploration into what rationality’s relationship is to the enlightenment, what the enlightenment’s relationship is to modernism, what modernism’s relationship is to (the conditions of) modernity, and what postmodernism’s relationship is to modernism. Proceeding this, and to strengthen the argument that some of the most influential postmodernists are indeed pro-enlightenment and modernist, I will move into more direct analysis of Michel Foucault. There, I will make the argument that Foucault was both pro-Enlightenment and a modernist.

**Rationality’s Relationship to the Enlightenment; Enlightenment’s Relationship to Modernism**

Looking back at history, we can find that it is not that rationality didn’t exist before modernity or enlightenment thought, rather, rationality was previously held captive by religious dogma. Thus, art historian Christopher Witcombe noted in 1995 that you can’t talk about enlightenment without its radical break away from theological proofs and towards secular thought. Even Pope Pius X, the head of the Catholic Church from 1903 to 1914, remarked in 1907 that modernism was a “synthesis of all heresies,” where, ‘modernism leads to atheism and to the annihilation of all religion,” and where, “the error of Protestantism made the first step on this path; that of Modernism makes the second; atheism makes the next.”

In a similar vein, postmodernism sees itself as a radical break from secular dogma. This may be true, but I also argue that this does not constitute a radical break from the enlightenment, but rather, a break from the hegemonic or dogmatic tendencies of reasoning since the break from religious authority. After all, it is enlightening when you realize that certain kinds of secular projects take on just as authoritative and dogmatic turns with all sorts of religious fervor attached it (“Believe science!” “I stand with science!”
“Only biological females can be women!”). Yet this sort of critical reasoning is only one that strengthens the legitimacy of enlightenment thought, rather than shying away from it. It is, as Kant said, another moment of people releasing themselves from self-incurred tutelage.

On that note, a variety of modernists have been critical of the turn to secular authority from the start. Thus, in 2013 the artist-blogger Joshua Kilburn defined modernism in the first instance as, “a flat out rejection of the lingering sentiments of Enlightenment (through Realism), as well as a flat out [rejection] of a benevolent, all-powerful creator God. Modernism rejects tradition….” If we take that to be true – the only correction I would add is ‘lingering sentiments of the dominant enlightenment’ – then modernism is really about constantly starting over, rejecting authority, and rejecting tradition for tradition’s sake.⁵

Thus, many of the so-called heroes of the so-called high era of Modernism tended to be 1) pessimist towards - and aware of the difficulty if not impossibility of comprehending - modernity, while also 2) often maintaining a politically revolutionary desire to transform or transcend one’s dominating experience with it. Regarding 1), it is for this reason that I speak of anti-modern modernists. Regarding 2), this understanding links up somewhat well with Arendt’s 1963 thesis that the ideation and playing out of revolutions are modernist phenomena. Modern (Western) philosophy began with Descartes doubting, so the story goes; every revolution in Western philosophy since then has been based on doubting a dominant articulation of truth or methods of truth.

**Modernism’s Relationship to Modernity; Postmodernism’s Relationship to Modernism**

What is modernity, anyways? Modernity is simply the playing out of modernization processes on a global, regional/national, or local scale, or conversely, the experience of that. Following this, modernism is an accompanying reflection of that experience, of which there are many interpretations of, wherein what people claim to be postmodernism is but one of those interpretations. In a sense, then, to be a modernist is to consciously take up the task of reflecting and reacting to modernity in a way that somehow seeks to 1) preserve, develop, or benefit one’s individuality, and/or 2) take hold of, control, counter, or otherwise respond to modernization processes taking place within one’s environment. From this, we

⁵ This is a fairly common view of literary and artistic modernism after all; a self-reflexive rejection of traditional styles and techniques, most succinctly summed up by modernist poet and critic Ezra Pound’s “Make it new” (1935).
can see that to be a modernist is to enter and maintain a power/knowledge pursuit in relation to managing or positively affecting one’s conditions and experiences of (or reactions to) modernity.

Both modernity and modernism has been two-faced—or really, multi-faced—from the start. This seems true whether talking about the start of a wide range of modernist applications or the start of a wide range of modernist effects. What people call postmodern attitude or thought can be traced back to at least Kant and his critiques of reason (but some go as far back as the pre-Socratics or sophists). So much so that we might say Kant’s work marks the start of postmodernism. Postmodernism, then, if we can distinguish it from modernism at all, is merely a particular enlightenment and modernist reaction to, or normative reflection on, modernity or the experience and lived conditions of modernization. It is, as I alluded to earlier, one insistent on deconstructing essentialist ideas of history, reality, and identity.

This postmodern reaction/reflection is one that I believe becomes fashionable especially around those times where modernization seems to be at another rupture or revolutionary moment. For instance, in 1989, Callinicos asked us to consider these two quotes:

In the multidimensional and slippery space of Postmodernism anything goes with anything, like a game without rules. Floating images such as those we see in the painting of David Salle maintain no relationship with anything at all, and meaning becomes detachable like the keys on a ring. Dissociated and decontextualized, they slide past one another failing to link up into a coherent sequence. Their fluctuating but not reciprocal interactions are unable to fix meaning. (12)

The nature of our epoch is multiplicity and indeterminacy. It can only rest on the moving, the slipping, the sliding, and is aware that what other generations believed to be firm is in fact the moving, the slipping, the sliding. (12)

The first quote is from a postmodern art critic in 1987 (Suzy Gablik), two years shy of the Berlin wall falling. The second quote is from a modernist poet (Hugo von Hofmannsthal) in 1905, around the time of the first Russian Revolution. Frank Kermode writing in 1968, a revolutionary period of its own, further makes the argument that ‘the

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6 A likely reason why Lyotard ultimately calls postmodernism a strand of modernism (The Postmodern Condition).
The mood of end-dominated crisis is “endemic to what we call modernism” (Kermode 98).

So there were already modernists who recognized plurality, incoherence, dangerous contradictions, and what is now generally considered a Nietzschean, anti-enlightenment perspective. Even before Nietzsche, though, Schopenhauer – traditionally placed in the idealist or romanticist camp of 19th century modernism – was talking about endless interplays of images and desires, and the endless striving of the will. Such theorizing of endless plays became quite fashionable all throughout the 20th century among revolutionary socialists, poststructuralists, and postmodernists alike. Loosely speaking and perhaps not related enough to note: Lenin and Gramsci, and Mao and Althusser following them, accepted the thesis of overdetermination which makes it too difficult to fix meaning or causality. But more explicitly relevant are the theorists such as Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida who talk of endless plays of domination, desires, and signifiers, respectively.

Berkley, Schopenhauer and High Modernist heroes make for just some of the examples of anti-dominant enlightenment and anti-modern modernist reactions to modernity, long before the 1950s-80s claims of a similar (now called postmodern) nature. In many strands of both enlightenment thought and modernism, accepting an overwhelming incomprehension of reality was coupled with individualist desires to overcome the despair of that incomprehension by embracing it and embarking on an authentic journey, to the extent that anyone’s motives and actions are authentic or wholly autonomous from external influence (in other words, to the extent that anyone has free will). Foucault continues this relationship, this desire, and this journey, picking up where the likes of Bataille, Nietzsche and Heidegger left off.

Given the parameters of this paper, it is not quite possible to elaborate all the ways in which Foucault may be considered a modernist. However, I don’t think that focusing on just one modernist characteristic in his thought makes compelling enough a case. For this reason, I will choose to explore at least a few areas, which for purposes of validation, should each be further elaborated in future research (by myself or anyone interested). I will look at two intersecting enlightenment or modernist impulses in Foucault, corresponding to 1) power/knowledge, social totality, and poststructuralism, and 2) self, ethics, and resistance, all of which are dealt with via a rational methodology and critical ontology.
1. Power/Knowledge, Social Totality, and Poststructuralism

Callinicos notes that the "Incredulity towards metanarratives seems...to be at least as old as the Enlightenment which was so productive of grand narratives in the first place," and further, that "the leading figures of the heroic era of Modernism at the beginning of the century generally rejected the notion of historical progress" (Callinicos 10-11). It seems to follow, then, that any claim such as, ‘to be a modernist means to remain deterministic or teleological in our historical thinking,’ ultimately falls flat. Modernists can be aware of contingency, and can be existential in the absurdist sense. We don’t just need to look at modernist artists, we can also obviously see this in Nietzsche and those who refuse to find or acknowledge transhistorical meaning, order, or determination.

Foucault, for his part, remained both critical and friendly to metanarratives. He simultaneously denounced them while offering universalizing concepts of the social such as epistemes, discursive formations, truth regimes, and dispositifs. In fact, as Callinicos notes, the “Foucauldian conception of an apparatus of power-knowledge is as much a theory of totality as Marx’s”: Under the guise of a “methodological preference for pluralism,” the Marxist theory of social totality is “reduced to merely one fragment of an inherently multiple theoretical field, and thereby rendered into material appropriate for incorporation into a Nietzschean perspective which treats the class struggle as one instance of the struggle for domination traversing human history” (Callinicos 85). Relatedly, in 1997 Dews observed that for Foucault, “power – often spoken of in the singular – becomes a constitutive subject on the Kantian or Husserlian sense, with the social as its constituted subject” (Dews 188). In this sense, the omnipotent narrative of power espoused by Foucault is both more grand and more plural than a classical Marxist one. It is, as Patton noted in 1988, more uniquely identified by accepting “difference and discontinuity at the heart of human history” (Patton 133). The legitimacy of Marx’s theory or Foucault’s is beside the point (in fact, notice how I have mostly strayed from judging the validity of post/modernism, enlightenment, rationality, etc.. I have only been focused on revealing the myth that there is a binary between modernism and postmodernism). What is crucial to note here are Foucault’s emphases on totalizing regimes, antagonism between domination and struggle/resistance, difference, and discontinuity, all of which are phenomena or theories about phenomena which existed well before ‘the postmodern turn’ of the 1950s-80s.

Furthermore, we can see that the poststructuralism or deconstructionism of
Foucault is on par with a sort of normative (ethically-charged), subversive, and reconstructive power/knowledge pursuit, one that can be focused on either individual or social ends. Given that the power/knowledge nexus turns out to be quite totalizing, or what Willmott in 1998 referred to as an ‘endemic condition,’ Foucault argued in 1980 that the normative intellectual pursuit is one of “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (Power/Knowledge 13). In this sense, I follow Willmott in characterizing Foucault’s poststructural analysis as one of “a commitment to a mood of restlessness,” of revealing the partiality and provisionality or contingency of perceivably stable structures, conventions, and ultimately, meanings (Willmott 90). From here, we make another connection to Marx’s radical enlightenment project, this time with regard to his notorious call for an ongoing ruthless critique of everything existing. Let us now further explore Foucault’s enlightenment and modernist project as it relates rationality, methodology, and ontology.

### 2. Rational Methodology and Critical Ontology for the Self, Ethics, and Resistance

Foucault’s methods stay within an enlightenment project for a number of reasons. It seems that Foucault rightfully recognizes that it’s not really enlightenment thinking to praise science, productivity, and growth dogmatically or unwaveringly, particularly at the cost of other human values like care for the self, the community and the environment. Let me try to show this with a number of reasons. One reason relates to the idea that it’s not always rational to be rational. What this simple idea reveals is that something rational in one framework (like mechanistic or hard-scientific rationality applied to soft sciences / humanities) can be seen as irrational in another framework (like in value spheres which find that mechanistic rationality applied to the study of humanity and sociality is a risky game). In this sense, or in a similar vein, the statement ‘it’s not always rational to be rational’ implies that it is rational to not always be rational, which means that the original reference to rational is actually a reference to something else; related no doubt, maybe an expression or mode of it, but something qualitatively different. As Habermas noted in 1987, what’s considered rational in one value system can be contradictory or agonistic to another. He makes this argument to explain that the capitalist (private property and commodity market-based) economic system is hegemonic in part because its self-rationalization processes require encroaching on other systems, and part of this is done by accentuating one form of rationality (instrumental) over another (social or communicative, for instance).
The discussion of Habermasian theory is useful here because we can use it to argue that Foucault’s proliferation of writing may be a result of his belief in, or at least his practice of, communicative rationality. Why else write publicly? In other words, Foucault’s critical readings and writings – broadly speaking – are a mode of communicative rationality that can bring about knowledge/power for himself and others, a mode of thought that especially arises at the dawn of the enlightenment, and which should not be so negatively equated with the technological functionalist (i.e., instrumental) rationality of modern systems and institutions. Making truth-claims, finding evidence to support one’s argument, and critiquing the claims of others (both peers and those in authority) — this was the rational pursuit that the freethinking of the age of the enlightenment opened up.

But it’s not only communicative rationality where Foucault practices reason. Let us recall in detail what Foucault said in his 1983 ‘What is enlightenment?’ essay, and we can then find a second reason why Foucault remains tied to enlightenment thought and rationality:

I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas which concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformation, which have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century… (316).

This is, I believe, an incredibly revealing quote in at least three ways. It seems that 1) Foucault preferred some socio-political phenomenon, culture, relations, etc. to others, and 2) Foucault thought that these more preferred settings come from critical historical analysis and a sort of pragmatic/practical thinking. Here we find proof of Foucault desiring to take advantage of the fact of the knowledge-power nexus; analysis and practice lead to more preferrable or less preferrable transformations depending on the quality of the said analyses and practices (which includes tactical/strategic decision-making. See his Power/Knowledge interviews for a greater discussion of tactics/strategies, and how important Foucault found them to be, or at least how useful he thought they were as concepts for understanding and participating in power games). Thus, we are dealing with a type of practical-theoretical rationality that I see Foucault strongly adhering to. 3) Lastly,
in regard to the above quote, Foucault in a way is revealing a conception of progress. Consider that individual conceptions of progress may be tied to one’s normative ethics (which of course have a variety of influences). Depending on one’s ideals, one can legitimately see progress in history simply by using historical and present data as it relates to the criteria one sets as part of their vision of progress. So whatever Foucault’s criteria were, conscious of them or otherwise, he surely preferred some social relations, institutions, and norms over others. He saw historical progress in at least some instances (relations between sexes and perceptions of insanity, for instance). He therefore had at least some normative ethics, regardless of if it can be excavated from the rest of his body of work and regardless of its consistency. Perhaps then, even though we can say that Foucault rids of dominant enlightenment and modernist ideas that suggest progress is humanity’s destiny, while also ridding of a conception of progress that overemphasizes productivity and economic growth while underemphasizing community, environment, and plurality of experiences and preferences, we might also say that he nevertheless harnesses an enlightenment mode through his practical-theoretical pursuit of revealing and overcoming conditions of possibility in a transformative manner.

All that said, there is yet another, third reason he stays within an enlightenment project. He developed quite substantial methodologies of archaeology and genealogy, whose signposts are not only an analogy to existing hard scientific disciplines but are also considered by Foucault as a new kind of rigorous empiricism⁷ and a new kind of (“effective”) history. Colin Koopman argues Foucault’s archaeology is an “empiricism of the smallest differences and the most momentary shifts,” but also, “the empiricism of explosive and momentous intersections” (Koopman 108).

Meanwhile, Foucault considered his genealogy as a form of resistance “in opposition to the scientific hierarchization of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power” (Power/Knowledge 141). Dreyfus and Rabinow, in their friendly 1982 problematization of Foucault’s work on truth/power/resistance (or what they describe as a ‘series of dilemmas’), further remark: “In Each set there is a seeming contradiction between a return to the traditional philosophic view that description and interpretation must ultimately correspond to the way things really are, and a nihilist view that physical reality, the body, and history are whatever we take them to be” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 205). It’s this same

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⁷ As just one example, in an April 1983 interview, Foucault makes a claim and then says, “I think that starting from this general theme, we have to be both extremely prudent and extremely empirical” (“Politics and ethics: An interview” 378).
sort of contradiction that explains why postmodernists such as Lyotard have to walk back their critical arguments, finding themselves trapped by their own radical logics which demand them to undermine any attempts at clarity and knowledge production. As Habermas argues, “reason can be convicted of being authoritarian in nature only by having recourse to its own tools” (quoted in Callinicos 81). In other words, critique is normatively structured and immanent. It is possible only because of our existing truth regime and its norms and tools of thinking/being/acting. Nietzsche, and Foucault following him, sustain the paradoxical “attempt to demonstrate by means of rational argumentation the perspectival and indeed instrumental nature of knowledge” (Callinicos 81).

Furthermore, Foucault’s explicit turn to how the self can resist/subvert reveals his libertarian, emancipatory, constructivist, and ultimately modernist and pro-enlightenment stance: To develop capacities; to overcome weakness and external power; to create oneself. As Nietzsche put it in Will to Power, “Pleasure appears where there is the feeling of power. Happiness lies in the triumphant consciousness of power and victory. Progress lies in the strengthening of the type, the aptitude for strong use of the will. Everything else is dangerous misunderstanding.” The knowledge/power construct that Foucault so exceptionally breaks down in his archaeological and genealogical period is turned on itself to emancipate the multipolar subject.

Indeed, in his 1983 “On the Genealogy of Ethics” interview, Foucault asked why “everyone’s life couldn’t become a work of art?” (261). At this point in his career, Foucault yearned for a process of making sense of one’s life through making one’s life; the self as a process of creation. He asked us that we first and foremost practice the “exercise of self upon self by which one tries to...transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being” (“The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom” 282). It has also been noted that, “as a follower of Nietzsche’s path to enlightenment, Foucault approached maturity with a preceding analysis of finitude, subsequent to which he suggests how to be within it” (Bregham 214). Foucault argued that both finitude and ambivalent rationality must be met with a limit-attitude, which when “amalgamated with a critical history...the outcome is a critical ontology of who we are in the present” (Bregham 214). Or as Foucault put it regarding the relation between his ‘history of the present’ and the historical perspective found in Kant’s original ‘What is Enlightenment?’ essay, “it seems to me that it is the first time that a philosopher has connected in this way, closely and from the inside, the significance of his work with respect to knowledge, a reflection on history and a particular analysis of the specific moment at which he is writing and because of which he is writing”
(Foucault, “What is enlightenment?” 309).

We can further see this critical and transformative impulse in Foucault’s praise for the way Kant demarcated enlightenment thinking as-such. Foucault felt that rather than think of the enlightenment as an age, a doctrine, a set of procedures, or a body of knowledge, it would be wiser to view enlightenment as an attitude or ethos that’s worth sustaining. Again, on this matter I find value in quoting him at length:

It seems to me that a meaning can be attributed to that critical interrogation of the present and on ourselves which Kant formulated by reflecting on the Enlightenment. It seems to me that Kant’s reflection is even a way of philosophizing, which has not been without its importance or effectiveness during the last two centuries. The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (Foucault, “What is enlightenment?” 318-19)

Here, Foucault equates Kant’s critical interrogation of the present, and what Foucault calls the critical ontology of ourselves, to the enlightenment attitude. His critiques of Kant notwithstanding, clearly Foucault found novelty in Kant’s ability to reflect on history and the present as they relate to conditions of possibility.

Now to briefly summarize this section, Foucault as critical ontologist uses archaeology to excavate the savior behind the discourse, and then genealogy to “reveal the contingent and arbitrary” of the savior, all in order to “pursue maturity as a transformative practice vis-à-vis finitude” (Breham 214). Or again, in Foucault’s own words from 1983, “following lines of fragility in the present” helps “in managing to grasp why and how that-which-is might no longer be that-which is,” such that “any [historical] description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of possible transformation” (“Critical theory/intellectual history” 36). Foucault used these methods as part of a rational power/knowledge pursuit that placed an emphasis on critiquing and overcoming modern conditions, or at least, more consciously managing your experience of/with such conditions.

Lastly, I ask that if you are still not convinced of this practical nature to Foucault,
one that is keen on using knowledge for individual or collective power pursuits, that you consider this exchange between him and Gerard Raulet:

G.R.: Is it here, along the fractures, that the work of the intellectual - practical work, quite clearly - is situated?

Foucault: That is my own belief. I would say also, about the work of the intellectual, that it is fruitful in a certain way! To describe that-which-is by making it appear as something that might not be, or that might not be as it is. (“Critical theory/intellectual history” 36)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I feel that intellectuals who consider their work to be of a postmodern or anti-enlightenment tradition need to do a better job at understanding themselves and marketing their ideas. Why do I make this somewhat harsh prescriptive statement? Because postmodern academia has catapulted and-or justified a belief that enlightenment and modernism are things to be of the past, already overcome if not in desperate need of still overcoming. This essay has tried to show that such a characterization of enlightenment thought and modernism both obfuscates the absurdist, anti-essentialist, pluralistic attitudes found within them and disguises how what we call postmodernism is but one of the most radical strands of enlightenment thought and modernism. Instead of maintaining the misconceived binary between postmodernism and modernism, I find it imperative that we remember, as Stuart Hall noted in 1988, the “double-edged and problematic character of modernity: what Theodor Adorno called the ‘negative dialectic’ of enlightenment” and further, that:

to be ‘modern’ has always meant to live a life of paradox and contradiction… alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead (e.g. the line from Nietzsche and Wagner to the death camps), longing to create and hold onto something real even as everything melts. (“The meaning of ‘New Times’” 228)

I also suggest that we, as Habermas articulated in 1986 when recalling Adorno’s project, “remain true to the idea that there is no cure for the wounds of Enlightenment other than the radicalized Enlightenment” (Autonomy and Solidarity 156). Or further, as a student of Herbert Marcuse put it in 2021 about Marcuse’s project, one where we are chiefly critiquing the “worldview [that] prevails in Modern Society based on the principles
of natural science, and that [this] world view eliminates everything but the facts from the purview of rationality" (Feenberg). It is as though Marcuse was disgruntled that when he looked out at society and its economic and political institutions, he yearned for the ways and uses of rationality that are beyond dealing with a functionalist use of surface level facts. In a sense, then, he was critiquing anti-intellectualism and calling for deeper, wiser practical-theoretical pursuits. It is my belief that Foucault's mode and spirit precisely represent this pursuit. As this paper comes to an end, I hope that the reader notices its two-fold thesis: that postmodernists are modernists, and so was Foucault.

WORKS CITED


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