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Post-Modernism, Agency, and Democracy

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Abstract: This essay presents a general summary of post-modern philosophy's conception of agency. It argues that while post-modern philosophers offer formidable intellectual tools for criticizing contemporary restrictions on agency, their conception falters for a variety of philosophical and political reasons. This implies we should develop a more robust conception of agency to provide a foundation for progressive politics. The essay concludes by analyzing several recent steps to develop such a conception.

Keywords: post-modern culture; Wittgenstein; Heidegger; agency

1. Introduction

Post-modernism is currently one of the most highly contentious areas in academia. From the right, critics such as Jordan Peterson and Stephen Hicks have criticized post-modernism for abandoning the Enlightenment and embracing irrationalism.[1] From the left, Slavoj Zizek and Alain Badiou have criticized post-modern "democratic materialists" for their sophistry and alleged support for PC culture [2] (p. 2). It has even attracted considerable attention in the media as part of the ongoing culture wars, with pundits and journalists taking sides in the ongoing academic furor. All this makes it ever more important to have a reasonably thorough grasp of the virtues and limits of post-modern discourse. This essay is designed as a contribution to the ongoing discussion. In particular, I discuss the post-modern account of agency, as presented in the work of several seminal authors. I also discuss how this account of agency relates to the arguments of many post-modern philosophers and theorists for a greater embrace of democracy. While I largely agree with the democratic ambitions of the post-modern philosophers, I argue that the account of agency they present remains too thin and riddled with theoretical problems to serve as a sufficient intellectual basis for greater democratization. In particular, I argue that post-modern accounts of agency remain bound to what I follow Heidegger in calling a "technical mindset" which limits their capacity to develop a robust description of what unconstrained agency might look like. After discussing this technical mindset and its application to post-modern theories of agency, I then briefly conclude this paper by sketching some preliminary arguments about what a more robust philosophical account of agency might look like.

Before I begin, I should also offer a single important qualification. This essay operates at a high level of generalization and draws numerous links between different authors who justify the post-modern account of agency for different reasons. While their individual arguments are exceptionally important, and often highly interesting, I have not been able to discuss them all in any depth in this piece. In a later work, I hope to address some of the more exemplary accounts of agency more directly, both for exegetical and practical purposes. However, I will not do so here. This is because my ambitions are narrower. I hope to showcase the limitations of post-modern approaches

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[1]   Perhaps the most famous, if highly problematic, account is in Hicks' book. See [1].

to agency, not to imply that we should do away with post-modernism generally, but to preserve the valuable insights of the tradition against superficial and mean-spirited attacks. This requires looking at the weaknesses of post-modernisms' approach to agency, so that its worthwhile claims can be extracted and incorporated into a more robust progressive project in the future. In the last parts of this paper, I will very briefly discuss several authors who have already engaged in such a project. These figures should give us hope for the future, as they are models for how to engage the most important theoretical enterprise in progressive political today.

2. A (Very) Brief History of Post-Modernism

The forerunners of post-modern theory emerged in the 1940s, during an unusual time in the history of European thought. Many Europeans had been deeply horrified by the atrocities perpetuated during the Second World War. More cynically, European intellectuals also reacted staunchly to the growing awareness that both the ideological and concrete influence of the Continent was on the wane. It seemed to many that the promise of modernism, and Western Civilization more generally, had proven a bust. Some, such as Martin Heidegger [3], looked upon this shift with cautious pessimism. Others, such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, took it upon themselves to explain how Western reason, and the Enlightenment promises associated with it, could be turned to such violent and seemingly nihilistic ends [4,5]. In so doing, they undertook a novel effort to fuse the Marxist critique of society with psychoanalysis, the newly discovered science of individual psyche [6,7].

While the work of the Frankfurt school was important in initiating the shift away from modernism and its optimistic rationality, the post-modern conception of agency truly blossomed in France during the 1960s.[2] It was initiated by a group of young scholars against the then dominant schools of thought in French intellectual circles. These include: semiotics, Hegelian dialectics (particularly as understood by Alexandre Kojev and Jean Hippolyte), Sartrean existentialism, and (especially for many) Marxism. Each of these became associated with some vestige of the rationalized established discourses, whether it was the historical tyranny of dialectics or the transcendental narcissism of Sartre. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida have since become synonymous with the intellectual attempt to undermine not just these discourses, but the very idea that one can ever get beyond discourse and reach and objective philosophical standpoint from which to see the world as it truly is.[3] Many came up with insightful accounts for why this realization should help liberate us, particularly by revealing the contingency behind powerful and often institutionally backed discourses. Others produced influential social theories which purported to explain how the discourses of modernity emerged and were propagated across society. Most critically, while these thinkers differed on many important, many of them stressed that their criticisms were neither objective observations, nor did they rest on some alternative normative theory that should be propagated in place of the discourses they criticized.[4] This leads to the question of what type of philosophical approach was being offered, and what its consequences might be for different concrete instantiations of their arguments.

While the post-modern theorists differed on a great many of central points, they shared two crucial beliefs in common. The first was that there could be no Archimedean standpoint from which a subject could assess the world. To invoke Richard Rorty [9] (p. 155), we must become anti-foundationalists. In addition, the second related belief was that previous theories of morality and agency, themselves

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[2]　The relationship of French post-modern theory and the critical theories of the German Frankfurt school is the subject of ongoing debate. It seems clear that both have had a formative impact on North American critical theory.

[3]　The case of Deleuze is somewhat more complex. While his logic of transcendental empiricism does stress the need to continuously create new concepts in line with "deterritorializing" one's subjectivity, his earlier work on univocity and difference occasionally suggests there are such things as ontological truths. See [8].

[4]　On the Deleuze point see [8].

based on those objectivizing discourses, were both unsustainable and undesirable. These were explosive claims, though the ramifications of each were of course unpacked differently depending on the thinker in question.

Each of the major post-modern theorists arrived at their belief that there was no objective standpoint from which to assess the world differently. Lyotard [10], who coined the designation "post-modern", based his belief on empirical observation that individuals had lost faith in "meta-narratives" which bridge disciplines and social practices. As he puts it in his classic work *The Postmodern Condition*:

> *In contemporary society and culture—post-industrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.* [10] (p. 37)

Lyotard was largely a historically minded thinker, who approached the subject of post-modernism in epochal terms. In the works for which he was most famous, he largely eschewed the more analytical and philosophically technical arguments made by thinkers such as Foucault and Rorty. Instead he discussed the way in which grand narratives had ceased to be attractive to many in post-modern society. Jean Baudrillard was even more historically minded and developed often brilliant arguments concerning why post-modern societies became ones where any conception of truth was increasingly ambiguous. Baudrillard claimed that modern societies had gradually gone beyond even Marx in surrounding themselves with symbolic simulacrums of real simulacra out there in the material world. On this Marxist vision, there was a real world of material objects and relations which ideology prevented us from apprehending.[5] One of the tasks of critical theory was to help rid us of these illusions. Baudrillard thought this Marxist optimism was fundamentally outdated. We no longer lived in an environment where the real world was accessible to us. Instead, we exist in an increasingly hyper-real environment in which simulacrum do not stand in for anything; what is being presented to the subject is not standing in as a representation of something, a "parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials" [12] (p. 39). In this symbol saturated world, it became ever more difficult to distinguish what is being referred to from the hyper-real symbols that are intended to stand in for it.

Lyotard and Baudrillard both approached the topic of post-modernism from a socio-historical perspective. To invoke Fredric Jameson [13], they were interested in the "condition of post-modernity" which was in some sense understood as "cultural logic". They understood it as an epoch in human history where narratives and symbols associated with truth came under pressure by post-modern conditions. Other thinkers were post-modern in quite a different sense. They were also keen to provide arguments about the "condition of post-modernity" as a "cultural logic". However, they also offered deeper epistemological and linguistic arguments as to why achieving some kind of correspondence theory of truth-to develop a mirror of nature in Rorty's [14] famous metaphor-was unlikely to ever happen. I will provide a few accounts of this deeper set of arguments below.

Perhaps the most famous post-modern theorist is Jacques Derrida, who made his name criticizing and to some extent building the then ascendant school of Saussurean structuralism. Structuralism, simplifying a great deal, held that the determinate meaning of a sign was dependent on its holistic association with other signs [15]. This meant that language did not really represent the world in terms of a one-to-one correspondence between word and object but was rather system that needed to be understood as a totality. Derrida built upon these insights, while also pointing out their limitations. Derrida argued that logocentric societies privileged that idea of representation in language because they believed that signs could make present what was absent. This in turn flowed from a phonocentric understanding of subjects as making statements which have specific meaning which in turn must

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[5]　The most famous example of this is Marx's account of the fetishism of the commodities [11] (p. 163).

be interpreted by other subjects. What was not acknowledged in this was that language could not make something present that was absent, and that the belief that it could do so involved pathologically attempting to suppress the other possible meanings latent within both an individual proposition and language as a whole [16]. In this respect, even the ambitions of the structuralists to demonstrate the systematicity fell short of the vastness of what language did, both on the surface of a text and beneath it. Part of the goal of deconstruction, as it came to be called, was to indicate that these meanings could not be so suppressed. Deconstructionist interpreters were encouraged to follow the "trace" back to indicate what an author or speaker was attempting to keep buried.[6] This did not mean, as some have crudely put it, that Derrida was a relativist per se. However, it did mean that there could be no final interpretation of a text, since both the surface and potential substratum of meanings could beget a limitless number of different, playful, interpretations.

Finally, Foucault also reacted violently against the dominant intellectual traditions of hiss time; whether it be the structuralism of Saussure or the Marxism of figures such as Sartre or Althusser. Foucault developed a discursive approach to language and knowledge which followed Nietzsche's [18] (pp. 437–599) *Genealogy of Morals* in privileging history as an ur-discourse that casts insight into the continuous transformation of all other discourses. One of the virtues of such a historical analysis is revealing that what might appear an objective discourse on truth is often a very specific episteme which emerges in a given place and time for complex socio-historical reasons [19,20]. Often, Foucault believes these reasons have far more to do with the power simultaneously providing support for and being supported by a given episteme than its intrinsic truth. The power of these discourses can often blind us to their disturbingly pervasive effect, particularly when they become associated with disciplinary institutions such as prisons and schools [21]. This is where he made his famous connection to the productive, but occasionally insidious relationship between knowledge/and power. For Foucault, echoing Bacon, every system of knowledge presupposes a system of power.[7] An institutional system of law, for instance, establishes a given episteme for legal practitioners and subjects to operate within, while enforcing the consistency and constancy of the episteme with carceral power. This meant that a knowledge could never be understood independently of power; a discursive episteme always needed to be situated in networks of power and enforcement, even when these happened to be practically useful. This also meant that Foucault's account of knowledge and power went well beyond the standard Marxist critique of ideology, as for instance was popularized by well-known French thinkers such as Althusser [23]. While the Marxist critique of ideology at least held out the hope of overcoming the false consciousness imposed by super-structures and the culture industry, for Foucault we would never have any knowledge or truth that could be meaningfully disconnected from a system of power.

This brief summary is meant to demonstrate how an array of otherwise distinct thinkers reached similar conclusions about the possibility of subjects making objective assessments about the world. Whether they reached this conclusion through the empirical observation of contemporary society as was the case for Lyotard, a historical assessment of post-modernity relative to other historical epochs in the case of Baudrillard, o by illustrating the inability of language to adequately represent the world as it is in Derrida and Foucault, the philosophical and concrete outcomes were the same. We should abandon the long held belief that one can arrive at anything resembling truth, or at least truth as defined by the correspondence theory designating that truth means a coincidence between our mental and linguistic representations of the world, and the world as it actually is.

Once this step towards epistemological skepticism was taken, it is not hard to see why post-modern theorists would quickly reach related conclusions about the status of theories concerning agency and morality. This relates to the second point of agreement between the major post-modern theorists: as with epistemic theories of knowledge, most moral theories, especially those associated

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[6]　For an indicative text applying Derrida's approach to the "ethnocentrism of knowledge" see [17] (p. 289).
[7]　For a helpful account see [22].

with the political and economic status quo, rest on an insecure foundation. Indeed, almost all the post-modern theorists agree that one of the tasks theory should take upon itself is to liberate us from moralizing demagogues by unmasking the spuriousness of their moral claims. This can often be very difficult, since many demagogues operate from entrenched positions of power and socio-economic influence which are institutionally perpetuated over time. This was most artfully put by Michel Foucault, who in an almost Kantian vein went as far as to frame freedom as the ontological condition for all ethics:

> *Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics; but ethics is the deliberate form assumed by freedom.* [24]

While I largely agree with Foucault's sentiment here, it is important to note that many of the post-modern accounts which share his belief rest on a moral assumption that increasing the agency of individuals is desirable. I say "moral assumption" because why and whether freedom/agency is good in and of itself is rarely discussed. This can be a substantial problem if one adopts a different moral or meta-ethical position which does not give freedom such pride of place, as would be the case for many utilitarianism and virtue ethicists. However, given I agree with this post-modern emphasis on agency, I will not take substantive issue with the assumption in this paper. Instead, this section will conclude by discussing what the post-modern theorists understand to be constraints imposed on the exercise of human agency, and what they offer as an alternative model.

Each of the major post-modern theorists offers a distinctive and unique account of what constraints are imposed on the exercise of human agency. Many of these accounts of the constraints imposed on human agency, such as those of Lyotard, Baudrillard,[8] and Deleuze and Guattari[9] offered frequently brilliant analyses of Western modernity and the many complex forces which enforced and even fostered support for anti-democratic and even fascistic impulses. Foucault went even further with penetrating genealogies of knowledge/power formations; particularly medical associations, the penal system, sexual norms, before finally announcing that we had entered a new age of bio-politics wherein the state would become responsible for the biological functioning of its populations ([27,28], pp. 139–140). Strangely, Derrida wrote very little about political and ethical concerns until very late in his oeuvre ([29,30], pp. 54–81). However, all his writings imply the need to dissociate one's self from propounded certainties, whether through breaking them down wholesale or approaching them ironically.

> *If I had invented my writing, I would have done so as a perpetual revolution. For it is necessary in each situation to create an appropriate mode of exposition, to invent the law of the singular event, to take into account the presumed or desired addressee, and at the same time, to make as if this writing will determine the reader, who will learn to read (to 'live') something he or she was not accustomed to receiving from anywhere else. One hopes that he or she will be reborn differently, determined otherwise, as a result...* [31] (pp. 30–31)

While each of these distinct analyses has features to recommend them, and I shall not evaluate any specific one here. Instead, I will attempt to generalize their common features to discuss what unites these various philosopher's arguments about agency and its limitations. In addition, this is where the problems begin. Unfortunately, as I will elaborate below, both the post-modern theorists and their many admirers have been notably wary of providing a model of what unconstrained agency would look like, or what positive measures can be taken to realize it.[10] Indeed, beyond appeals to the virtue of greater democratization, non-fascist living, and the ecstasy of a liberated aesthetics of the self, it is hard to tell what emancipated agency might look like. As I shall discuss later, this silence is not incidental. Indeed, I believe it flows from the structure of post-modern accounts of the relationship between subjectivity and agency. Despite their many innovations, I believe that post-modern theories

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8   For an indicative example see [25] (p. 25).
9   For the Deleuze and Guattari reference see [26] (pp. 296–322).
10   Deleuze and Guattari [32] are the notable exception.

of agency remain dependent on many of the same presuppositions they sought to disprove. This meant that their accounts are bound by the same restrictions, necessitating we move beyond post-modern accounts of agency where possible.

3. The Limitations of the Post-Modern Approach to Agency

In this section, I will claim that the unwillingness of many post-modern theorists to develop a more robust approach to agency is unsurprising for two interrelated reasons. In later sections, I will elaborate how this also problematizes the post-modern support for greater democratization.

Firstly, if post-modern theorists pushed their various philosophical arguments about the influence of language and social structures to their logical conclusion, they would once again be forced to place the contingent individual, in all his/her particularity, at the center of their theory.[11] This would abnegate much of the political motivation behind adopting post-modernism as a philosophical support due to its critiques of liberal individualism. Indeed, it comes perilously close to the Lockean position that individuals begin as a blank slate whose subjectivity is gradually constituted through engagement with the determinants of the empirical world.[12] Moreover, given that the individual is regarded exclusively as the product of various socio-historical effects, a post-modern theorist is handicapped when developing a robust theory of freedom. This is because the post-modern approach remains beholden to what I claim is a deterministic "technical mindset" common to scientism and its offshoots throughout Western thought. Secondly, I believe the claim that agency is determined entirely by socio-historical circumstances is unattractive not just because of its ramifications, but because it is, at base, fallacious.

My first claim can be illustrated by an appeal to the late Ludwig Wittgenstein, and his argument that a private language cannot be conceived. This is because he defines language by focusing on its communicative function in a given semantic community. Wittgenstein [33] denied that one could conclusively discover a determinate master rule from which all potential "language games" branch. If there were such a determinate rule, it might be possible to develop a rationalistic model of human consciousness that could then account for the universal objectivity of empirical phenomena. This is because the universal rule which determines all semantic "forms of life" would have been understood. From there, one could try to move from the particularities of language use to its universal pre-conditions. Since Wittgenstein was convinced that there was no such rule, we are left with accepting that language, and thence all linguistically mediated approaches to "truth," can only leave things exactly as they were. Much as in his earlier work, one who truly understands this realizes that there are better things to engage in. As Wittgenstein artfully put it in the *Tractatus*:

> *My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them as steps to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.* [34] (p. 89)

Languages emerged because of the "games" that we played in various "forms of life" and made up a "vast system" of interconnected semantic meanings. None of these could be arranged in some philosophical hierarchy. As he composed the *Philosophical Investigations* in the 1940s and early 50s, Wittgenstein seems to have become convinced that the very attempt to draw a one-to-one correspondence between classes of linguistic statements and forms of knowledge did a disservice to the variety of language games existing in the world. He came to feel that one could not determine *a priori* whether some language games were more valuable than others. The only way to determine whether a given language game might serve a valuable purpose within a historical community of speakers was

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[11]   I refer to the internal logic of the argument rather than the criteria of another logical system.
[12]   I say perilously with a bit of sarcasm. Given Locke's peerless bourgeois credentials, I cannot imagine any post-modern theorist would accept such an association.

to internally understand the "forms of life" common to that community [33] (para 241). These forms of life can be meaningfully compared to several post-modern conceptions of language and meaning, including Foucault's discourses, Derrida's texts, Lyotard's narratives and so on. While there are important technical differences between them, each other believes that discourses, texts, and narratives operate largely independently of the wills and subjectivities of those who interact with them. Instead these subjects are largely determined by these discourses, texts, and narratives. In Wittgensteinian terms, the private subject was less important than the "forms of life" which determined the language games that we play.

By extension, Wittgenstein felt it made little sense to speak about a private human consciousness whose inner content can be analyzed independently of the social and linguistic world around it.[13] To do so would be to presume that one could semantically think the "I" without some language inherited from a given set of socio-historical contexts. On this Wittgensteinian account consciousness is now seen, at best, as the ability to assimilate and engage in linguistic behavior.[14] Many post-modern theorists have attempted to build on this insight. Post-modern theorists hope to demonstrate how diffuse forms of discursive formations, logocentric interpretations, grand narratives, and the micro-power of modern politico-legal institutions inhibit the agency[15] of individuals.[16] However, they have been very reluctant to suggest what this agency itself is, even in such an uninhibited form. Pushed to their extreme, I think post-modernist arguments would wind up back in the very liberal modernism they seek to eschew.

If one accepts that all things are determined through being interpolated within diverse socio-historical contexts, then one is pushed to accepting a political variant of liberal universalism. This is because, the post-modernist must believe that all experiences can be made explicit through a shared language, in effect becoming universalized. Otherwise the post-modern theorist would be pushed to believing that there was some private self that transcended and stood outside the determinations of the socio-historical contexts. From this, some post-modern theorists have argued that the no subjective position can be epistemically privileged over any other. In other words, the post-modernist is pushed towards valuing all epistemic positions equally. This is because one can no longer claim that there are private experiences that operate at a radical level beyond the socio-historical contexts through which subjects interact and define themselves.[17] Or, to put it in Derridean language, it becomes unclear that we can meaningfully talk about even our subjective interpretations of events since there is "no outside text." If it is true that all subjectivities are determined by the socio-historical contexts, there are no such private experiences.

This has obvious normative consequences. If there is no private subjectivity that transcends the determinations of the socio-historical contexts, and we cannot privilege any epistemic position over another, it seems plausible that each individual's opinions should be accorded equal weight on normative issues. This is because there is no transcendent position from which one might speak "truth" to the power dynamics which determine the makeup of our society and our subjectivity.[18] Ironically, as Jeremy Waldron claimed, this would compel post-modernists to also accept the strong claims of liberal universalists who argue for the metaphysical, rather than just political, tenability of their argument.[19] Or, as put by Brian Barry, claiming that there is no universal core from which one can derive values

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13　This was central to his argument in [35].
14　Rorty employs the term "mind" rather than "consciousness". For the sake of consistency I have chosen to stick with the terminology I have worked with throughout this piece.
15　In many respects this runs counter to Wittgenstein's belief that even a critical analysis of language can only leave things as they are; philosophy cannot impede on what he called "forms of life".
16　I rely primarily on Foucauldian terminology here both because I think it is the clearest and most consistent.
17　The classical example is of course the Marxist emphasis on the class consciousness of the proletariat. Marx cannot be accused of being a liberal in disguise however, either at a political or philosophical level.
18　For the references to "forms of life" see [33] (para 241).
19　See, amongst other works, his paper "Particular Values and Critical Morality" in [36].

must lead one to the uncritical acceptance of all systems of value, including the systems of those who believe there is such a universal core [37] (p. 252).

If, on the other hand, there is something incommunicable in the experiences of persons that must be understood in and of itself, and not truncated by semantic translation into communicable discourses, post-modern theorists are forced into a different position. They would have to argue that there are some features of knowledge and human agency that cannot be accounted for through a critical analyses of the socio-historical contexts. This would include the experiences of legally marginalized individuals whose voices have been silenced. There must exist some core of self-hood and agency which exists beyond that determined by the socio-historical contexts we share with others. In other words, the perfect post-modern theorist becomes some kind of a Kantian in the end, much like Foucault himself did by re-engaging with the critical project.[20]

Indeed, Foucault's analyses are perhaps most representative here. As indicated, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault initially seems to have agreed with the quasi-Nietzschian argument that history was something of an ur-science which enabled us to understand all others [19] (pp. 400–407). Later, as he moved into the *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*, this early optimism gave way to a cynical belief that knowledge/power was an often oppressive force. It took the form of discourses engendered by various institutional authorities, such as the nexus between law and prisons, which were in turn supported by immense apparatus of oppression. These determined even the subjectivities of those who were incorporated into them. Or to paraphrase his striking aphorism in *Discipline and Punish*, our subjective soul becomes a prison for the potentialities of our body [21]. What is odd when analyzing this is the unusual degree of determinism latent within the analysis, which is reflective of what I will later describe as the technical mindset. Foucault understands agency as primary being about material potentialities which are in turn constrained by external socio-historical contexts which determine our inner subjectivity. Only late in his life did he seem to recognize the inherent limitations in such an analysis, turning as mentioned to Kant as a potential source of insight.[21] However, Foucault, as with most of his post-modern kin, was unable ever to articulate a comprehensive response to these problems fully. The same is true in the work of other post-modern theorists such as Baudrillard and Lyotard, who regarded human subjectivity as largely defined by our new hyper-reality of the post-modern condition, and Derrida who as I shall discuss below never fully managed to explain how agency could be possible in a linguistic environment where texts operated independently of the will of subjects who interpreted them.

Some, post-modern philosophers such as Derrida and Deleuze, made tentative movements in the direction of developing more robust conception of agency I am calling for. For instance, Derrida consistently stressed the ethical openness that deconstruction was meant to engender. This can certainly be understood as an argument for a kind of interpretive agency; albeit one I would argue that I still strongly constrained by its emphasis on the text being determinative. In addition, Derrida did extend such arguments to innovative claims about a democracy to come. This would be defined by a politics of friendship and allowing the Other to exist in their undecidability, rather than interpolating them into the rigid categories characteristic of logocentrism [39]. In other words, Derrida's politics is about allowing the Other to remain what it is fundamentally, in all its alterity. Many of his most important arguments in the political and ethical realm center around this normative commitment. Derrida will often observe how standard approaches to politics and ethics will often try to incorporate the other into a standard horizon of understanding.[22] Drawing on his work, commentators such as Spivak [17] will observe that this is as true of liberalism as any other ethics and politics. While superficially tolerant, liberalism is often unwilling or even unable to allow the subaltern to "speak" because its

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[20]　See Michel Foucault "What is Enlightenment?" in [38] (pp. 32–50).
[21]　See Michel Foucault "What is Enlightenment?" in [38] (pp. 32–50).
[22]　The reference to "horizon of understanding" is not Derridean, but rather by own terminology meant to summarize an approximation of his position.

voice would reflect the fundamental limitations of the liberal outlook. So, in historical practice, even apparently tolerant political ideologies such as liberalism have ultimately engaged in imperial and repressive projects. For Derrida and followers such as Spivak, this totalizing impulse is antithetical to any progressive politics that is truly concerned with difference.

Many of these arguments are inspiring, and their critical dimension is well taken. However, they are also left frustratingly empty of determinative content. When not engaging in critical discussions, Derrida and Spivak discuss constructive politics and agency at such a level of generality that it is difficult to determine what they actually want in concrete terms. Defenders might respond by saying this is a deliberate gesture to refrain from setting guidelines intended to determine future actions by free agents. However, it is one thing to discuss a future that is to be left open to acts of human agency. It is another to provide little theoretical guidance on how to ensure this future is available to as many people as possible. Moreover, they generally do not systematically relate to the broader problems post by post-modern theorists about the determinacy of discourse, text, narrative and the socio-historical contexts and institutions which support them.

Aside from some of the examples discussed above, post-modern theorists have generally tried to avoid these theoretical problems by not actually engaging with them at a philosophical level. Rather than engage substantially with developing a robust account of agency, they have focused theoretical attention on the practical activity of those who engage in socio-political struggles in an attempt to avoid theorizing about foundationalist accounts of knowledge and agency. All other attempts to mute these limitations philosophically, for instance by establishing an account of "strategic essentialism", can only evade the limitations by appealing to the sensibilities of those already converted to the worth of a particular cause.[23] Indeed, these limitations, perhaps more than any others, explain the current emphasis placed on the German idealists and their accounts of freedom; whether one is talking about Kant for Foucault, or Hegel and Schelling for Zizek [40] (pp. 137–138).

Moreover, my argument stresses that the political consequences of wholesale embracing a post-modernist approach to agency are not at all desirable; indeed, they would directly contradict the political sentiments of those theorists who advocate for post-modern approaches to breaking down the socio-historical contexts. This is because many post-modern theories are predicated on accepting the ultimate determinacy of socio-historical contexts. As such, a post-modern theorist unable to consistently develop any robust theory of agency which deviates significantly from those common to the Western tradition is unsurprising. This is because post-modern theory is beholden to what I call the "technical mindset."

The claim that human agency is primarily or entirely determined by socio-historical contexts is predicated on accepting determinism. More particularly, post-modern theorists take socio-historical contexts to be the true determinants constituting the various forms of human subjectivity. If the determinants of human subjectivity are the socio-historical contexts within which we come into existence, then the particularities of a subject's experiences must occupy a privileged explanatory position when determining who we are, and how we relate to social phenomena such as legality. Since these particularities are unique to each subject, there can be no fixed, or "Archimedean" point, from which to begin constructing a universal theory of human subjectivity beyond saying that difference is the only universal.[24] To invoke Foucault, our intersectional subjectivity is molded into a soul which becomes a prison for the body through interactions within distinct socio-historical contexts.

The embrace of such a historicized account of human subjectivity is often seen as highly emancipatory. The claim is that universalistic discourses on the "proper" essence of human nature were employed as a weapon intended to marginalize the experiences, and thus the subjectivity, of various "others". It would not be going too far to claim that, for some scholars, this polarity between accounts

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[23] Political engagement in "strategic essentialism" was pioneered by Spivak [17] (pp. 282–284) in a number of works.
[24] The idea of an Archimedean point is critiqued by Rorty [41].

of "universal" consciousness, always understood as being consistent with Western metaphysics and values, and the production of its deficient "Other" is what most defines our intellectual history. This polarity between the legitimate universalism of Western liberal "agency" and its pre-determined and deficient "Others" is seen as contributing to the emergence of sexism, racism, and a host of other historically significant prejudices. The counter claim is that by embracing the post-modern account of subjectivity one can avoid making essentialist claims either about human beings or the phenomena they experience.[25] Post-modern theorists often take this as laying the critical groundwork for a more emancipatory politics to follow; one that will do away with the prejudicial polarities which define the intellectual history of the Western world. As I shall indicate below, I do not believe this genealogy is inaccurate.[26]

4. Post-Modernism, the Technical Mindset, and Human Agency

Heidegger claimed that at the base of Western thought is not simply an emphasis on crude polarities, but the ontological claim that reality consists of what Heidegger calls "beings in Being". He held that this ontological presumption, far from simply being the purview of a few philosophers, influenced the way most individuals understood both themselves and the world around them. The ontological claim maintains that the world is ultimately divisible into different fragmented things, each of which exists in a complex set of relations with other similarly fragmented things.[27] This is what I call the technical mindset; the belief that the world is ultimately a collection of "things"; with individuals being a specific class of things.

As Heidegger put it in *What is Called Thinking*:

Accordingly—what is called thinking, insofar as it follows this call. Thinking means: letting-lie-before-us and so taking-to-heart also: beings in being. Thinking so structured pervades the foundation of metaphysics, the duality of beings and Being. Such thinking develops its various successive positions on this foundation, and determines the fundamental position of metaphysics. [43] (p. 224)

The account of subjectivity offered by post-modernism is beholden to this same ontological presumption that reality consists of "beings in Being" specifically that individuals are determined by the various socio-historical contexts within which they exist. The entire subjectivity of an individual, on this account, can be understood by looking at the bundle of determinants that constitute them. In this respect, post-modern theory does not break from the parameters of modern Western thought, which is largely oriented by the technical mindset.

If post-modern theorists understand human subjectivity to be exclusively determined by socio-historical contexts, they understand human beings in a manner that is analogous to that of "things". Once one has developed a properly mechanical understanding of the impact of particular but intersecting socio-historical contexts on the plastic *tabula rasa* of our un-determined subjectivity, the post-modern theorist can then understand how a given type of subject emerges. Of course, developing a post-modern analysis powerful enough to make entirely accurate claims about all the determinants of subjectivity may be practically impossible. However, by definition, the possibility of developing such a technique cannot be ruled out *a priori*. This variant of the technical mindset exemplified by post-modernism also has serious political consequences. The claim that human subjectivity is entirely determined by socio-historical contexts has not just been embraced by those focused on theorizing how individuals might deploy their agency to be rid of prejudice and structural forms of injustice. It is also, as Arendt brilliantly assessed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the working

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25　Chomsky [42] (p. 90) has often touched on the political association frequently drawn between empiricism and the emancipation of marginalized subjectivities.
26　The reference to "one dimensionality" is drawn from Marcuse [5] (p. 12), though adapted here.
27　Heidegger's most sustained commentary on the metaphysics of "beings in Being" appears in [43].

assumption of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes bent on molding the perfect human beings to ensure the functioning of the regime [44] (Part III).

This is no coincidence. Post-modernism emerges with the development of the technical idea that human subjectivity is indefinitely plastic because there is no core set of features which define us. The idea the human subjectivity is plastic is a precondition for arguing that those subjects who grew up in socio-historical contexts not amenable to the technical requirements of our modern and now post-modern world should be treated unequally.[28]

Of course, few if any post-modern theorists have argued for authoritarianism; quite the contrary. For many, various post-modern arguments are adopted to show sensitivity to the plurality of human experiences in given socio-historical contexts and reflects a rejection of authoritarianism. However, it is hard to see how post-modernism can generate what Chomsky referred to as a "soft theoretical" boundary against the idea that the subjectivity of human beings is indefinitely malleable, and therefore open to manipulation by authoritarian institutions [42] (pp. 90–91). This is because post-modernism cannot develop an account of human agency beyond a negative one. Post-modern arguments can only critique the socio-historical contexts which constrain individuals. However, it is not enough to examine which particular socio-historical contexts impede human agency if one does not have an account of what agency is.

The post-modern approach to agency cannot explain how, despite the emergence of an immense plurality of human subjectivities, there none the less remain tremendous commonalities in the way we think, interact, and develop even within very different socio-historical contexts. Superficially, the idea that there are tremendous commonalities between people might appear to be simply false. How could it be true given the immense plurality of differences one can encounter for instance in moral, political, and religious systems? However, what post-modern theorists do not sufficiently appreciate is that no such particularities would be possible unless the capacity to transcend such particular contexts was also possible. The most evident example of this is language. It is entirely possible to imagine a private individual, or a collection of entirely private individuals, who are incapable or perhaps even unwilling to speak to one another or even with themselves. In such circumstances, the range of variation one would see in human subjectivities would be entirely minimal.

However, this is not the case for human beings. As Chomsky [46] indicates, our common capacity to develop novel syntactic structures is what accounts for the linguistic diversity we see in the world. Chomsky attributes this shared capacity to a linguistic organ which develops a language in accord with the rules of universal grammar. This capacity is what enables the development of a wide variety of syntactic structures which then assume different semantic meanings in given socio-historical communities.[29] The members of such communities can then plausibly speak of themselves as having a unique group history. Without this common capacity, no diversity could emerge. In other words, what is common to us all is what enables us to be different.

This indicates the limitations of post-modern theory. Post-modern theories characterize human beings as determined by the socio-historical contexts within which we exist. This indicates how post-modernism remains beholden to the technical mindset; the approach regards human beings as ultimately the product of their environment. For these reasons, post-modern theorists are unable to develop a more robust approach to human agency without going beyond the theoretical limitations of the mindset. They become limited to developing critiques of the socio-historical contexts without accounting for what an emancipated agency would resemble either in theory or in practice.

This is not to suggest we should abandon the insights of post-modern theories. In many respects, I think their political and historical critiques of the socio-historical contexts to agency provide a great deal of insight on why and how we must overcome their false necessity. What is required is linking the

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28 The basis of this critique goes as far back as Rousseau [45] (p. 171).
29 Noam Chomsky refers to his hypothesis that there exists a "language organ" several times.

critical approach post-modern theory takes towards contemporary society to a more robust normative conception of what emancipated human agency should be.

This is especially true regarding the emphasis both place on democracy. One of the great virtues of the post-modern theory has been exposing the still deeply undemocratic propensities that exist in our society. This is true along many dimensions which have been exposed by a variety of post-modern theorists. Whether it is through disciplinary institutions, an emphasis on the positivity of law, or favoring a simulated democratic public sphere over an authentic one, there are many sites in our society which call for greater democratization and public involvement.

5. Post-Modern Democratic Theories

Despite the inability or unwillingness of many post-modern theorists to develop a robust model of agency, this has not prevented many from engaging in positive normative theorizing on the great political issues of the day.[30] Perhaps unsurprisingly, most are self-declared democrats who make consistent and impassioned calls to emancipate the demos from the limitations of the liberty oriented conception of agency in theory, and of liberal-capitalism in practice. Indeed, the propensity of post-modernists to become democrats is so common that some radicals, most notably Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek, have taken to caricaturing it as the guiding ideology of modern "critical theory."[31] Democracy is invoked by post-modern theorists as a way of shifting a population away from the "conservative" autocratic narratives of tradition oriented philosophies which privilege the totalizing views of experts over the considered opinions people faced with practical tasks [9] (pp. 29–30). Other post-modern theorists place tremendous stress on developing the authentic "democratic intuitions" of individuals [48] which can be directed against the false-idols of representational parliaments where the rituals of democracy are falsely "staged" [17] (p. 257). In some cases, the possibility of a democratic multitude coming to inherit the earth is all but transformed into a true political theology, as in this indicative statement by *Empire* authors Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri:

> *Certainly, there must be a moment when reappropriation and self-organization reach a threshold and configure a real event. This is when the political is really affirmed-when the genesis is complete and self-valorization, the cooperative convergence of subjects, and the proletarian management of production become a constituent power. This is the point when the modern republic ceases to exist and the postmodern posse arises. This is the founding moment of an earthy city that is strong and distinct from any divine..* [49]

Or as they put it more directly in a later work:

> *Freedom and equality also imply an affirmation of democracy in opposition to the political representation that forms the basis of hegemony...The logic of representation and hegemony in both these instances dictates that a people exists only with respect to its leadership and vice versa, and thus this arrangement determines an aristocratic, not a democratic, form of government, even if the people elect that aristocracy.* [50] (pp. 304–305)

On the one hand, it might appear odd that so many post-modern theorists would argue so consistently and uniformly for greater democracy given their rejection of foundationalism. However, many post-modern theorists seem to regard their skeptical arguments towards the epistemological and ontological status of knowledge as a corollary to a normative disposition which is highly emancipatory. By breaking down a belief in meta-narratives, post-modern theorists hope to create greater space at the philosophical level for new epistemes to emerge which might serve to challenge hegemonic ideologies;

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[30] It is worth noting that all of the theorists I subsequently mention share an often under-theorized belief that increasing agency is valuable because they presume that the free development of the self is "what matters". Unfortunately this meta-ethical argument, and its consequent limitations, are rarely scrutinized directly.

[31] See Badiou's dismissive references to democratic materialism which opens Alain Badiou [2] (pp. 1–9) and Slavoj Zizek [47].

for instance, the widespread belief in the universality of the liberty oriented conception of agency. This is also related to the critiques of the socio-historical contexts engaged in by many post-modern theorists [49]. Once belief in these meta-narratives is shaken, many post-modern theorists believe the institutional arrangements they support will be similarly undermined as their false necessity is recognized and rejected [51].

It is important to note that while many post-modernists might acknowledge that the rejection of meta-narratives means that there can be no necessary connection between their philosophical and normative positions, the latter are characterized as immanently implied by the former.[32] Critical theory should become reflected in a critical approach to hegemonic practices inhibiting the "multitude" from organizing and emancipating itself from the powers that bind it.

However, I think that this radicalizes the immanent political dimensions of post-modern theory too much. There seems little inherent reason one must become politically radicalized at the normative level, even if one accepts the democratizing potential of the various post-modern philosophical arguments. To paraphrase Barry again, the rejection of foundationalism need not lead to the view that all normative positions are or should be considered equal [37] (p. 252). It is just as possible that one might accept Rorty's generally liberal vision of a pragmatic approach to politics. One could also draw conclusions about the need for a strong, even authoritarian state required to arbitrate between moral disagreements given the existence of moral relativism.[33] It is even possible that, by rejecting foundationalism, one might draw more conservative conclusions about what is morally proper. Indeed, Edmund Burke [54] directly linked his skepticism towards philosophical foundationalism and rationalism with a distinctively British conservatism.

That post-modernism has often led theorists in a democratic direction is, to my mind, partly explained as an accident of culture. As I explained, given that it initially arose in France as a reaction against modernist meta-narratives associated with the political status quo, or the Marxist alternative seen as dominated by the Soviet Union. However, to my mind, the deeper reason is that many post-modern critiques are predicated on normative judgments which are meant to be universalized. Most important is their belief that the agency authentically development of the self is morally desirable. One must presume that even anti-essentialist post-modern theorists such as Gayatri Spivak [55] express concern with whether the "subaltern" can speak because they believe that expression is of some intrinsic value to those who have been marginalized.

This inability to evade the burden of moral judgment reflects Ronald Dworkin's [56] very Kantian point about the impossibility of evading moral judgment. However, it is worth noting that I do not believe that the democratic arguments of many post-modern theorists are therefore invalid. I simply believe that they should be made explicit. If it is true that individuals should have the agency to define themselves, as many post-modern theorists implicitly seem to believe, then this can be directly linked to a moral argument for both democracy and the amplification of an individual's overall capacity for agency. By linking this to a more robust model of agency, post-modern theorists can also avoid the limitations of the technical mindset I accounted for in the section above. I believe that progressively minded thinkers should focus their energies more on developing such an account of agency, and less on the various critical attractions offered by post-modern philosophy. This is especially important in the contemporary political climate, when so many regard progressive thinkers as exclusively involved in identity politics and trashing the other side. We should be attempting not just to criticize, but to inspire. To do so we will need more formidable philosophical resources than post-modernism can truly offer. In addition, indeed, some philosophers emerging from the post-modern tradition-most notably Judith Butler [57], once considered the critic par excellence-have attempted to accomplish just this. In doing so, they have often been forced to move gradually away from the limits of post-modernism's approach

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[32] For the reference to "immanence" see [52] (p. 584).
[33] This is how Richard Tuck [53] (pp. 62–65). interprets Thomas Hobbes.

to agency, as Butler [58] did in *The Psychic Life of Power* where she incorporated psychoanalytical themes into a Foucauldian analysis of power. This was a necessary step towards giving a more robust twist to agency necessary to provide a normative underpinning to a democratic theory. I believe this is a positive development which bodes well for the future of progressive philosophy.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I unpacked what I take to be the basic features of the post-modern approach to agency. I began by briefly summarizing the history of the approach and outlined the arguments of some of the major theorists. This included quickly analyzing the work of seminal figures such as Baudrillard, Derrida, and Foucault. In particular, we looked at their approach to truth and agency. In the next two sections, I argued that post-modern theories were unable to get beyond certain limitations. Firstly, if the logic of the post-modern arguments was unpacked thoroughly it would wind up re-embracing the liberal individualism it sought to eschew. Secondly, I argued that this was not coincidental. This is because post-modern theorists are unable to develop a more robust approach to agency because they remain bound up in the limitations of what I called the technical mindset. Ultimately, post-modern theorists must regard human beings as determined by the socio-historical contexts within which we exist. This problematizes the arguments many post-modern theorists make for greater democracy. In many respects it leads to conclusions that were not intended or desired. I therefore argued that, especially given the intellectual and political climate surrounding post-modernism today, we should be more ambitious in developing truly robust accounts of democracy that can inspire people to genuine social change. Such an account is truly needed in today's world, when many increasingly associate progressive thinking with offering only critical visions of the world, without any substantial alternatives being on offer.

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