

REVIEW

David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism To Post-Critique* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004). ISBN: 0262083302

Both those who are interested in the historical collision of Continental philosophy with the American academy, and those who continue to work in the idiom of French post-war thinking will find David Couzens Hoy's book tremendously timely. In addition, Hoy has presented us with the rarest of creatures – a book of theory written in both an accessible style and also at a level of abstraction (above summary, yet below detailed exegesis) that makes it a wonderful text from which to teach. Those two factors alone make this a book worth reading (and re-reading).

Hoy defines his vision of the book's project in these terms, "This book is intended as a historical and topical guide through the different ways in which these French philosophers have asked about what resistance is and how it is possible."¹ He is particularly concerned with answering the criticisms of rationalist thinkers (presumably including liberals such as Habermas and post-Marxists such as Eagleton) "who want to know 'in the name of what' resistance is justified" by Foucault, Derrida, and the other French theorists that Hoy investigates.² In order to pursue this line of thinking, the book contains two sub-themes. This first is an examination of the influence of Nietzschean philosophy on the poststructuralist attempt to provide a *social ontology* that accounts for resistance, chiefly in the work of Michel Foucault. The second is to track the connection and confrontation between poststructuralism and its critics and co-travelers alike, including Bourdieu, Levinas, and the post-Marxists. This analysis focuses on the questions of ethics and politics. Hoy ends the book with his reflection on continuing to use the tools of a "deconstructive genealogy" while also stressing the need to move beyond poststructuralism to what he calls "post-Critique."

In the main body of Hoy's book is to be found a wealth of informative commentary and theoretical elaboration on the works of Nietzsche, Foucault,

1 David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 2.

2 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 5.

Derrida, and Laclau and Mouffe. He ascribes to the fairly standard account that Nietzsche is the grandfather of poststructuralism.

Thus, Nietzsche is important to the poststructuralists because he shows us a way out of the traditional epistemological and metaphysical conceptions of subjectivity and selfhood. But his writings on moral psychology are equally important. [...] particularly his emphasis on the body rather than on consciousness provides an alternative account of human understanding and comportment.³

Hoy argues that the birth of poststructuralism, if such a thing is worth naming, could be found in Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.⁴ He credits Deleuze with recovering the Nietzschean insight that critique need not only be a negative activity, but also an active mode of existence. It then was odd that Deleuze is so absent from the rest of the book. Foucault serves as the working out in historical detail of these Nietzschean attitudes about embodiment, pluralism, and active critique. Although Hoy's discussion of normalization, the history of ethics, and bio-power will be familiar territory for many readers of this journal, he handles each of these concepts and their connections in such a way as to suggest interesting new lines of thought about the corpus of Foucault's work. In looking for Foucault's basis for understanding resistance, he sees the desubjugation/desubjectification (*désassujettissement*) of the subject at the core of the critical project.⁵ The book's next chapter turns to a discussion of the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu. While Hoy acknowledges that Bourdieu is not a poststructuralist, and is "closer to Marx and Merleau-Ponty" than Nietzsche, he finds the notions of *habitus* and *field* to be a similar approach to doing an embodied social ontology to Foucault's genealogies.⁶ The end of the discussion of Bourdieu marks the turning point in the book towards a consideration of the controversy surrounding poststructuralist forays into ethics and politics.

In next two chapters Hoy traces the forays of poststructuralism into questions of ethics and politics. The chapter on Derrida and deconstructive ethics is particularly engaging, as Hoy traces Derrida's deconstruction of being-towards-death in the works of both Levinas and Heidegger. This analysis leads into the final topic of the book, the status of ideology critique as critical politics. Many see the intersection of poststructuralist and post-Marxist criticism as the most stimulating frontier of thought today, and Hoy is up to the task of presenting the full fury of that confrontation. He moves the discussion from the poststructural skepticism of ideology as "false

3 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 19-20.

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

5 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 88-89.

6 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 101.

consciousness” to encounters with the “post-Marxist Marxists” Laclau and Mouffe and the “post-Critique” (Hoy’s term) of Slavoj Žižek.

A fair assessment of any book begins by comparing the author’s vision with the product. It is in this case (and this case alone) that Hoy’s work leaves one wanting. The attempt to answer the rationalist critics of poststructuralism and defend the idea of critical resistance loses its sharp edge by the conclusion. If Hoy’s fullest elaboration of “post-Critique” is that the traditional foundations of criticality – metaphysical, ontological, and universal truth claims – are to be replaced by his invocation of good old fashioned Aristotelian practical wisdom (*phronesis*), he is not likely to see his vision catch on.⁷ And why should it? If the solution to the problems of contemporary Continental philosophy is simply to be found in the wisdom of the ancients, we have all been wasting our time, effort, and ink in vain. The main thrust of his conclusion is further weakened by omissions in the prime sub-theme as well.

Although the importance of Nietzsche to the poststructuralists is clear, the insight is hardly new. In addition, by putting all emphasis on the Nietzschean patrimony, the centrality of the poststructuralists’ engagement with Heidegger gets buried. However, in Hoy’s account it is not buried too deep. Heidegger rears his head in each and every substantive chapter in this book – and there is good reason for that. If the deconstructive genealogist really was just the descendent of Nietzsche, then many rationalist critics would have grounds to complain about the supposed nihilism of poststructural accounts of resistance. However, if French poststructuralism instead has two Germanic grandfathers – one (Nietzsche) whose style of critique is active and solitary and one (Heidegger) whose project of beings whose *Being-in-the-world-with-others* is also *dwelling* within a *homeland* – the family resemblance is more complicated. Take, for example, Foucault’s distinction between practices of *liberation* and practices of *freedom*:

[T]his practice of liberation [the surpassing of limits] is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society. This is why I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation [...]⁸

Now, does anyone think that Nietzsche would counsel the care of “acceptable [presumably social] forms of existence or political society” as a concern of the genealogist? Foucault is alluding to freedom as political *dwelling*. It also

7 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 234.

8 Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 282-283.

would be well to note that the most sustained treatments of Nietzsche by Foucault and Derrida – “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” and *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, respectively – focus on Nietzsche’s method/style of analysis rather than the content of his philosophical project.⁹

The consequence of overplaying the influence of Nietzsche and underplaying that of Heidegger as the background interlocutors of poststructuralism is the closing of a potential answer to the question, “In the name of what is resistance justified?” Hoy suggests that there are dangers in either the epistemological anarchism of “anything goes” as well as the nihilism of “nothing matters.”¹⁰ What if the Nietzschean style adopted by Foucault and Derrida is not an epistemic position, but an ethical one? In this case the question of justifying whether resistance is critical is reversed into that of developing a deconstructive genealogy of resistance that supports a *preexisting* ethical commitment to critique. Hoy argues that quasi-transcendentals like Derrida’s *justice* “are not discrete, ‘ontic’ phenomena.”¹¹ If one’s practice of an undecidable justice produces a social ontology *in the name of justice*, albeit one that can never be just, is justice not properly described as an ontic phenomenon? All of this is to suggest that Hoy’s casting of the term poststructuralism onto the ash-heap of history may be premature. Yes, the term is one “of convenience” in classifying certain French thinkers in the post-War period; and yes, many or most of those same thinkers “would not have adopted that label” (nor, we may assume, did Heraclitus or Pythagoras label themselves “pre-Socratic” either).¹² Yet, if poststructuralism is defined as not only a critique of structuralism, but a specific kind of critique of structuralism – one that employs an admixture of Nietzschean styles and Heideggerian concerns – then the decline of the structuralist human sciences need not spell the end of our uses for poststructuralism.

In the end, Hoy’s book is eminently successful; if not in the exact terms he sets for it. Engaging in its style and timely in its concerns, this book is a major contribution to the study of both post-critical social theory and the social ontology of resistance.

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9 See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Press, 1984), 76-100; and Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles/Eperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

10 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 231.

11 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 128.

12 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 17.