

REVIEW

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

In these, the twilight years of “theory,” it is easy to forget the discursive upheavals signaled by the appearance of “poststructuralism” on the Anglo-American critical scene in the sixties and seventies. Writing against the canon of sacrosanct ideas bequeathed by modern humanism and its forms of knowledge – from hermeneutic obsessions with depth and meaning to the historicist belief in history as narrative representation – writers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva openly challenged these idealist renderings of language and history, implicating them in histories of violence, domination, and exploitation. As a result of this materialist mode of questioning the modern history of ideas, their theoretical interest in the intersection of the body, language, and the dynamics of history made it possible to *resist* or effect a critical relation to the humanist regime that has undeniably dictated the modern exegetical and historical disciplines since the late eighteenth century, the social genealogy of which Foucault so remarkably described in *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*. If recent pronouncements on the end of the poststructuralist era can be read today as highly characteristic of much of contemporary Anglo-American thought – witness the many eulogies for high theory in the wake of the death of Jacques Derrida in 2004 – it is perhaps no accident that this (in my view) *regressive* movement from “theory” toward “practice” has provoked much of the confusion which haunts today’s polemics in the politics of interpretation on both the right *and* the left: namely, the received dogma that critical resistance against domination or injustice is impossible in the absence of universal principles and norms that will guide rational political action.

David Couzens Hoy is one of the most prolific and judicious contemporary voices in the vexed debates over the place of poststructuralism in Anglo-American critical thought, and his new book – *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* – offers a critical rearticulation of today’s polemics by tracing the figure of “resistance” in the political and social theories of the “poststructuralists,” focusing on the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Levinas, and Derrida. As the only book in English that deals with

the concept and practice of “resistance” in an analytically serious way, Hoy’s *Critical Resistance* is a timely reminder that poststructuralism is something more and other than an exotic French import. The book opens with a wide-ranging introduction to the concept of *resistance* – a persistent critical issue in poststructuralist theory, but one that the Anglophone tradition in philosophy and critical social theory has largely ignored, if not repressed. And while this resistance, as it were, to theorizing about resistance in the Anglophone tradition possesses a historicity that *Critical Resistance* does not examine, Hoy consistently argues that the challenge facing those who wish to defend a poststructuralist politics is to show how the different kinds of resistance articulated in poststructuralism – from the body of resistance in Foucault to the ethical resistance of the Other in Levinas – are not reactive evasions of the political, but rather critical interventions *in practice*. If “critique without resistance is empty and resistance without critique is blind,”¹ then the critical task of poststructuralist thought is to account for the possibility of resistance to political and psychic subjugation without resorting either to the master-narratives of the Enlightenment or romanticized notions of a pre-discursive self untouched by power.

This task, Hoy contends, finds its discursive origins in French readings of Nietzsche in the sixties, beginning with the path-breaking publication of Gilles Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in 1962. That Nietzsche should be the privileged precursor to what Hoy calls *post-critique* – his promising word of choice to replace the “finally inadequate”² term *poststructuralism* for a theoretical era no longer under the influence of structuralist linguistics – is, of course, not surprising, given the undeniable debt poststructuralist theory owes to his materialist rendering of language, interpretation, and history. And yet, while locating the origins of poststructuralist theory in this moment in the history of ideas seems true enough as far as it goes, Hoy’s argument would be profitably supplemented were he to consider its *political* origins in the decolonization and national resistance movements of the fifties and sixties, particularly the War of Independence in Algeria. As Robert Young points out in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, many of the writers affiliated with poststructuralism – most notably Derrida, Althusser, Lyotard, Bourdieu, and Cixous – were either born in occupied Algeria or personally involved with the tragic events of the war.³ Since Hoy clearly recognizes the transformative potential of poststructuralist thought, a more historical approach to its social and political origins in the critique of colonialism and its forms of knowledge would have helped address and

1 David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 6.

2 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 2.

3 Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1.

perhaps answer both past and present calls for it to give way to more “practical” modes of critique. For the claim that “theory” ultimately fails to address the political and ethical dimensions of culture and society – and therefore must be overcome – can only be made by actively denying the disruptive place of poststructuralism in postcolonial critiques of the imperial expansion of Europe, or what has been called the rise of the West. Insofar as Hoy’s argument is often on a level of abstraction that many poststructuralists have come to recognize as both the condition and effect of the modern history of ideas, his analysis at times fails to *read*, or attend to the materiality of, what it interprets.

This is not to say, however, that Hoy’s account of the rise of poststructuralist thought in French readings of Nietzsche is without value, for what interests him most is their demonstration of the body as the site upon which modern technologies of power inscribe themselves – technologies which, to borrow Nietzsche’s language in *The Genealogy of Morals*, are designed to domesticate the human body to the point where it can *make* and *hold to* promises.⁴ This is most cogently articulated in his argument that Nietzsche’s interest in the body as the source of resistance marks a decisive epistemological departure from the Enlightenment’s identification of freedom with rational self-consciousness. The crux of his claim, in effect, is that “in contrast to Kantians and Hegelians, who believe that freedom and autonomy require rational self-transparency, Nietzscheans think that much of what we do is conditioned by embodied social background practices that we do not and perhaps cannot bring fully to consciousness.”⁵ This Nietzschean move toward a genealogy of modern cultural and social practices of embodiment must be understood, Hoy rightly suggests, if one is going to begin to think in terms of *post-critique*. Indeed, whether one looks at Foucault’s work on the genealogy of discipline and punishment or Derrida’s rather Nietzschean notion of inscription, the figure of the body is crucial to the poststructuralist critique of modern philosophies of consciousness or reflection.

But Hoy also cautions his readers that “there will be room for disagreement in the following pages about just how opaque we are to ourselves and as to what this opacity implies for our capabilities as ethical, political, and social agents.”⁶ With this note of caution in mind, one of the virtues of Hoy’s style is his critical ability to negotiate these disagreements in the politics of theory without any of the anxiety and partisanship that often characterizes debates in the humanities and social sciences. While, in the book’s concluding chapter, he offers Derrida’s notion of “deconstructive

4 For a lively account of Nietzsche on disciplining the body, see David E. Wellbery’s “Foreword” to Friedrich A. Kittler’s book, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), vii-xvi.

5 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 13.

6 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 13.

genealogy" as the most promising innovation in the politics of interpretation since the sixties, the essays in *Critical Resistance* present poststructuralist thought as a collective interpretive and epistemological enterprise rather than a towering Babel of individual personalities and theories. As a result, the individual chapters on Nietzsche, Foucault, Bourdieu, Levinas and Derrida, and Post-Marxism seek to explore in clear expository prose how different modes of resistance – political, social, and ethical – are possible, and how they relate to each other in practice today. The accent thus almost always falls on a series of related questions that emerged during the course of poststructuralist investigations into modern technologies of embodiment – questions about the *limits* of rational self-consciousness that Hoy convincingly argues the Anglophone tradition in critical philosophy and social theory ignores at its own peril.

Without doubt, there are insights and arguments in *Critical Resistance* that should make a difference in Anglo-American critical thought in the coming years. But nowhere is this more evident than in his remarkable chapter on Foucault, in which he traces with analytical precision how his genealogies of disciplinary power allow for the possibility of critical resistance. Throughout the chapter, Hoy anticipates the traditional objections to Foucault's enterprise, most succinctly summarized by Fredric Jameson's warning that he is hopelessly trapped in a "winner loses" logic,⁷ according to which "the more Foucault wins by portraying society as carceral, the more he loses insofar as his critical voice of refusal becomes increasingly paralyzed."⁸ Readers who object to this warning may thus find Hoy's careful presentation of Foucault's explanation of how resistance is possible under disciplinary regimes a productive counter-reading to the Anglo-American portrayal of him as rendering "individual agents as powerless and ineffective in bringing about social transformation."⁹ From this reading of Foucault, according to which "all domination is power, but not all power is domination,"¹⁰ it follows that resistance is to be understood not only as an "enlightened" critique of the technologies of power, as important as this Kantian move is. Rather, as Foucault insists in his explorations of the history of sexuality, resistance against disciplinary regimes must produce a radical desubjectivation (*désassujettissement*) – the emancipatory dissolution of the very subject that strangely and paradoxically seems to desire the social and psychic conditions of its own subjection (*assujettissement*). For readers of Foucault, of course, this is where things get interesting.

7 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *New Left Review* 146, 53-92.

8 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 9.

9 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 59.

10 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 14.

In this connection, Hoy turns to Judith Butler's provocative reading of Foucault in *The Psychic Life of Power*, in which she senses a "suppressed psychoanalysis" in Foucault's genealogical account of subjection and resistance.¹¹ By pursuing a psychoanalytic critique of Foucault, and at the same time, a Foucaultian critique of psychoanalysis, Butler argues that the subject who is produced in and through subjection is never *fully* constituted in subjection. Drawing on Jacqueline Rose's feminist revision of Freud, Butler explores the possibility that "there is a resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life,"¹² one that interminably reveals the "failure" of disciplinary power to subjugate the subject's agency once and for all. In this way, Butler suggests, resistance is *enabled* by power itself. This is to say that for Butler, as for Foucault, the figure of resistance is inextricably connected to the idea of power as *productive*. In thus describing power not as an exterior restriction but rather as a process that must be repeatedly produced, Butler's analysis of the psychic life of power "between Freud and Foucault" shows that it is precisely the possibility of a repetition that goes awry, one that somehow fails to consolidate the subject by the social and psychic forces of normalization, that enables resistance. Taking Foucault's well-known example of the discursive formation of homosexuality – a late nineteenth-century "injurious" term that first names and frames a particular class of pathologized subjects, but which Foucault suggests could also be the site of a radical resignification and transvaluation – Butler concludes that power produces social and psychic effects which not only perpetually undermine the cultural practices of normalization, but also make other ways of being human possible.¹³

What Hoy takes from this insight on the part of Butler's "psychoanalytic" Foucault is "a convincing psychological explanation of why one resists."¹⁴ As Hoy puts it at the conclusion of his chapter on Foucault, "one resists not merely because one is constrained, but because one recognizes that one identifies with these constraints insofar as they become one's identity by making one who one is."¹⁵ Nor is this all. For Butler, as for Hoy, "resistance comes when one senses not only one's dependence on these constraints, but also one's tendency to give in to them."¹⁶ This invocation of Butler's work is an important moment in Hoy's book, for it substantiates, rather than merely announces, the truly disruptive nature of poststructuralist thought. The subsequent chapters on Bourdieu, Levinas and Derrida, and Post-Marxism, extend these insights on the nature of subjection and resistance

11 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 87.

12 Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1987), 90-91.

13 Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 93.

14 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 100.

15 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 100.

16 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 100.

in productive ways, but *Critical Resistance* finds its post-critical idiom and focus in Hoy's reading of Butler's psychoanalytic revision of Foucault. The importance, and indeed *virtue*, of critical resistance, Hoy writes after Butler, "would be the practice of risking one's deformation as a subject by resistance not to the constraining principles per se, but to one's *attachment* to them insofar as they constitute one's identity."¹⁷ What Hoy finally admires in Butler's post-critical thought is what she admires in Foucault – the way it is shaped in an interminable "disobedience to the principles by which one is formed."¹⁸ Indeed, given the cultural conservatism pressing in on all sides today, what better way to describe the cultural politics of *critical resistance*?

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17 Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 100.

18 Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in D. Ingram (ed.), *The Political* (Blackwell, 2002), 226.