



“Destructive Intellectualizing vs Science”

a 4 star review by Dick Burkhart of

Explaining Post Modernism:

Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault

By Stephen Hicks (2011)

I decided to read this book after direct observations of the pathologies of Critical Race Theory (CRT) when I learned that CRT is rooted in postmodern philosophy. I was well rewarded. In fact Hicks explains in straightforward language essential concepts of key philosophers from Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel to Nietzsche and Heidegger, then on to postmodernists like Foucault. Before Hicks most of this had been a puzzle to me.

Postmodernism is an ideological assault on the core values of the Enlightenment and of science, appealing to subjectivity, irrationality, emotions, and anecdotes, while asserting: "...that all claims of objectivity and rationality mask oppressive political agendas" (p 85). The purpose is to promote a philosophical basis for no-holds-barred mass movements (in the sense of Erik Hoffer's "The True Believer") to foment revolution. I was surprised to learn that it was Rousseau who was the first in this tradition to promote total revolution, becoming a favorite of the both the French and Russian revolutionaries.

The latest example to capture the public eye, with its "cancel culture", is CRT, whose doctrines of race are based on quasi-religious ideological fervor, not rigorous scholarship. It is not incidental that such movements focus on doctrines and intimidation, not on practical and constructive programs. Being anti-reason, anti-science, and pro-power philosophically, propaganda and smear campaigns come naturally.

Meanwhile, CRT simply assumes that the aggrieved parties will do far better once in power, no well-researched and wisely implemented programs required. Reality check: as this is being written, the "defund the police" forces have come to power in several US cities, but have been caught flat-footed, without credible replacement programs, risking failure and strong political backlash. Note: I am personally convinced that we can do far better on policing, especially on the racial equity front, but that this needs the best social science globally and won't come easily or quickly given the current political tactics on both the Left and the Right.

Where Hicks comes up short is in his understanding of economics and “socialism”. His concept of socialism is that of a Soviet-style command economy. But what is all the rage among today’s youth, and elders like myself, is Bernie Sanders type “democratic socialism”, which is modeled on the very successful social democracies of Europe, especially those in Scandinavia, like Denmark.

In particular, Hicks claims that “In theory, the free-market economists have won the debate. Ludwig von Mises, Fredrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman have shown how market are efficient” (p 87). But the “theory” in question is a version of “neo-classical” theory, which is notorious for its many false assumptions and failed predictions (the crash of 2008 came as a big surprise).

In addition the narrow neo-classical definition of “efficient” has meant making oodles of money for the ruling classes while hollowing out the middle class and crushing a good portion of the working class over the last 40 years of corporate globalization. This “escalating inequality” led directly to the election of a US demagogue in 2016 with similar consequences globally from what is now called “neoliberal capitalism”. Meanwhile, this “efficiency” is also raising havoc with the global climate, damaging ecosystems, and depleting natural resources.

The other way Hicks comes up short is that he fails to present a coherent alternative to postmodern philosophy, after acknowledging the collapse of the positivist (= scientific) school of philosophy, since science cannot many questions of most interest to philosophers. Examples of such questions, pointed out by Bertrand Russell, are (1) “Can we prove that there is an external world” (= a discoverable “reality”)? Or (2) “Can we find an objective basis for morality” (p. 72).

Most working scientists, of course, simply assume that there is an external world waiting to be elucidated, or “discovered”, by humanity via scientific investigations involving observations, experiments, theories, and analysis. As to morality, social scientists, though unlikely to propose a definitive description, would offer the relevance of studies about behaviors and attitudes that contribute to the long term survival, prosperity, and happiness of human societies.

As an applied mathematician, I’m quite comfortable with a formulation of knowledge based on (1) conceptual or mathematical models of various aspects of our world, (2) observational, experimental, and analytical analysis of these models, (3) societal procedures for assessing the usefulness of these models for both contributing to our understanding and to our long-term survival, prosperity, and happiness. That is, classical questions may spur our interest but definitive answers are not needed. Useful insights and data will do. Some questions may even lack meaningful answers, such as “What came before the beginning of time?”. The whole point is what we learn from the quest itself.

Postmodern philosophy may just be a frightening symptom of global distress, but sound philosophy, well-coordinated with both the latest science and the most ancient wisdom traditions, is now needed more than ever.