

## POSTMODERNIST GIBBERISH: DERRIDA DUMBFOUNDS THE POSITIVISTS

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Jacques Derrida (1978), the enfant terrible of Continental philosophy who passed away recently, made many mad: analytical philosophers, positivists in the sciences and social sciences, the right, stupid people generally. That Derrida was brilliant is somewhat beside the point. What is on point is the way he read—texts and indeed the whole western philosophical tradition—aggressively, so much so that we could conclude that Derrida meant that reading is a form of writing.

That is one of the main things I take away from his oeuvre. Another is that every text is 'undecidable,' that is, it cannot perfectly clarify and exhaust its topic. This is because every definition needs to be defined, ad infinitum. There is no vantage outside of writing from which one can achieve that Archimedean insight about the truth or essence of the world. This rebuttal of absolutism is extremely maddening to those who pretend apodictic knowledge, especially the gang we sometimes call positivists.

To be sure, positivism died within physics by 1905, with Einstein's first papers on the special theory of relativity. Newton was overthrown, except in the largely American social sciences, where it still prevails, even though there are challengers nibbling at the edges of the mainstream social-science disciplines. Newton only survives in sociology, political science, economics and parts of psychology.

It is in these disciplines that Derrida is especially scandalous, although rear-guard actions are also being fought in English by those who dislike 'theory' and want the great books instead. I had colleagues who so hated Derrida that they passed around cartoons lampooning postmodernism, for which he was allegedly responsible. And anyone could dismiss his writing because it is often allusive (but see Lemert 1997).

I know sociologists who are politically progressive but intellectually conservative. They respect the right of people to be gay, but hate postmodernism. They don't understand the connection—queer theory, inspired by Foucault (1988). Derrida has queered the western philosophical tradition by challenging foundational hierarchies, of production over reproduction, subject over object, reading over writing, straight over gay and so on. Most important he challenges the positivist version of science, which was in the saddle between Newton and Einstein but still thrives in American social science. This positivism pretends that texts can perfectly know the world, without leaving a remainder. This is the thinking that puts everything into neat little boxes, with nothing left over. Everything is in its place, and nothing falls between the boxes or overlaps them. As Derrida and the Frankfurt School argued, this 'identitarian' thinking is the basis of fascism.

Derrida links epistemology and politics, much as the Hegelian Marxists from Lukacs (1971) to the Frankfurt School (Jay 1973; Wiggershaus 1995) did. Knowing, writing, reading, teaching are political vehicles in their relationship to the world, which sometimes they pretend only to mirror—hence reproducing it.

### *Theses that Derive from Derrida*

I begin with Marx, who argued that the aim of philosophy/theory/science should be not only to know the world but to change it. That is Marx and Engels' (1972) famous 'eleventh thesis.' Derrida builds on that insight. I am interested in Derrida mainly as he enriches this Marxist tradition, which is elaborated in a parallel way by the Frankfurt School. I am not the first to notice the remarkable parallel between Derrida and Adorno in their discussions of epistemology and of philosophy's intervention in the world. The following insights are Derrida's contributions to the critique of positivism:

- *Knowing changes the world.*
- *Knowing cannot be known transparently; it must be interpreted.*
- *Interpretation is not transparent, and it changes knowing, which changes the world.*

- *Texts do not say; they do not disclose themselves; reading is writing.*
- *Numbers do not mean; they are merely signifiers.*

Positivists make two key assumptions: Texts say. And numbers mean. This is Newtonian epistemology, which begins to unravel with Einstein and then Derrida. People hate Derrida because much of his critique is developed in difficult, allusive prose. A reviewer accused me of writing 'postmodernist gibberish,' presumably imitating and/or drawing from Derrida and others of his ilk.

Derrida writes gibberish in order to liberate reading to write—to impose meaning and sense on words that are treated merely as slippery signifiers, which is all they can ever be. This is not anti-science. It could be a loving embrace of science if science is read and written merely as one rhetorical strategy among many—science fiction, as I call it. The Frankfurt School ably demonstrated the possibilities of an empirical sociology that did research, reported it, teased out its meanings, all within an overarching theoretical framework inseparable from researching, reporting, analyzing etc. In this sense, mathematics is argument, as Einstein argued beginning in 1905.

Einstein was Derridean before the fact. He realized that understanding nature does not exhaust nature of its ineluctable mystery—its resistance to being drained of mystery, myth, meaning. I lament Derrida's lack of engagement with the post-positivist philosophy of science, but we all are captive of our intellectual autobiographies. I am closer to Derrida's sensibility than to Einstein's because I was raised on many of the same intellectual sources—Hegel, Rousseau, Marx and many others. But my father was in the vanguard of the first generation of quantitative political scientists and my wife is not just a user of sociological statistics; she works at the level of the ICPSR summer school. I'm Frankfurt; she's Ann Arbor. We both respect the possibilities, indeed inevitability, of science, but we also recognize that science is undecidable—it cannot stand outside the world and merely count it untheoretically. Let me turn to Derrida's theses:

### 1. Knowing changes the world.

Every time your writing is read people begin to see the world your way. Publication is transforming, especially, in fast capitalism, when books ooze out of their covers and compel lives. Positivism is a peculiar writing strategy that conceals its authorship; it is secret writing, as I have called it. It conceals its literariness, its artifice, precisely to describe the world incontrovertibly. We

'must' have racism, sexism, capitalism and so on because we have mirrored them on the journal page. Positivism recognizes that the world is molten and it needs to have a certain ideological remainder in order to bring about that storied world. It wants to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Non-positivist writing acknowledges its constitutive nature. By writing, it intervenes. It is always already rhetorical—making an argument, often for a different state of affairs.

## 2. Knowing cannot be known transparently; it must be interpreted.

You venture to another country, with a foreign language. You pick up an English-Spanish dictionary, let's say, and you look up a term in the other language. The definition seems simple, but there is a word you cannot understand. You look it up, and the same thing happens all over again. The process of defining the definition is endless, suggesting that language is not transparent; there is no Ur-language, no language beneath or beyond language, such as mathematics, that resolves all differences.

## 3. Interpretation is not transparent, and it changes knowing, which changes the world.

One can read a poem, or a Shakespeare play, as saying different things. Science is no different. A Presidential candidate receives 45% of the vote. Did she lose by a landslide? Or narrowly? There is nothing available to the person doing the interpreting in the way of a rule or method that will decide these issues. Knowing is very much a matter of perspective. And this does not make objective knowledge impossible. There *is* a real world out there. But there is no posture outside of the world, beyond time and space, from which we can know and then talk about or write about—or count—the world perfectly objectively. Perspective always creeps in to determine what we think we know.

## 4. Texts do not say; they do not disclose themselves; reading is writing.

No matter how scientific an article seems, or how quantitative, one must still interpret it. And different interpretations are always possible, as we just noted above. The interpreter, the reader, must intervene in texts strongly,

even 'constituting' them, by what he or she brings to the table in the way of interpretive dexterity. One cannot just let the writing speak for itself; it never does. Things are always left unsaid and remain undefined. Contradictions loom around every corner. This does not thwart writing but requires that reading become, in effect, a form of writing itself. Writing does not 'mean' apart from the readings that people do.

### 5. Numbers do not mean; they are merely signifiers.

By the same token, math is a form of writing, what Wittgenstein called a language game, with its own peculiar rules and conventions. As writing, math is fiction; it conjures a world that does not necessarily contain algebra or calculus as self-evident ways of knowing. To say that math and science are fictional does not rob them of truth. Their truths can be powerful. Sometimes we need to count things—the population of a country, average annual income, the number of illegal immigrants. But counting is not the only way to know. Writing, interviewing, poetry, fiction are valid and should be valued. As I have been saying, science is a form of fiction. Positivism is a unique version of scientific empiricism that pretends it is not writing. Derrida would agree with me that one can and should be an empiricist without being a positivist. Positivism is a subset of all possible empiricisms, some of which can be Derridean and Frankfurt-oriented.

### *Implications for Doing and Writing Sociology*

A Derridean sociology is a possibility that perhaps he did not consider. However, one of Derrida's (1994) last books, *Specters of Marx*, makes it clear that he thought like a social scientist and took seriously the Internet as a distinctive development in capitalism. It is easy to dismiss postmodernism as a vitiation of science and scientific sociology, as I have explored in an essay (Agger 2007) entitled "Do You Hate Postmodernism? Or, Did You Flunk Statistics?" Postmodernism seems inimical to science because it can easily be read as gibberish and also because it is theory—a perspective that seems to avoid counting. But as I tell my students, one can view theorizing and science as complementary perspectives by using an analogy that I remember from my teenage years.

I flew from Portland, Oregon to Amsterdam. The Pan Am plane took the polar route, over the North Pole and nearby Greenland. We looked out from our windows in wonder at the amazing snowscape below us. I had never seen the world this way, full of glaciers and apparently lifeless ice

flows. That is the perspective from which theory might look at the world. But at 40,000 feet it is difficult to really see the polar bears and penguins. One would need to be on the ground, or near it, to capture the details of the polar snowscape. Of course, both perspectives are valid; indeed, they require each other to really understand this strange land.

Poverty is another example. It is helpful to learn from Labor Department statistics that the bottom fifth of American households average a mere \$11,000 a year in annual income—less if one is in a black or Hispanic household. The poverty threshold is about \$19,000. But it is also helpful to learn from poor people themselves how difficult life can be at that station. Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) wrote a dramatic book called *Nickel and Dimed* in which she provided ethnographic accounts, her own, about being a member of the working poor, laboring at various jobs, without benefits or employment security, without hope of saving money for college or even a place of one's own.

Let's pursue the poverty example. It is often not enough to say 'there's lots of poverty.' Lots is relative. A percentage of poor would be helpful. However, that begs the question of defining (operationalizing) poverty. A certain gross household income? Lack of savings? The absence of job security and benefits? Living in a certain neighborhood? Psychic desperation? These all have to be argued, theoretically. There is no vantage from which they can be known beyond argumentation and perspective. Even knowing the percentage poor may not be enough. One might do well to have narratives from poor people, who struggle to make ends meet, like Ehrenreich in her book. But even that falls short of structural, potentially global understanding of the dynamics of capitalist impoverishment, uneven development, labor-market segmentation etc. A Derridean would conclude that one needs knowing and writing about poverty on each of these levels in order to understand the phenomenon from many sides, but never completely. There are no phenomena 'in themselves,' no noumenal essences. It could be that the rich are poor, too, in their alienation from themselves and from others.

Derrida, like the Frankfurt School, is like the passengers on the polar route. They see the world from above, glimpsing certain structures and processes perhaps invisible from the ground. This sort of theoretical work, even if it called postmodernist, does not necessarily vitiate the ground-level work of describing, interviewing, even counting. Indeed, Derrida would stress that both the macro and micro perspectives (from on high and ground up) are flawed or, better perhaps, are corrigible. They have blind spots that can be corrected with multiple perspectives on knowing, writing, reading, science. A colleague of mine at a former university dismissed Derridean sociology as "speculative bullshit," which is a lot like calling it gibberish. I thought he meant that he did not understand Derrida and thus was mad at

him, a reaction that is easy to understand given the dense character of his writing.

But 'Derrida' is a language that can be learned, as can the Frankfurt School's critical theory, in order to illumine and enrich the scientific project. One of the big myths in the positivist social science world is that postmodernism and critical theory are inimical to empiricism. The Frankfurt School ranged from the dense and allusive *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973) to the rich empirical work of the California studies in prejudice, culminating in *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), *Aspects of Sociology* (The Institute for Social Research 1972) and even Adorno's (2000) 'intro' sociology textbook, based on lectures, entitled *Introduction to Sociology*. Derrida's empiricism is implied, if not yet fully actualized. I have spent much of the past twenty years developing a Derridean sociology of science, and hence a scientific sociology (*Socio(onto)logy* [1989b], *Reading Science* [1989a], *Public Sociology* [2007]) that bases itself on the theses, above, about the indeterminacy of writing and the constitutive nature of reading. Perhaps the only thing separating Derrida and the Frankfurters (see Michael Ryan [1982]) is their differing stance on Marx and Engels' eleventh thesis on Feuerbach—where the call for the unity of theory and practice.

Even here, though, the Frankfurters, by the end of the 1960s, had largely come around to Derrida's distance from the world. This was prefigured in post-WWII works such as Marcuse's (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*, Horkheimer's (1974) *Eclipse of Reason*, and Adorno's (1974) *Minima Moralia*. *Negative Dialectics* opens with a phrase indicating that the opportunity to change the world was missed and cannot be recovered—a debatable point in Internet capitalism. The Frankfurters, until Habermas, felt that "total administration," a tendency of the logic of capital and its culture industries, choked off any significant opposition, a theme I pursue in a book I am writing about the legacy of the sixties (*The Sixties at 40: Radicals Remember and Look Forward*). In much of my current work, I, along with Beth Anne Shelton, explore childhood and adolescent as one of the few remaining contested terrains on which total administration plays itself out. In our (Agger and Shelton 2007) *Fast Families, Virtual Children* we examine the nexus between family, work and school, and in our (forthcoming) *I Hate School* we examine the reproduction of American anti-intellectualism in the sweat shops and prisons of our elementary schools, junior highs and high schools.

For his part, Derrida, like Foucault and Baudrillard, helps us read culture politically, especially as the book has been eclipsed. This occurs in fast capitalism, in which books ooze out of their covers and implant themselves in the world, surrounding us with 'secret writing' that cannot be carefully considered and contested. Advertising is an obvious example, as is reality television. Even positivist social science is an example, as I develop in my Derrida-aided readings of journal sociology, where a doctrinal positivism

(Newton) gives way to a discursive positivism of the post-1960s American sociology journals. This latter positivism abandons argument—text—for the post-textual figurings (I call them gestures) of the dense and layered journal page. Reason is eclipsed by method, which is figurally displayed, suggesting the inertness of the social world that cannot be leveraged toward utopia. Of course, this representational function of ideology—depicting the inevitability of our social fate, Nietzsche's amor fati—has been with us since Marx wrote about religion as opium during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Today the love of fate, always a misrepresentation given the basic fluidity (historicity) of the social world and even of nature (Einstein), has been transmogrified into the coach Bill Parcells' verity: "It is what it is." This ontologically freezes the dialectic and hence denies the possibility of social change.

### *Public or Pubic Sociology?*

Recently, among sixties generation sociologists like me and Berkeley sociologist Michael Burawoy (2005), a "public sociology" has been endorsed as a return to the activism of that decade. Predictably, perhaps, mainstream sociologists have appropriated the term for their own consulting work, media contacts and, in the case of Pepper Schwartz, outside employment. University of Washington sociologist Schwartz is employed by perfectmatch.com to match people based on the high science of a personality profile, available to paying customers. Perfectmatch.com hypes her by listing endorsements from other sociologists who hold doctorates. In her recent tell-all expose of her (Schwartz 2008) post-marital sexual escapades framed as advice for women in their fifties and beyond, *Prime: Adventures and Advice on Sex, Love and the Sensual Years*, she exemplifies a curious kind of public sociology, or pubic sociology as it might be called. She talks about picking up a guy at an airport bar who looked twenty years younger than herself, and then having torrid sex with him at their idyllic destination. It turns out that he was only eleven years younger—perhaps a peril of public/pubic sociology conducted hurriedly in fast airports. Schwartz also offers an Ode to her Vibrator as well as endorsements of plastic surgery and handcuffs during sex. She recommends Velcro ones, a nuance lost on me.

You have to be really self-absorbed to write a book about your sexual experiences or perhaps just needy. If Schwartz's public sociology cannot change the world, at least it can get you laid. (Anyone wondering about Internet dating should consult a real work of public sociology, by Virginia Vitzthum (2007), entitled *I Love You, Let's Meet.*)



I have considered Burawoy's writing about public sociology and even responded to it in writing. Until I learned recently that Schwartz had gone commercial and was involved with a dating service and then wrote a self-help sexual confessional, I knew her mainly from a book she wrote with Blumstein on American couples. Pepper is full of advice: My favorite title by her is (Schwartz and Lever 2000) *The Great Sex Weekend: A 48-Hour Guide to Rekindling Sparks for Bold, Busy, or Bored Lovers*. I also note, from her *curriculum vita*, that she did a stint as a consultant to "Playboy Online." To give her a real chance (as a public sociologist, if not a dating/sexual partner), I went to perfectmatch.com and filled in her and the company's personality profile. Here are the results, a meager return for the ten minutes it took to bubble the answers with my mouse (no sexual double entendre intended, Pepper):

Your Similarity Test Results – **RAOV**

Risk Taker, High Energy, Optimistic, Seeks Variety

You are an unleashed personality. You hold nothing back and are willing to put it all on the line, act quickly and expect success. If you fail, you expect success the next time - or certainly, eventually. You also like change, because a changing environment means new opportunity, another chance or an even better mate. Too much predictability in life scares you. You don't want a partner that will hold you back, so you probably should look for someone who is a forward charging person like yourself. At the very least, not timid.

The test was like most others, except for the PhD-endorsing window dressing and a clear interest in environmentalism and (call it) sexual electricity. Predictably, there were snafus. I could only list two sports or exercise forms I like, and I like many, many! And, given the number of permissible answers to one of the items, I was forced to sacrifice my interest in sex for my interest in sports! With all due apologies to Wilhelm Reich and Pepper, *everyone* likes sex. I was really discouraged to learn that I, as a 'RAOV' (see above), am in the majority category of respondents; I thought I was special! I was even hoping for the category "Adornoian," an angst-ridden Jew who writes dialectical sentences and despairs about the Enlightenment. Oh, well. Fully 41.8% of the respondents are like me—high energy, optimistic etc. Of course, anyone who knows me knows that I am not a risk taker. You will never get me on a Ferris wheel, like alone a scary roller coaster. And I like to go the same old Chinese restaurant in Arlington and order the same things every time! (I note that one of Pepper's doctorate-holding endorsers is Barry Glassner, whose work on food I like. I wonder if Barry, and another

fellow traveling doctorate-holding endorser who I like, Barbara Risman, are also RAOV!) I'm so predictable (run before dawn, write in the morning, fish in the afternoon) that I don't even have a cell phone; everyone knows where I will be. I think I am not a RAOV after all.

Picture Derrida filling in the dating site's personality profile! An imaginary Pepper is helping him worry this through:

Jacques: I don't know what this means, 'to indicate my interests.' I have many interests, and perhaps no interests. I am interested in 'interest' or perhaps better to say that interest is interested in me.

Pepper: No, no, Jacques, just click on your hobbies—you know, sports (you guys in France like soccer) or gardening or writing. You can only click on three of them.

Jacques: What does it mean to be interested in writing? My whole life is toujours ecriture—how do you say, always already writing? As I have written, there is nothing outside the text. (Il n'y a pas de hors-texte.) There is no outside to my writing, even when I put down the pen because I need to eat or sleep. Sleep is prolegomenon. For me to 'be interested' in writing would mean that part of my life is not textual and of course that is false. I like to watch football on Saturday but, alas, I usually have a book in my hand!

Pepper: You're making this really complicated, Jacques. Don't you want to find a date? Come on, work with me. You could meet your true love.

Jacques: I am more interested in the boundary between truth and love, because, after all, love is a certain kind of falsehood; the self is under erasure because you have given yourself over to the object. People are pursuing their false love—love that falsifies by putting the self under erasure. Can I put that somewhere on the questionnaire?

Pepper: No, you cannot. You should really read my book. You say you are a philosopher but I have my own personal philosophy, which is "Live large. Be all of who you are and can be." Live large, Jacques.

Obviously, I have a very different conception of sociology in mind, although I'm sure my cash flow pales by comparison to Pepper's. It is an iron law that you cannot be a public sociologist and rake in the cash by commodifying your work.

By "public" sociology (of the non-profit kind) I intend four orientations to one's scholarly work, to one's writing, including of course science. The latter three of these are taken directly from Derrida, and the first is derived from the eleventh thesis of Marx and Engels (with which Derrida wouldn't have been in disagreement, judging from his *Specters of Marx*).

- Sociology in its telling seeks to change the world; indeed, it is already doing so by narrating the world.
- Sociological writing would confess its basic assumptions about the world, exposing them for debate.
- Sociological writing would acknowledge its own corrigibility, its constraint by perspective, thus embracing multiple perspectives.
- Sociological writing would 'transcode' (Jameson 1981) its own language game (figures of speech and technical terms) into other games, acknowledging (Derrida's concept of undecidability) that there is no Ur-text beyond which we don't have to define our words endlessly.

We might want to add a fifth:

- Public sociology must be posted on the Internet, open source, in order to enable access. This precludes online dating services' personality profiles, though!

Unlike Burawoy, I don't conceive of public sociology as one among several other good literary possibilities; for example, he retains an essentially positivist professional sociology alongside the engaged sociology that people with our politics profess. Unlike Schwartz, I don't intend sociologists to write

pot-boilers for the delectation of the needy public—public sociology, as I am terming it. My public sociology would unashamedly use technical language, whether ‘heteroskedasticity’ or ‘hyperreality’ as long as authors attempted to define, and then define again, reaching out for the ideal speech situation of unconstrained, turn-taking dialogue embraced by Habermas, a second-generation Frankfurter, concerned to translate socialism into a revived democratic public sphere. Public sociology is the way we would talk to each other in utopia.

For me, public writing resides at the level of the sentence, which must be dialectical. Adorno models this sort of writing. I view him as a public sociologist and public intellectual, even if reading him presupposes vast knowledge of Continental philosophy and social theory! (In Europe what counts as public intellectuality is different from here; Derrida is offered in mainstream, main street Parisian book stores.) Sentences must portray a seemingly frozen present as possessing the energy of their own undoing, total administration presaging utopia. For example, in describing the long siege of Bush, Jr., a positivist or public sociologist might note that this Reich might last a thousand years. A Derridean would acknowledge the right’s hegemony, but would already recognize its counterforce in a disaffected (and enlarging) electorate. Indeed, right-wing triumphalism would be read as the right’s self-consciousness of its own precarious position, vast corporate profits and militant unilateralism having bankrupted the domestic economy. I think of the scene from Michael Moore in which Bush is captured addressing a roomful of the rich and saying, knowingly, “Some call you the elite; you are my base”!

For Burawoy, public sociology involves addressing a certain audience—publics—to help mobilize them, much as *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 2002) addressed a proletarian public. But Burawoy also allows for the frozen, socio(onto)logizing sentences of the positivists, who control the power. Schwartz, if she thinks about the issues at all, would probably valorize stylistic clarity in the service of an audience insatiable for sexual and mating advice. Of course, clarity, at the level of the simple sentence lacking conditional clauses is a sine qua non of *People* magazine-like public sociology. I mention Schwartz both because she recently won a telling ASA award for public sociology (telling about the ASA) and because her autostimulating book *Prime* contains not a single Adornoian sentence. Perhaps Schwartz is unfamiliar with Sartre’s decision to refuse the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964, and his reasons, quoted below, for doing so:

I deeply regret the fact that the incident has become something of a scandal:

a prize was awarded, and I refused it. It happened entirely because I was not

informed soon enough of what was under way. When I read in the October 15

*Figaro littéraire*, in the Swedish correspondent's column, that the choice of the Swedish Academy was tending toward me, but that it had not yet been determined, I supposed that by writing a letter to the Academy, which I sent off the following day, I could make matters clear and that there would be no further discussion.

I was not aware at the time that the Nobel Prize is awarded without consulting the opinion of the recipient, and I believed there was time to prevent this from happening. But I now understand that when the Swedish Academy has made a decision it cannot subsequently revoke it.

My reasons for refusing the prize concern neither the Swedish Academy nor the Nobel Prize in itself, as I explained in my letter to the Academy. In it, I alluded to two kinds of reasons: personal and objective.

The personal reasons are these: my refusal is not an impulsive gesture, I have always declined official honors. In 1945, after the war, when I was offered the Legion of Honor, I refused it, although I was sympathetic to the government. Similarly, I have never sought to enter the Collège de France, as several of my friends suggested.

This attitude is based on my conception of the writer's enterprise. A writer who adopts political, social, or literary positions must act only with the means that are his own—that is, the written word. All the honors he may receive expose his readers to a pressure I do not consider desirable. If I sign myself *Jean-Paul Sartre* it is not the same thing as if I sign myself *Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prizewinner*.

The writer who accepts an honor of this kind involves as well as himself the association or institution which has honored him. My sympathies for the Venezuelan revolutionists commit only myself, while if Jean-Paul Sartre the Nobel laureate champions the Venezuelan resistance, he also commits the entire Nobel Prize as an institution.

The writer must therefore refuse to let himself be transformed into an institution, even if this occurs under the most honorable circumstances, as in the present case.

This attitude is of course entirely my own, and contains no criticism of those who have already been awarded the prize. I have a great deal of respect and admiration for several of the laureates whom I have the honor to know.

My objective reasons are as follows: The only battle possible today on the cultural front is the battle for the peaceful coexistence of the two cultures, that of the East and that of the West. I do not mean that they must embrace each other—I know that the confrontation of these two cultures must necessarily take the form of a conflict—but this confrontation must occur between men and between cultures, without the intervention of institutions.

I myself am deeply affected by the contradiction between the two cultures: I am made up of such contradictions. My sympathies undeniably go to socialism and to what is called the Eastern bloc, but I was born and brought up in a bourgeois family and a bourgeois culture. This permits me to collaborate with all those who seek to bring the two cultures closer together. I nonetheless hope, of course, that "the best man wins." That is, socialism.

This is why I cannot accept an honor awarded by cultural authorities, those of the West any more than those of the East, even if I am sympathetic to their existence. Although all my sympathies are on the socialist side. I should thus be quite as unable to accept, for example, the Lenin Prize, if someone wanted to give it to me, which is not the case.

I know that the Nobel Prize in itself is not a literary prize of the Western bloc, but it is what is made of it, and events may occur which are outside the province of the members of the Swedish Academy. This is why, in the present situation, the Nobel Prize stands objectively as a distinction reserved for the writers of the West or the rebels of the East. It has not been awarded, for example, to Neruda, who is one of the greatest South American poets. There has never been serious question of giving it to Louis Aragon, though he certainly deserves it. It is regrettable that the prize was given to Pasternak and not to Sholokhov, and that the only Soviet work thus honored should be one published abroad and banned in its own country. A balance might have been established by a similar gesture in the other direction. During the war in Algeria, when we had signed the "declaration of the 121," I should have gratefully accepted the prize, because it would have honored not only me, but also the freedom for which we were fighting. But matters did not turn out that way, and it is only after the battle is over that the prize has been awarded me.

In discussing the motives of the Swedish Academy, mention has been made of freedom, a word that suggests many interpretations. In the West, only a general freedom is meant: personally, I mean a more concrete freedom which consists of the right to have more than one pair of shoes and to eat one's fill. It seems to me less dangerous to decline the prize than to accept it. If I accept it, I offer myself to what I shall call "an objective rehabilitation." Accord-

ing to the *Figaro littéraire* article, "a controversial political past would not be held against me." I know that this article does not express the opinion of the Academy, but it clearly shows how my acceptance would be interpreted by certain rightist circles. I consider this "controversial political past" as still valid, even if I am quite prepared to acknowledge to my comrades certain past errors.

I do not thereby mean that the Nobel Prize is a "bourgeois" prize, but such is the bourgeois interpretation which would inevitably be given by certain circles with which I am very familiar.

Lastly, I come to the question of the money: it is a very heavy burden that the Academy imposes upon the laureate by accompanying its homage with an enormous sum, and this problem has tortured me. Either one accepts the prize and with the prize money can support organizations or movements one considers important—my own thoughts went to the Apartheid committee in London. Or else one declines the prize on generous principles, and thereby deprives such a movement of badly needed support. But I believe this to be a false problem. I obviously renounce the 250,000 crowns because I do not wish to be institutionalized in either East or West. But one cannot be asked on the other hand to renounce, for 250,000 crowns, principles which are not only one's own, but are shared by all one's comrades.

That is what has made so painful for me both the awarding of the prize and the refusal of it I am obliged to make. (*Le Monde*, October 1964).

This is public intellectuality at its best, with the intellectual refusing to be "institutionalized," thus retaining his intellectual autonomy. Sartre is re-



flecting on how writers can remain independent and therefore make a difference, an example that Derrida took seriously even as his postmodernism departed from certain tenets of Sartrean existentialism. Sartre's comments about why he refused the Nobel Prize define for me what it means to be a public intellectual. Public French intellectuals marched in the streets during May 1968, another enduring example of engaged intellectuality. A month earlier, Tom Hayden helped Frances Fox Piven, a young Columbia professor, climb into the occupied Math Building at Columbia during the student action designed to reorient university policy regarding its relationship to surrounding Harlem. Those were times of both hope and rage.

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are central to my thinking about how the self must not pretend "bad faith" by pretending that he is merely a pawn of the cunning of reason—History. Writers must not act in bad faith, either, by pretending that method is a royal road to truth and solves intellectual problems. Derrida also helps me to be an eleventh-thesis type of person by assisting me, as Adorno does, to craft sentences that embody utopia in what Derrida calls deferral—the way writing always provokes other writing (via readings) that correct and cajole. Utopian community is always literary, as Habermas recognizes in his concept of ideal speech, embellishing Plato, Mill and Rousseau as well as early Marx. It involves people producing talk and text that bind them together around the campfire. Marx and Engels in *German Ideology* briefly offered a similar image of people, in a good society, engaging in discussion after dinner—praxis, by another name.

[A]s soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. (Marx and Engels 1972).

What is deferred, for Derrida, is the truth, which is more about how we get there than about a destination, again a Greek notion. Sentences are the sinews of a society of mutuality in that they flow into each other intertextually—my talk opening to yours, and so on. This is a Derridean way of thinking about community, the commune, communism that takes us very far afield from the ASA's award of prizes for writing pot-boilers and advice columns.

Derrida offers a literary methodology that treats method simply as a way of making an argument and not as the royal road to truth, with mathematics as its vehicle. And all arguments are flawed, limited by their own ellipses, deferrals and even contradictions. Newton's model of science is still embraced by pre-Einsteinian sociologists who have not kept pace with developments in the philosophy of natural science since 1905. As I have argued, after the sixties, American sociology attempted to sober up and gain institutional legitimacy by returning to a mathematized model of the world and of its own journal discourse, thus ending the eleventh-thesis-like engagements of sixties sociologists who tried to stop the war and win civil rights. They view the sixties as a nightmare on the brain of the living, to be extirpated by graduate curricula heavily weighted toward statistics and methods.

But science does not solve all problems nor resolve every debate. It is merely poetry, passion, polemic, however much it replaces prose with figure. Nor does the science aura, as I have called it, ensure that academic administrators will re-allocate monies from engineering to sociology. These administrators count dollars; they don't read the sociological journals. Marcuse (1955) in *Eros and Civilization*, the great Frankfurt statement of utopia, envisages a new science, a gay or happy science, that plays with words and ideas much as a new technology would play with nature and the body. A non-positivist sociology would satisfy what he calls the play impulse as well as contribute to social change.

These thoughts scandalize the discipline today, much as Derrida does. Marcuse is caricatured as sexually libertine, while Derrida's deconstruction is read as destruction. Whether a Marcusean and Derridean sociology remains a contradiction in terms depends entirely on whether we assign legitimacy to different, polyvocal narratives of the social—sociologies, by another name.

The scandal is the wordplay in which these theorists shamelessly engage. I address these issues of textual/sexual scandal in my (Agger 2008) "Political Sentences: Anti-Intellectualism, Obscurantism and Polymorphous Perversity." I attempt to explain why non-linear, labyrinthine sentences offend the sober, linear mainstream, even the pubic sociologists like Schwartz who otherwise celebrate her sexuality (but don't get the connection between sex and text). It is not only that the mainstream cannot understand French and German technical languages of theory; it is that they worry that these utterances are forms of oral sex that undermine the missionary/power position.

American anti-intellectualism is deeply rooted in Puritanism and explains our preference for pragmatism. I was a small-town American boy until I went to school in England and Europe when I was thirteen, and then west-

ern and eastern Europe when a graduate student. I learned how to be an intellectual flaneur, Walter Benjamin's (1999) term for a person who strolls, sampling cosmopolitan delights of many different cultural styles and language games. The flaneur purposely slows down fast capitalism and rejects the pragmatic coin of the realm. Kant's purposive purposelessness is endorsed—play by another name. Progressive European intellectuals have always linked their work to utopia, prefiguring the ideal community in their own small communities of ideas, colleagues, students, neighborhood hangouts. Sartre (1956) conceived *Being and Nothingness*, his basic text of existentialism, while seated at his favorite Parisian café, Café de Flore, located at 172 boulevard Saint-Germaine, where he hung with his partner Simone de Beauvoir and other intellectual compatriots. I doubt that Sartre had an office and a secretary. He demonstrated great courage

Gibberish, then, is that which offends the sensibility of the pragmatic, positivist number cruncher and grant writer. Everyone within the discipline knows that statistics and methods training involves years of rhetorical apprenticeship in the complex, often convoluted language games of technique. But these are Apollonian, not Dionysian, discourses, designed to remove the carnal/textual from the journal page, relegating it to footnotes and technical appendices. Method displaces the author, but is secret writing—and hence advocacy—in its own right.

American intellectual life is nearly unique in the western world in its commitment to the chimera of value freedom, the centerpiece of Comte's, Durkheim's and Weber's embrace of the Newtonian engine of scientific method. Value freedom is a value position, even if it concealed underneath the dense figurings of the sociological journal page. Derrida helps us decode these pages, unlocking their own Dionysian desire to be something other than what they are—a pulsating page that postures perspective, passion and polemic unashamedly. Perhaps I am not alone in flipping first to the author's acknowledgments and footnotes, ever in search of the lively literary heartbeat nearly stilled by the dreary apparatus of method. These are always the most fun sections to write, where the author gives vent to his subjectivity and sensibility.

My point is that gay science and systematic knowing do not necessarily collide if we rethink science as a peculiar kind of fiction, not a method to eviscerate the literary and political subject who we quaintly call the writer. Science is writing that claims validity for itself by cloaking itself in method. There is nothing wrong with method, but Derrida would read method as rhetorical—a way of embellishing one's argument for one state of affairs over another. He helps us see that science is passionately partisan, preferring one ontology over another. This is only scandalous if we compartmentalize the author's sensibility, including her body, and pretend that what happens on

the journal page is somehow above or beyond the scribbling of authors we call sociologists.

Ben: Jacques, how do you respond to people who say that you do not write well or clearly in order to conceal the fact that you have no really new or important ideas?

Jacques: Writing that appears simple and clear in fact is the most difficult of all to read because it defers discussion of its deep but unexamined assumptions until the future.

Ben: What would happen in that future, when the philosophical chickens come home to roost?

Jacques: There will be more writing, and of course reading. The book will never close. The simple text will turn out to be many hundreds of pages long. There is such a thing as mystifying clarity.

Ben: Nietzsche said that language can be a prison, inside of which meaning is imprisoned. It seems to me that you are trying to put writing to use in exploring the prison and also exploring the boundary between language's prison and a free world, which is in fact not so free after all.

Jacques: Yes, Nietzsche well understood that enlightenment might turn into its opposite if it becomes overly dogmatic. Some of your favorite authors, Adorno and Horkheimer, make the same point.

Ben: Do you have any final words about people who dislike postmodernism because it troubles their ordinary sense of the world and of language?

Jacques: Such people have shit for brains. (Ces personnes ont shit pour cerveaux.)

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