
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 8, number 1. Winter 2012

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

Response to Critics

Thomas McCarthy

Philosophy Department
Northwestern University
1880 Campus Drive
Evanston, IL 60208
t-mccarthy@northwestern.edu

Let me begin by thanking the commentators for their careful readings and many insights, and for advancing the discussion of issues that interest all of us. Because questions of method figure so prominently among the latter, it will be economical in the end to preface my individual responses with a few general remarks on the approach adopted in the book.¹

I. Prologue on Method

Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development generally attempts to provide a critical, historical-philosophical account of modern European and American conceptions of progress and development, inasmuch as they have shaped the widely shared and highly influential self-understanding of the modern West as the most civilized and advanced of all

cultures. A main aim of that account is to dismantle the master metanarrative of Progress (with a capital 'P') that has supported this self-understanding by examining the actual meanings-in-use of its basic ideas and ideals as they figured in the global expansion of capitalism since the 17th century. In doing so it displaces internalist readings of modern social and political thought with more contextualized but non-reductivist readings, which bring into view the myriad and pervasive interconnections of ideas of development with ideologies of racism and imperialism.² Because those ideologies typically turned on Eurocentric, hierarchical schemes of historical development, my critical history of theory is at the same time a critical theory of history. Finally, as Ladelle McWhorter notes, this concern with history is by no means antiquarian in intent, for the legacy of five decades of global racism and imperialism still structures our world today; from this perspective, what the book seeks to sketch is a critical history of the present.

In concert with these broadly deconstructive aims, the book also attempts to sketch a reconstructive approach to development generally - under the rubric of a "critical theory of development" - and particularly to core elements of modern social and political thought. For however dangerous ideas of development have proved to be, I argue, they are indispensable for thinking sensibly about modernization processes. That is to say, no plausible account of the historical processes that issued in a globalized modernity can ignore either the cultural learning evident in such areas as science and technology, historical scholarship and social inquiry, and the like; or the enormous increases in societal power associated with the differentiation in modern societies of specialized subsystems for economics and law, administration and education, and the like. Thus, I argue, the idea of development has to be critically reconstructed not eliminated. And in my broadly reconstructive efforts, I try to diminish and contain somewhat the dangers of

developmental thinking by stressing that a critical theory of development has to *dis-aggregate* totalizing notions of Progress and recognize that development in one domain (e.g. the technology of warfare) may well be accompanied by regression in others (e.g. political morality). To put it succinctly, the Enlightenment thinkers who envisioned knowledge, morality, and happiness as typically progressing in concert were mistaken, as were the social theorists who followed them in this regard: development is inherently ambivalent. Further, a critical theory of development has to *de-center* the Eurocentrism of received ideas of progress, and the assimilationist policies based on them, and to construct a vision of global development that is not something “we” do for – or to – “them,” but a challenge facing all of us together, proper responses to which, therefore, should be sought in dialogue and cooperation across cultural differences.

The general approach I adopt in pursuing these aims combines normative theorizing of neoKantian provenance with interdisciplinary materialism in the tradition of the Frankfurt School. This materialist turn comprises, as it did in the case of Marx’s materialist critique of Hegel, a turn away from the philosophy of history in the strict sense and toward social-theoretical inquiry into macrohistorical changes of various sorts. Thus Lorenzo Simpson is right to note the absence in the book of “a full-blown philosophical argument for the ineluctable status of cultural modernity” and to inquire after the “modality” of my (re-)statement that “we are now all moderns in an important sense.” (LS, 5)³ The ideas of such social theorists of modernization as Weber and Durkheim, Parsons and Habermas play as important a role in my rethinking of development as earlier, more narrowly philosophical accounts and as Marx’s residually inevitabilist and teleological account.

One consequence of this “naturalization” of the philosophy of history is that the claims I make are not meant to be

transcendental, a priori, or purely conceptual claims to necessity or impossibility. My use of “inescapable” when discussing what I call “facts” of modernity signals, rather, the view that no plausible interpretation of modernization processes may ignore or simply deny them; they are unavoidable features of any account of macrohistorical changes in the modern period that aspires to be “realistic.” The warrant for this claim is a critical, reflective examination of central features of the discourse of modernity since the Enlightenment; they are, if you like, important lessons one can learn from examining central approaches to development theory from Kant to the present. As such, they are certainly not intended to be infallible pronouncements but only warranted assertions and thus invitations to further discussion.

As Simpson also notes, the background to this shift away from what I regard as overly strong theoretical commitments is my embrace of the hermeneutic turn and its consequences in the domain of social inquiry. To quote from REHD: “Grand theories and grand metanarratives of development or modernization always outrun the available empirical evidence. They are macrohistorical interpretive schemes, which, as [Max] Weber recognized...are framed from interpretive and evaluative standpoints that are essentially contestable.” (REHD, 224) I directly go on to say, however, “this does not mean that empirical data and the correlations, connections, conditions, and consequences they indicate are irrelevant. They place very real constraints on which types of theory and narrative make analytical and interpretive sense.” (Ibid.) That is, though all such schemes are susceptible to ongoing comment and critique, this does not entail that “anything goes”: “fallible” and “contestable” are not directly opposed to better or worse, warranted or unwarranted, but to “certain” and “incontestable.” Thus, to respond indirectly to a remark by Jack Turner concerning standpoint theory (JT, 4), the multiplicity of socially, culturally, politically,

professionally, and personally situated interpretive standpoints means that our historical accounts of large-scale, long-term, structural changes, as well as the general interpretive-analytical schemes that frame them, are inherently contestable. The discourse of modernity will, then, unavoidably involve conflicts of interpretation, which, however, need not end in a Tower of Babel. To the extent that they can be institutionalized and carried out as continuous, discursive exchanges of evidence and argument for and against competing interpretations and evaluations, they can assume the form of ongoing discussions of reasonable disagreements.

From this methodological perspective, the principal theoretical burden of the second part of the book is to sketch out and defend *a few basic elements* of a critical, interpretive-analytical framework for the study of development. No attempt is made to set out a comprehensive theory to compete with those constructed by the great social theorists of modernity from Marx to Habermas. Instead, more in the spirit of Kant's essays on universal history, my aim is to sketch out some general lineaments of a universal history of the rise of global modernity, in which racism and imperialism figure differently and more centrally than they did in his. The most important of these elements for my purposes are summed up in the book as general "facts" of modernity, in particular, what I call the "Hegelian" facts of cultural modernity and the "Marxian" facts of societal modernity. This two-dimensional scheme marks the view that neither structural-functional changes in social systems nor discursive rationalization in cultural spheres are reducible one to the other. For this reason, I draw not only upon conceptions of sociocultural rationalization but also upon neoevolutionary conceptions of societal adaptation through the differentiation of specialized subsystems, which enhance a society's capacity to cope with environmental problems and thus its competitive advantages vis-à-vis other societies. In

distinguishing - only analytically, to be sure - societal from cultural development in this way, I want to hold on to the difference between, on the one hand, conceptions of future development that are *incoherent* because, they expressly deny the very cultural rationalization (e.g. in history and the human sciences, scholarship and cultural studies) that they draw upon, and, on the other hand, those that run the risk, in the present global circumstances, not of incoherence but of *impotence*, because they reject functional developments that have vastly expanded the productive and reproductive *power* of modern, highly complex and differentiated societies.

II. Ladelle McWhorter

In her lucid and subtle comments, Ladelle McWhorter concisely capture the complexities and nuances of this line of thought, before incisively interrogating it from the Foucauldian perspective she deployed to such great effect in her book, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, published in the same year as my book. She notes that, while I do not present a stark "either/or" between genealogy in her Foucauldian sense and critical history in the Habermasian sense, I do understand my reflections as belonging less to the former genre than to the latter, inasmuch as the interpretive-analytical framework I deploy has an explicitly normative dimension. (Cf. REHD, 13f.)⁴ She correctly grasps my position regarding the "inescapability" of certain "facts of modernity" but compares it unfavorably with a more Foucauldian perspective, according to which we, as products of modern disciplinary institutions and practices, recognize that "we are developmental through and through," but also realize that we can still resist "developmental normalization" and the domination it incarnates. And she argues that, while I don't deny this possibility, I do come "uncomfortably close to making ontological claims about development" and thus "become normative much too prematurely." (LM, 4) Here I will simply acknowledge that she is correct in noting these tendencies toward ontology (if by that she means some sort of

sociohistorical ontology) and normativity, and refer to the paper cited in the last footnote for their detailed defense. In short, I argue there, firstly, that Foucault's *own* social ontology of power is interpretively inferior to one that also has a place for the independent logics of directional learning processes in many dimensions of human practice, and secondly, that his *own* tacit but pervasively operative normativity is practically inferior to the expressly articulated and defended normativity of critical social theorists. So, on this point, it seems, we encounter a reasonable disagreement that has already served as the focal point for a sometimes fruitful discussion.

To McWhorter's supporting charge, that my discussion of the facts of development moves too quickly and thereby "conflates a variety of fairly different processes under one term" and thus flattens out "an array of facts in a variety of historically emerging domains" (LM, 4), I have to plead guilty and appeal to the usual constraints upon a book covering so broad a range of topics and views over such an extended period. However, in line with what I stated above, I don't think that differentiating and contextualizing these various processes at greater length and in greater detail would fundamentally alter my judgment of the relative merits of these two general approaches to development, though it might well alter my accounting of the costs and benefits of particular developments.

McWhorter also makes the valid point that atemporal difference is not the only alternative to progressive development. Historical change, she notes, "can be unidirectional and irreversible...without thereby being progressive." (LM, 4) She is concerned that, despite all my caveats, "degree of development will correlate with degree of worth. As long as development is valued...it is supposedly better than whatever preceded it." (LM, 5f.)⁵ There is no denying the historical power of such a short circuit and the

great harm it has motivated and justified. Nor can the dangers inherent in development theory be made simply to disappear by the sorts of distinctions, qualifications, and restrictions I introduce in respect to it. Rather, if developmental thinking is an unavoidable feature of modernity, then what is required, in my view, is that those dangers be relentlessly resisted and contained through its *ongoing* critical rethinking. And if developmental practice is going to be more like Amartya Sen's "development as freedom" and less like the regimes of domination and exploitation that it historically has been, then deepening, spreading, and entrenching the sorts of lessons I rehearse is also required.

At the same time, REHD offers a variety of arguments against assimilationist views and in favor of a version of the multiple modernities view. In particular, it emphasizes and explains the persistence of reasonable disagreements on ethical questions concerning interests, values, and goods; on moral questions concerning what is equally in the interest of, or equally good for, all affected by an action; and of political questions concerning collective identity and the common good. (see REHD, 160-165) Moreover, it argues that the need for and value of power-enhancing, functional adaptations depend upon historical circumstances. Thus, the separation of "degree of development" from "degree of worth" is repeatedly emphasized: "[D]isagreements about what *place* either cultural or societal innovations should have in the life of a society cannot be decided by demonstrating that a given transformation represents a developmental advance, either of 'rational capacity' or of 'functional capacity.' Once the demands of theodicy and teleology are stripped from developmental schemes, such advances no longer carry the imprimatur of divine providence, ends of nature, or the cunning of reason...The issues under discussion in practical discourses concerning the desirability of institutionalizing specific innovations in specific societies have directly to do

not with species perfection but with what the participants judge to be in the best interests of everyone affected by those changes, including those not yet born who will have to live with the consequences of present decisions.” (REHD, 162)

On the other hand – and this is perhaps what concerns McWhorter – I do argue that some cultural changes are best regarded as the results of learning processes, in that they offer improved ways of dealing with certain domains of experience; for there is no plausible account of the history of such domains as science and technology, historiography and human studies, among many others, that ignores or denies this. Foucault’s obviously troubled and constantly shifting metatheoretical remarks about his own critical histories are a case study in the difficulty of resolutely adopting a radically externalist perspective on the critique of impure reason. McWhorter is correct, then, to surmise that my account of development implicates a positive valuation of at least *some* unidirectional and cumulative processes; but that does not at all preclude disagreement about how they should be institutionalized and what role they should play in individual or social lives. As issues of this kind are being debated in a plurality of societies with a diversity of traditions and in a variety of circumstances, one would expect to find, and does in fact find, wide differences in the assessment of particular changes. For the discourse of development is, as McWhorter notes, value-laden; and that feature of it is as unavoidable on my account as is the discourse itself. But she tends to focus on individual action; and the strategies of resistance to modernization that are practicable for individuals and small groups may not be, and often are not, practicable on a national or transnational scale. My argument, by contrast, generally proceeds at the political-societal level and concerns collective responses to collective problems, and that places additional constraints on feasible strategies of resistance.

As McWhorter persuasively argues, collective responses to the problems of the poorest and most vulnerable societies need not take the form of helping them to develop. What is often called for is a direct response to immediate needs; and even when such responses have the form of improvements to existing structures, they need not amount to development in the technical sense at issue here: not every improvement is a development. On the other hand, in today’s unevenly developed world, what is often required to attack the roots of widespread suffering and injustice is indeed a modernization of basic structures – educational, economic, political, social, and so forth. My express position in the book is that collective action of this sort be organized as a collaboration and not an imposition. And it is just this sort of collective response to collective problems that I had in mind when stressing the importance of hope to progressive politics. McWhorter’s remarks in this last connection, however, address questions of *individual* motivation to *moral* action: “[W]hat moves most people to moral action is the draw of another’s need, not a calculation about the likelihood of ultimate success...[E]ven if I knew for sure that a more just future was impossible, I would not stop responding to the needs of those around me.” (LM, 6f.) Though related to it, this is a different question from the one I address in REHD, to wit: does it make sense for politically organized, collective actors to pursue societal or global changes they believe are impossible to attain? Is hope concerning the feasibility of basic structural improvements a prerequisite for concerted political action to bring them about? In the view I defend, collective action of this sort cannot be effectively mobilized and sustained in the absence of hope in its possible success. It is just at this point of the argument that Jack Turner introduces the notion of “tragicomic hope.” But before taking that up, I want to expand the methodological focus of my remarks to address some of Lorenzo Simpson’s concerns.

III. Lorenzo Simpson

My account of the derivation and status of certain general “facts of cultural modernity” may serve as a point of departure for responding to Simpson’s worries about the imposition of modern ways on non-Western peoples. As I explain them, these “facts” have become unavoidable presuppositions of the global discourse of modernity. Simpson himself grants that “certain aspects of cultural modernity do seem cognitively irreversible,” such as the fruits of the “historicist enlightenment” and “the learning processes institutionalized in modern science.” (LS, 5) But others do not, particularly those having to do with ideals and values, as is illustrated by his example of debates about genital cutting. I do not deny that ethical and political matters are susceptible to deeper and wider reasonable disagreements than, to use his examples, questions of science or historiography. In fact, as noted above, my argument expressly allows for that and attempts to explain it by much the same hermeneutic considerations that Simpson emphasizes, particularly by the different interpretive and evaluative situations of different participants in the discourse of modernity. But my account of our *present* hermeneutic situation differs from Simpson’s in one decisive point, and it is this that lies behind the shift in my view of cross-cultural dialogue since the 1980s, to which he refers in his comment.

As a master of critical hermeneutics, Simpson knows that interpreters of modernity belong to the very history they are trying to understand, and that their interpretations are never free from its effects. Thus the lively and interesting debates about “rationality and relativism” that dominated the discussion of cross-cultural encounters in the 1960s and 1970s reflected, I want to suggest, the historical situation of an unfinished process of decolonization. They were largely shaped by *representations* of non-Western peoples *constructed* by Western anthropologists, some of whom also served as energetic *advocates* for peoples who could not speak for

themselves in many institutionalized venues of the discourse of modernity. In that historical situation, it seemed to make sense to treat diverse cultures as “seamless wholes” and to represent dialogue amongst them by means of the sort of *counterfactual* thought experiment that Simpson deploys here. I adopted a similar approach in my earlier work. But since the 1980s, the accelerated transformation of an increasingly globalized world comprised in large part of postcolonial societies has altered our interpretive situation in fundamental and far-reaching ways. As Simpson notes, cultures are no longer viewed as static and homogeneous wholes, and distinctions between “inside” and “outside” are regarded as matters of degree: the “outside” is increasingly “inside” the cultural pores of every society, such that “internal” resources of critique are often not endogenous.

Accordingly, the sense in which “we are all moderns now” that I rely upon in elaborating the idea of a multicultural discourse of modernity implies that we have less reason to construct counterfactual cross-cultural dialogues or to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Every culture has its virtuosos of historical and cultural reflexivity capable in principle of participating in this discourse on equal terms; and postcolonial intellectuals are typically more aware than their Western counterparts of the unquestioned, taken for granted character of Western patterns and presuppositions. For this and related reasons, I do not frame issues of intercultural dialogue as Simpson does in his comment, but treat the capacity, in principle, for full participation by denizens of non-Western cultures rather as my starting point. To be sure, I add “in principle” to these formulations in acknowledgement of the very great impact that existing disparities of wealth and power exert on participation “in fact.” Finally, unlike Simpson’s, my discussion of the imposition of Western patterns of culture and society moves primarily, not at the level of “conversational practice,” but at a sociopolitical level; it is concerned with the structural

conditions and consequences of institutionalizing intercultural communication in different, more symmetrical, ways.

For the rest, I have no substantive disagreements with Simpson's reformulations and expansions of my line of argument: in specific, his remarks on the interplay of social structures and cultural patterns in perpetuating racial stratification; his observations on the interpretation of value commitments, to the effect that understanding agents' values requires understanding their views of the worlds in which they are acting, and his complication of the notion of agency by taking into account agents' ability to avail themselves of the enabling conditions of action and to overcome obstacles thereto. On this last point, however, Simpson senses a disagreement between us regarding interpretations of human rights that stress civil and political rights versus those that stress social and economic rights (LS, 3f.); but as a close reading of the book will confirm, I expressly embrace a notion of what Habermas calls "substantive equality," which includes elements resembling Rawls' fair equality of opportunity and fair value of political liberty. This idea, central to the Western traditions of social liberalism and social democracy, provides a bridge across the differences to which Simpson refers.

IV. Jack Turner

Jack Turner characterizes "tragicomic hope" as a refusal to surrender to a belief, however strongly warranted, in the impossibility or high improbability of achieving justice. His argument too moves primarily at the level of individual ethical motivation, in this case of responding to a rationally "absurd situation" with a "leap of faith." (JT, 7f.) I do not want to directly take issue with this sort of existential response to the challenges of individual life, but I do want to express my doubts that organized, collective action to achieve racial justice can be sustained by it. Nor, in fact, do I agree

with his view that "the historical record counsels strongly against belief in the possibility" of heightening public historical consciousness of racial injustice sufficiently to make the amelioration of persistent inequities a reasonable hope. (JT, 7) Beyond what I say in the book about the immense changes in this regard within cultural and political public spheres since the Second World War, I will add only that for someone who was born and raised in a *de jure* segregated America and who now lives in an America led by a black man and presently finds himself engaged in an institutionalized conversation scarcely possible in my youth, this reading of the historical record appears excessively pessimistic. In my view, that record counsels rather against abandoning hope that racial injustice can be progressively ameliorated. And that is all I need for my argument, which neither seeks to establish teleological inevitability nor aspires to a scientific prediction or estimation of probabilities, but is concerned with what we have reason to believe could be realized under the conditions in which we find ourselves and with the political will we think we can muster. With that in view, I am less concerned to discourage the ethical-existential hope of those without hope that Turner embraces than to encourage the moral-political hope for ongoing reconstruction of entrenched neoracist and neoimperialist structures.

V. Matthias Fritsch

Exploring the relation between such hopes for future justice and memories of past injustice, Matthias Fritsch's comments continue to work a rich vein of reflection on the philosophy of history that he laid open in his earlier work, *The Promise of Memory*.⁶ He notes the considerable agreement between us in rejecting the idea of a present that is simply coincident with itself, and in insisting on the need for a theory of intergenerational justice, which concerns both coming to terms with the past and securing the conditions of future justice. But he finds that I don't go far enough in rethinking the historical-ontological connections of past, present, and

future in my reflections on intergenerational justice and seeks to push me further along that path. My ambivalent response to his line of thought is, on the one hand, an appreciation of the greater depth and nuance he gives to the discussion of temporality and justice, but, on the other hand, a number of doubts about the increased symmetry toward which he wants to push me.

To put the issue straightforwardly, the presents in which we re-present our pasts and pre-figure our futures are ineluctably the situations out of which we have to think and act. To ignore this fundamental *hermeneutic and pragmatic asymmetry* is to aspire to a God's-eye-view of history, in which past and future are part of an eternal present. In specific, when we include the victims of the past in our reflections concerning intergenerational justice, it cannot be on the basis of their equal standing *as actual participants* in practical discourse about whether the consequences and side-effects of a proposed course of action are equally in the interest of *all affected*. On this point, I tend to agree with Max Horkheimer's somewhat blunt response to Walter Benjamin in a similar connection:⁷ "The supposition of an unfinished or unclosed past is idealistic, if you don't incorporate a certain closedness into it. Past injustice has happened and is over and done with. Those who were slain were really slain." Thus, "what happened to those human beings who have perished cannot be made good in the future." Benjamin of course continued to be concerned with the redemption of the past and to insist that history was not merely a science but a form of remembrance (*Eingedenken*) that can transform what is apparently closed and finished – such as past suffering – into something that is open and unfinished. Thus he endorsed an approach to history based on anamnestic solidarity with its countless generations of oppressed and downtrodden. Horkheimer acknowledged the roots of this impulse, but regarded the approach to history it inspired as, in the end, theological rather than materialist. "The thought that the

prayers of those persecuted, in their hour of direct need...are all to no avail...is monstrous...But is monstrousness ever a cogent argument against the assertion or denial of a state of affairs?"

It is with this asymmetry in mind that I center my own discussions of the politics of memory and the moral-political obligations of reparative justice around present and future generations, that is, around the need to redress the *continuing harms* of past injustice, specifically the *persisting* racial and imperial inequities that are the *enduring consequences* of capitalist modernization.⁸ To displace this moral-political orientation toward wrongs that can be rectified or ameliorated by our present and future actions with the more ethical-ontological orientation that Fritsch proposes would, I fear, dissipate the practical focus required for concerted collective action. For as the classical philosophers of history already noted, victims of injustice are omnipresent in human history -- which, as Hegel famously put it, is a slaughter house; without the focus provided by deliberation on courses of action in the present that might result in a reduction of injustice in the future, *Eingedenken* of past suffering takes on a religious or ethical-ontological cast.

I use the phrase "*ethical-ontological*" to characterize the genre of reflections that Fritsch endorses in view of the various "duties" and "obligations" to which they repeatedly give rise – e.g. the "duty" of "recipients of gifts" from past generations to "compensate" them for the "costs of production and transfer" – and, more generally, in view of the value-laden character of the historical ontology he presents, in which succeeding generations are entrusted with the lifeworlds and institutions they inherit from past generations and are obligated to pass them on to future generations in such a manner as to enable their future autonomy. (MF, 6) I do not dispute that such reflections may contribute to the historical self-understandings of particular individuals and

communities, and thus to the cultural and political public spheres in which they participate. But such self-understandings are obviously tied to the ethical-ontological frameworks embraced by the individuals and groups that construct them; and no one of them can claim to be morally or politically binding. Thus, for example, the interpretive framework sketched by Fritsch is in competition with those endorsed by Horkheimer, by Habermas, by expressly religious philosophers of history, and, for that matter, by me. But insofar as the type of reflection he proposes can contribute to a political culture and a politics of memory that address the practical-political aim of redressing continuing injustice, I welcome it.⁹

Finally, with regard to the relation of present and future generations, I can accept much of the elaboration that Fritsch provides; but I nevertheless want to hold on to a certain asymmetry, which is different from that obtaining between past and present generations. For unlike past generations, future generations *are* among *those affected* by the consequences and side effects of our present actions; so our moral-political deliberations do have to take their agreement or disagreement into account. But their participation in our deliberations can be only virtual not actual, and their consent can only be anticipated not actually given. And while I share Fritsch's view that this anticipated consent can be confirmed or disconfirmed only in and through the actual deliberations of future generations -- under conditions favorable to democratic deliberation, which we should do our best to secure -- the fact remains that in regard to the actual deliberations in which we are presently engaged, their participation and their assent remain virtual and hypothetical. That is to say, moral universalism requires that *we now* try also to see things from what we *anticipate* will be the circumstances, values, and interests of future generations, and to give their anticipated concerns equal consideration

with our own in determining what is equally good for all affected by our actions.

VI. David Scott

In view of the variety of methodological issues these commentators addressed, I was initially puzzled by David Scott's disappointment with REHD owing to its lack of "methodological uptake." (DS, 1) In the end, I was rather disappointed by his disappointment, for it seemed to arise from the expectations with which he had approached the book, which he mentions at the start and returns to repeatedly, and which, it seemed to me, amount to the expectation that I would -- or should -- have written a different book. And my disappointment was sharpened by my own expectation that our dialogue would be especially fruitful, which I had formed from reading his earlier reconsideration of C.L.R. James' classic account of the Haitian Revolution, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*.¹⁰ For both his book and mine are concerned with how the past is constructed in relation to the present, in his case narratively and in mine metanarratively or theoretically; and for both of us, a critical rethinking of the past's relation to the present is tied to a hopeful reimagining of desirable futures. Most strikingly, although he frames his analysis of James' narrative history mainly in poetical-rhetorical terms, while my analysis of universal history is framed mainly in social- and political-theoretical terms, both analyses end by stressing the "paradox", "dilemma", "predicament", and "ambiguity" inherent in and constituent of modernity. In short, I had understood our two approaches to the discourse of modernity as more complementary than competing. And that judgment seemed confirmed when I subsequently read that Scott viewed the mode of genealogy he employed as in itself incapable of producing "a politics properly speaking," and thus as in need of "supplementation" by addressing "the question of politics" directly, and declared this to be the aim of his recent work¹¹ -- as it was, I had thought, of the

reconstructive dimension of my book as well. Instead, Scott apparently understands our different ways of approaching common themes to be opposed rather than complementary. My response will focus on his central line of criticism.

Scott quotes and repeatedly comments upon the following sentence from page 14 of REHD: “My *guiding assumption* is that the resources required to reconstruct our tradition of social and political thought can be *wrested* from those very traditions, *provided that they are critically appropriated and opened to contestation* by their historical ‘others.’” (Emphases added here) Somehow, and notwithstanding anything that comes after, he reads this as saying that my discussion will proceed on the fixed presupposition of the sufficiency of the resources of “[my] own tradition” -- by which he seems to understand a self-enclosed and non-permeable version of modern Western moral and intellectual culture; and he construes my relation to the views of “historical others” as basically “passive and monological” rather than as involving active engagement and dialogical reciprocity. (DS, 3) In the final analysis, he charges, this “presumptive privilege” and lack of “receptive generosity” prevent my really listening to and learning from them. (DS, 4)

This came as something of a surprise, since to my mind the book was an extended attempt to articulate the results of more than a decade of listening to and learning from intellectuals formed in different traditions, both in print and in actual dialogue. Thus Scott’s judgment of my many references to and engagement with scholars from those traditions as “en passant” or based on an insufficient understanding of their backgrounds and contexts was troubling, as they were intended precisely to acknowledge what I had learned from them about the deep inadequacies of the hegemonic Western discourse about universal history before it began to engage seriously with the anticolonial and postcolonial critique of the last century. And

notwithstanding Scott’s suggestion that I “seek merely to assimilate [e] them to my tradition” (DS, 10), I had hoped it would be clear to the reader that I seek rather to promote dialogical symmetry, reciprocal elucidation, and mutual learning (see e.g. REHD, 164f.), and that I understand this as ineluctably leading to a conflict of interpretations and an ongoing negotiation of differences (e.g. REHD, 186f.), which is more likely to issue in hybridity, compromise, and (hopefully) overlap than in global consensus. It also struck me as strange that Scott’s attempt to put me in a box of his own making evinces just the sorts of either/or and inside/outside binaries that both of us are concerned to dismantle. We are both well aware that, just as many resources of postcolonial critique have their origins in Western traditions of thought, many of the resources available to Western critics of liberal capitalist modernity derive from the vast and expanding store of postcolonial critique.

Scott specifically discusses two instances of the “presumptive privileging” of my own moral-intellectual tradition and consequent failure to engage substantively with the traditions of historical others. The first is a very brief sketch of post-Reconstruction historiography of slavery. (REHD, 108-111). Acknowledging that I do reference the main black counter-tradition of historiography, he faults me for doing so “en passant” and not more fully engaging with and learning from it. (DS, 5f.) But this is to ignore that the express purpose of those few pages is to set out the dominant ideology of white mainstream historiography, for my eventual target is the public historical consciousness and political culture that this hegemonic consensus informed and was informed by. *In that context*, it would have served little purpose to present a full-fledged – “thick” not “thin,” as Scott puts it – dialogical engagement with dissident traditions. And Scott never says what *specific* difference this would have made to my line of argument.

The same is true of his commentary on my very brief account of two streams of postcolonial critique that promote a “post-development” perspective (REHD, 180-183), of which I am critical, and on my similarly brief account of another stream of postcolonial critique that promotes instead a broadly reconstructive approach to the dominant discourse of modernity, with which I am in sympathy. (REHD, 183-185) One of my concerns there was to illustrate that postcolonial thinkers themselves are divided on the dilemma of development, so that it is not simply a Western imposition to pursue it. Scott’s complaint here is similar to that above, as is his failure to say specifically where my line of argument goes wrong. In particular, he rebukes me for not substantively engaging with the very different intellectual background and context of thinkers like Dipesh Chakrabarty, who is my main interlocutor in the latter section. That would have required, he writes, that I learn “to think inside” the tradition of Subaltern Studies from which he comes; and my failure to do so means that I do not learn from him but assimilate him. (DS, 9f.) There is no doubt some truth to this, for at that point in my argument it was important to highlight the overlapping of views stemming from different traditions; but it is not the whole truth, for it was from listening to Chakrabarty that I learned to appreciate and came to adopt the practical-political approach to the dilemma of development that was salient in his context. (REHD, 188-191). In both of these cases, Scott concludes, my failure to “excavate the genealogy of questions and answers that constitute” the other intellectual traditions to which I refer, and which I sometimes “take up in [an] affiliative way,” underwrites my tendency to assimilate them to my own and betrays my inability to imagine “that [others] inhabit the hegemony of modernity differently” than I do. (DS, 9)

The underlying point here seems to be that the marginalization of the history of racism and imperialism in mainstream, Western, social and political thought is in effect a

“double marginalization”: it applies not only to those themes themselves but also to their thematizations in subaltern traditions.¹² In particular, the topics I take up in REHD have long been discussed, with great cogency and insight, by African American and postcolonial thinkers, whose contributions have until recently been largely ignored in mainstream theory. This is, to be sure, a valid point. I also agree with the related point that an integral part of understanding the history of racism and imperialism is understanding how those who were subordinated themselves experienced, articulated, analyzed, and criticized their subordination and the ideologies that underwrote it. And I will concede that I don’t do very much of that in REHD. But no one book can do justice to the massive and multifaceted problematic of these marginalized themes and traditions. My situation and my resources are quite different from Scott’s, and I accordingly addressed a different facet of the overall problem. As I explain in the first chapter, my audience and target is mainstream, Western, political theory, which until quite recently marginalized racism and imperialism rather than treating them as central to European and American conceptions of modernity. And though this does not coincide with projects like Scott’s, what I wrote in the book was certainly not meant to preclude them.

¹ *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge U P, 2009) will be cited as REHD, followed by page numbers.

² This and the next sentence are formulations used by Charles Mills in his lucid comments on my book at the 2011 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

³ References to the comments will be by author’s initials and page numbers.

⁴ In an earlier essay, “The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School,” chap. 2 of *Ideals and Illusions* (MIT Press, 1991), pp. 43-75, I remarked upon the considerable overlap between

the ideas of Foucault and the Frankfurt School, and argued for the advisability of explicitly elaborating and defending the normative dimension of critique.

⁵ Amy Allen expresses a similar concern in her review of REHD, in *Constellations*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2011, pp. 487-492.

⁶ SUNY Press, 2005.

⁷ I discuss their exchange in “Critical Theory and Political Theology,” chap. 8 of *Ideals and Illusions*, pp. 200-215. The passages cited here are referenced there on pp. 207f.

⁸ See also my account of the inherited obligation of present U.S. citizens to redress the continuing harm of racial injustice in the past: “Coming to Terms with Our Past, Part II: On the Morality and Politics of Reparations for Slavery,” *Political Theory* (Vol. 32, 2004): 750-772.

⁹ I have a similar attitude toward “the duty to remember” discussed by Pablo De Greiff (see REHD, 105), which Fritsch comments upon. For me, it is one element of the politics of memory I discuss in relation to the overarching practical purpose of global justice. I agree with Fritsch that it cannot stand on its own as an account of intergenerational justice.

¹⁰ Duke University Press, 2004.

¹¹ Interview by Stuart Hall, *Bomb 90*, 2005, pp. 1-10, accessed at <http://bombsite.com/issues/90/articles/2711>.

¹² I owe this term and this formulation to Robert Gooding-Williams, in a private communication.