



*Marx and the Postmodernism Debates: An Agenda for Critical Theory.* By Lorraine Y. Landry. Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers, 2000. Pp. xiii+232.

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In *Marx and the Postmodern Debates: An Agenda for Critical Theory*, Lorraine Landry attempts to engage the theoretical and practical differences between the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas and the poststructuralist theory of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. A tremendous amount of attention has been dedicated to this theoretical feud, but clarification is still needed regarding its practical relevance for the politics of social change. Trying to contribute to this task, Landry proposes reconciliation between critical theory and poststructuralism in the form of a “fruitful tension,” which allows the “flexible appropriation of arguments” for the purpose of constructing a general critical social theory with political potency. After reaching the resolution of the fruitful or constructive tension, she explores the potentiality of Marx for providing an interpretive key to the postmodern debates and contributing to critical social theory. Despite her practical interest in social change, accessing this text requires a familiarity with these debates as well as some background in modern philosophy. Thus, I do not find the book appropriate for new students of social theory, but it may prove useful to graduate students and professors, who are struggling to negotiate these debates. I intend to outline the approach and arguments Landry utilizes to reach the fruitful

tension, drawing attention to the unexpected aspects of her initiative. I will then evaluate her discussion of Marx as the interpretive key to these debates, which attempts to apply the fruitful tension.

Landry embarks on her project to establish the fruitful tension through a reassessment of the critical exchanges between Habermas and the poststructuralists and through a search for common ground. She asserts that Habermas too hastily dismisses the poststructuralists, explaining “Habermas’s recourse to ideology critique is arguably the least productive course” (p. 24). While the poststructuralists avoid this dogmatism, “there are factors tending toward the replication of one-sided polemics,” but also “factors pointing beyond” (p. 32). To make the claim for a fruitful tension, Landry searches for common ground between these warring camps in an unexpected source—their contributions to the project of modernity. I find this link surprising for two reasons. First, critics of the poststructuralists (most notably Habermas) label them as conservative and anti-modernist. In addition, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard are frequently classified more generally as postmodernists and understood to postulate a qualitative break from modernity and to declare of the futility of the modernists’ project.

Minimizing this divisive distinction to explore the less played out areas in the debates, the book begins with a clarification of the project of modernity. The project of modernity consists of two distinct endeavors, which promote separate conceptions of reason. The first project concerns instrumental reason developed through science and technology and includes the goal to extend human domination over the natural world. The other project involves practical, moral reason and encompasses the goal of constructing a noncoercive social order. Habermas and the poststructuralists contribute

to the latter through their independent critiques of the ideological outcomes of the former. For Landry the common bond extends beyond their castigations of instrumental reason and domination. Both critical and poststructuralist theories continue the modernist project through their appropriation of the modernists' sense of critique. Landry declares that in the "matter of 'critique'" there is "positive potential for positive affiliation between Habermas and the poststructuralists (p. 34)." To exploit this point of comparison, Landry employs the Kantian sense of critique to analyze the respective strategies. Kantian critique exhibits not only the rational challenge of authority but also the internalized focus on the conditions of possible knowledge.

While Habermas maintains a conscious and explicit commitment to Kant, the poststructuralists do not. Designating a chapter to each poststructuralist, she concisely and fairly reviews their work and contributions to social theory. Additionally, links are drawn between each poststructuralist and Kant. Landry relates Derrida to Kant, describing his method of deconstruction as a radical extension of Kant's critique of the conditions of knowledge (p. 49). Foucault's commitment to the 'ontology of the present' (the permanent critical ethos to a historical era) illustrates his affiliation with Kant (p. 74). Lyotard appropriates Kant's notion of the sublime to construct his postmodern political project. However, all three poststructuralists share a common bond to Kant that distinguishes their use from that of Habermas. They extend the aesthetic theory of Kant in his third critique to language and politics where as Habermas maintains the prominence of the first and second critiques. According to Landry, Habermas's applications of the first two critiques in his philosophy of language "represent some of his most deepest and most persistent differences from the poststructuralists" (p. 112).

Landry upholds the viability of the fruitful tension. Repeatedly declaring their commonality in “seeking to preserve and promote the Enlightenment goal of freedom from the ideological process of domination” (p. 114), she insists on sustaining “the tension between these two oppositions to a greater degree than is typically tolerated” (p. 115). Landry adds another unexpected dimension to support the toleration of this ‘Kantian schizophrenia.’ Moving beyond the identification of their common concerns, she recalls Kant’s own “bifocal” understanding of reason, which validated both “tireless deconstruction and careful reconstruction” (p. 118). Presumably, the “deepest and most persistent differences” are resolved through this appeal to the master text of the project of modernity, and, thus, her proposition of a fruitful tension is validated.

I want to question this approach by invoking the work of two poststructuralists ignored in her study: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) problematize Landry’s excavation of a common root in her appeal to Kant. The search for roots involves the “logic of ‘tracing’” that “always comes back to the same,” and precludes the possibility of confronting and engaging multiplicity, which is the task of inquiry (p. 12). They illustrate the limitations of this reductionist approach through a discussion of Freud and psychoanalysis that provides a valuable point from which to question Landry’s path:

[Freud] treats the multiplicities of the unconscious always as a reduction to the One: the little scars, the little holes become subdivisions of the great scar or supreme hole named castration (p. 31).

Modern philosophical analysis, as used by Landry, seems to have its version of the Oedipal Complex when it inevitably comes back to the same One, to Kant.

Perhaps basing critical social theory on the foundations of the project of modernity and Kant is a practical necessity to contribute to any social change. Landry emphasizes this political potential. She implies a vision of a united front of critical social theorists ready to get on with the real business of critique for emancipation. The Marxist-geographer, David Harvey, offers this humorous comparison of Christian Fundamentalists and critical social theorists to promote the practicality of foundations:

When a political group armed with strong and unambiguous foundational beliefs confronts a bunch of doubting Thomases whose only foundational belief is skepticism towards all foundational beliefs, then it is rather easy to predict who will win. (p. 2).

Landry comes to a foundation for the fruitful tension based on its potential to empower critical social theorists to confront the forces and ideologies of domination found in modernity, rather than attain epistemological certainty.

Displaying some poststructuralists' reflexivity, Landry observes a risk within her own project to compose a general critical social theory. She explains the challenge "to avoid some sort of granting of priority in a discourse about the modern and the postmodern" (p. 117). Unfortunately, the "granting of priority" exceeds a tolerable level in the second part of the book when she introduces Marx. In order to discuss the ability of Marx to "provide an interpretive key to the postmodern debates" while "demonstrating the value of the fruitful tension" (p. 141), she employs the interpretive approach of Gyorgy Markus. She distinguishes Marx's interrogation of modernity as a paradigm of production and Habermas, along with the poststructuralists, as a paradigm of language. In this reconceptualization of the postmodern debates, the poststructuralists all but

disappear, which becomes evident when Landry attempts to engage the critiques leveled by the paradigm of language against Marx.

In the representation of the 'paradigm of language,' the unification of critical theory and poststructuralism is reduced to the voice of Habermas. For example, in her effort to absolve Marx from the productivist accusations promoted from the paradigm of language, only Habermas's contentions are recounted. She counter-attacks Habermas, ignoring the poststructuralists' critiques against productionism's ideology of progress. The abandonment of the poststructuralists constitutes a slackening of the tension she built up in her argument. The conclusion of Marx following as an interpretive key to the postmodern debates is poorly founded because the discussion amounts to a reconfiguration of where Marx is subsumed in Habermas's critical theory. It is not to suggest that her second argument on Marx undermines her first. Rather, I interpret her abandonment of poststructuralism as a failure to sustain a fruitful tension. Had actually it been practiced, Landry would have reached a more solid evaluation of Marx in the debates. Indeed, as the tension whither with the prioritizing of a single discourse, so does the fruitfulness this second analysis. But instead of contradicting her initial claim, this careless release of tension, in fact, stimulates a demand for more. In a moment of irony, another unexpected path leads to her primary conclusion of the necessity for a fruitful tension between critical theory and poststructuralism.



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