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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.01.08

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**Recommended Citation**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.01.08  
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol1/iss1/8

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rationalities would prepare people better to interact internationally. MacIntyre’s argument for the inclusion of western rationalities would seem to imply that we should also construct universities that are open to non-western rationalities. Yet the western concept of rationality as craft might be inappropriate to judge eastern or native rationalities.

What would it mean to bring rival western and non-western rationalities into our universities? Feyerabend has suggested that medical schools should study traditional medicine as well as western medicine. MacIntyre’s argument for the inclusion of western rationalities, especially those practiced by many medical faculties, then future doctors would have a greater selection of remedies from which to choose. Relegating native medicine to anthropology puts dialogue and disputation?

There are any options that one should exclude from a university of dialogue and disputation? This is a hard question. I prefer the politically correct exclusion of creationism since I don’t see creationism as good science; yet it might be studied in other departments. But a truly pluralistic university should include all rationalities, especially those practiced by many members of its own society. I am therefore in a dilemma over the breadth of a truly open university devoted to disputation and understanding. MacIntyre’s Three Rival Versions Of Moral Enquiry is a clever and wide ranging contribution to the debate over the purpose of contemporary universities. It successfully pushes us out of the institutions imprisoned by outmoded Victorian pedagogical structures into the debates that are emerging from actual conditions in contemporary social life.

John Inglis, Lexington


A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.


Matthew H. Kramer’s first book is one in which Derrida’s quote is taken at full value. Working his way through particular texts, theories, and thinkers from the traditions of legal and political theory, Kramer is constantly at pains to make perceptible the strategies in the work he examines by showing why it must be imperceptible. Determined to elude the accusations and pat responses that seem to plague deconstructive criticism (e.g. that it is nihilism), Kramer is careful in his engagement of the texts and traditions of political and legal theory and maintains an awareness of the necessary implications that flow to his own text from such an approach.

Kramer focuses on three authors and the traditions which surround them: G.A. Cohen and Marxism via Karl Marx’s Theory of History, H.L.A. Hart and Legal Positivism via The Concept of Law, and David Hume and Conservatism via A Treatise of Human Nature, An Enquiry concerning the Principle of Morals, and An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding. Kramer concludes the book with a chapter on Critical Legal Studies, and it is here where his qualified allegiance lies. A brief exegesis on deconstruction introduces the book and is quite good in familiarizing the reader with Kramer’s particular understanding of Jacques Derrida’s philosophy. Kramer also continues what seems to be a trend in deconstruction scholarship by asserting that American literary critics have somehow misconstrued Derrida and are using him for their own purposes while others, usually philosophers, really understand Derrida and his project.

Kramer’s basic strategy is to introduce each author and his tradition and proceed to give a close reading to a particular text. In doing so, Kramer seeks to engage the text on its own terms and point out what incongruencies arise. This first reading provides the boundaries by which the text and the tradition in which it is situated claim to be an object. By spotlighting this boundary and the aporia of innerness and outerness which structure it, Kramer creates the space necessary for a strategy of deconstruction, and it is within this space that he demonstrates the instability of the alleged boundary and the dependence which each side necessarily involves itself. Kramer wants to show that this instability is a necessary feature of any text or tradition which theorizes about social or political life. He states that “[a]ll positions—be they metaphysical or political—will perforce dismantle themselves as the condition of their being elaborated. No position, then, can lay claim to the determinacy and coherence needed to play the part of an element in a necessary relation” (p. 148). What makes this book interesting, however, is what follows this claim: “[T]his will be true of deconstructive critiques as much as of discourse that has less explicitly thematized its undoing” (p. 148).

Kramer is concerned to show deconstruction at work and convince the reader that it should be employed in the context of legal and political theory. To do this he understands (as many do not) that the contradictions inherent
in the performance of deconstructive strategies must be accounted for. This must be done not apologetically, but forcefully, and as an integral part of the critique rather than as an aftermath or footnote. However, in taking the stance of deconstruction without apology, Kramer knowingly steps off into an abyss where politics and deconstruction share a relationship of suspicion. Kramer is most explicit about this relationship in that part of the book which engages the Critical Legal Studies movement and its adoption of the concept of reification as a way of explaining the history of law and legal theory. In bringing deconstruction to the legal theory debate, Kramer addresses the fundamental issue—that abstract literary theory can be of little consequence when intervening in matters which involve real people in concrete legal cases. Against Marx's distinction between interpreting the world and changing it, Kramer responds that "for the . . . deconstructive critic, a reinterpreting of the world is a changing of it" (p. 245). For Kramer, "every social practice (as well as every natural phenomenon) comprises myriad forms of categorization, and hence has always succumbed to a vertiginous interplay between sameness and difference" (p. 246).

In dealing with the thought of G.A. Cohen and H.L.A. Hart, Kramer tosses the monkeywrench of deconstruction into any gap which presents itself as a result of his close reading. Kramer interrupts the boundaries which enclose the theories of Cohen and Hart by questioning the very fact of the boundaries' existence. Every claim to presence by a theory highlights the dyad of innerness and outerness (and other conceptual pairings needed for a systematic theory) and at the same time signals the beginning of the end.

For Cohen, the distinction between sociality and materiality which he develops as a more encompassing way to theorize Marx's use-value/exchange-value relationship sets up an *aporia*, which necessitates the obliterating of this initial distinction. Highlighting the moment of abstraction which is required for this description, Kramer goes to work: "materiality is always already social, in the sense that it can come into view only as a result of the procedure (that is, abstraction) which resides at the social end of the sociality/materiality split" (p. 87). Substitute any two opposed concepts in the discourses of legal and political theory and the result is the same—they will not hold. In Hart's case, it is the distinction between primary and secondary rules and their relation to the rule of recognition that he depends upon to make his legal system cohere. Again, Kramer intervenes and the result is inevitable.

This is not to say that Kramer's book is dull or overly formulaic. In order to be successful in his strategy, Kramer must in some sense create the object of his destruction. Kramer makes the text as systematic and suggestive as the author claims it to be, and points out problems which arise within this (artificial) sphere. However, once this solidity is established, Kramer does not leave it in pieces after it has undergone the scrutiny of deconstruction. In his critique of Hume's proclivity for privileging the particular over the abstract requirements of the social compact, Kramer explains why this would be impossible:

A critique of Hume's privileging of particulars will not automatically impair the effectiveness of his theorizing, for any such critique will powerfully reconfirm units in the very process of undermining them; but if the intraphilosophical effects are so dizzyingly incalculable, then one should hesitate before making predictions about politics. (p. 149)

This hesitation is palpable throughout the book, not only in Kramer's writing but also in the mind of a reader who is sympathetic to deconstruction and wishes to situate it within a legal or political theory. Having established on the level of theory that the moment of deconstruction cannot be denied and that all dichotomies necessarily subvert themselves, he exhorts those who engage the problems of law and politics to embrace deconstruction as a strategy in their writing. To assuage the possibility of hesitancy, Kramer, in his analysis of G.A. Cohen, writes that:

Just as deconstruction leaves room for speech-act philosophy and structuralism, an analysis that has highlighted circularity can leave room for a defense of Marxism and for a Marxist reading of history. That such projects will ultimately subvert their own claims, or beg their own questions does not decrease their trenchancy in appropriate contexts—in particular, when they are competing against other persuasive versions of historical "truth," which will be subject to similar disruptions. (p. 80)

One immediately wonders when and how a context could arise that did not involve competing versions of historical "truth." When deconstruction is added to this competition a peculiar ethics presents itself. To what advantage does the political or legal theorist introduce deconstructive strategies into the debate? Although one who enlists such a strategy can offer devastating insights into the traditions one seeks to engage, it remains doubtful what effect such insights will have on one's opponents (the use of metaphors of battle and struggle pervade Kramer's book). Kramer maintains that to take a deconstructive stance allows one to "absorb critiques to which one's position must be vulnerable" (p. 268), and because of this he "imploring critical legal scholars to brace their methods by undermining and imperiling [them]" (p.269). Hesitancy redux.

To raise questions about strategy in Kramer's book is not to suggest that they have gone overlooked. As Kramer notes: "It may well turn out that upholding novelty against rigidified structures will promote stagnation far
more than would a contrary tactic. That, however, seems a gamble worth
taking” (p. 268). However, this gamble should only be taken with full
recognition of the stakes. Inverting Derrida’s observation that “to state the
difficulty is not... to surmount it” (p. 268), one should also note that neither
has one surmounted the solution by stating it. Although deconstruction
opens up many avenues for intervention in political and legal theory, both
sides of the dyads around which deconstruction operates are deeply
entrenched. This entrenchment has sites both within the academy and
without. To treat them as “merely” literary is to seriously weaken the
possibility of using deconstruction as an effective means of intervention.
The strength of Kramer’s book is that he recognizes this. His close reading of
a selection of texts which give sustenance to the main traditions of legal and
political theory is instructive, and should serve as a preliminary model for
those working within these traditions—especially Critical Legal Studies.

Greg Howard, Lexington

Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews. Edited by John P.
O’Neill. Text Notes and Commentary by Mollie McNickle. Introduction

Though Barnett Newman wrote more and more persuasively than any
of his colleagues in the early-’50s school known as Abstract Expressionism,
he still remains perhaps the most misunderstood painter in what was the first
modern American art movement to free itself in any significant way from
European tethers. In that we have learned to enter Rothko’s color field,
Pollock’s web, or De Kooning’s splashy landscape, we have not assimilated
Newman into a popular understanding. One can stand in the circular room
of the National Gallery in D.C. where Newman’s fourteen “Stations of the
Cross” hang, and witness the perplexity coupled with derision that crosses
viewers’ faces as they encounter these 8-foot canvases, so ascetically rendered
that they appear nearly bare, simply “framed” with strips of black or white.
How does one go about explaining to the uninitiated that it took Newman 43
years to arrive at this style? One could retaliate in the manner of Adorno that
“If one does not understand something, it is customary to behave with the
sublime understanding of Mahler’s jackass, and project one’s own inadequacy
on to the object, declaring it to be incomprehensible.” But Newman seldom
took such high ground. Rather, he tried insistently to explain his art and other
like it to an unfamiliar public and critics alike. Selected Writings offers more
than ample insight into the resilient psyche of the man who claimed that to
understand one of his paintings “would mean the end of all state capitalism
and totalitarianism” (p. 247).

Before Newman painted his seminal “Onement I” in 1948—a maroon
canvas with one orange stripe, or “zip” down the center—he was a relentless
proselytizer for the abstract art movement in America. He claimed it was the true
American form—"barbaric" and primitive, owing nothing to European
notions of representation, which he claimed were simply derivations of
classicism. “For the artist in America has the special privilege of being told
and reminded every minute of his state of futility. The world here makes no
bargain of expediency with him in the name of culture” (p. 112), wrote
Newman. Instead, he praised throughout his life the raw sculpture of
Oceanic and South Sea tribes, with rhetoric that never fell into the racist
implications of psychic savagery that became popular in lieu of surrealism.
Rather, Newman emphasized the “elemental mystery of life” that these
sculptures sought to embody and combat. Primitive art was never decorative,
never interested in polished surfaces. Rather it was always totemic, more
metaphysical, more “intellectual” in its grappling with the chaos of nature.

By examining primitive cultures in the Americas, Newman arrived at
the conviction that contemporary art had become impotent and stylized
because it emerged from only one tradition—classicism. Newman had
begun thinking about the “Other” decades before it was vogue in this
country. “We are to admit that the emperor has no clothes,” he wrote, “for to
do so—to admit that primitive art can move us without resorting to the
sensuous elements to which we are accustomed—may prove to be a denial
of our Western European aesthetics” (p. 146).

In the spring of 1945, in a long essay called “The Plasmic Image,”
Newman began seriously to search for a new “language” in which to paint—
a new beginning separate from Europe. The myth of “beauty” was obsolete,
ornamental, “plastic.” In light of the horrors that were unfolding in Europe,
such facile art was unfathomable for Newman. He searched for a “plasmic,”
philosophical form that would allow him to express all of the anguish
primitive people must have felt at the mercy of forces they could not
comprehend.

Newman never lost his ambition to express man’s relation to the
transcendental. He simply thought that the European’s “relation to the
Absolute became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect
creations—with the fetish of quality—so that the European artist has been
to a point in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the
desire for sublimity” (p. 171). The crucial question then became for Newman,
“if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called
sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to