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The Experience of Freedom
Jean Luc Nancy
(Trans. Bridget McDonald)

Reviewed by Michael Lackey
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Postmodern clichés (borders are fluid in time—borders of thought are socially constructed—rigid classifications are arbitrary) are now so much with us that it is easy to see them as established foundational precepts. Surely the post-structuralist decentering of the word has, if not directly given birth to, at least nourished these common assertions of the postmodern age. But if philosophy has been an attempt to lay a 'solid' foundation for systems of thought or ways of seeing, and if postmodern philosophy's foundation is the impossibility of establishing foundations (a foundational precept in itself), then the foundationless foundation must be securely (paradoxically) laid, lest philosophy today become a primitive dis-closure of freedom and Heidegger (though without Heidegger's closure of Being—rather, for Nancy, with must be securely laid, lest philosophy today become a primitive dis-closure of freedom) and Heidegger (armed with a methodolo gy that recalls Merleau-Ponty's critique of the Cartesian precept, cogito ergo sum), Nancy's objective in The Experience of Freedom is to lay such a 'foundation,' though his conclusion is not likely to please today's advocates of borderlessness.

According to Nancy, freedom is a pre-cogito, pre-subjective (one hears Merleau-Ponty at this point in Nancy's analysis) 'reality.' It is subject to neither the determining or determinate synthesis of the cogito nor to the laws of causality and necessity. It is not a part of the human will nor is it a natural right. Unfounded, elusive, ineffable—freedom cannot be reduced to thought. On the contrary, thought is thought because freedom founds thought, surprises thought into action and permits thought to be (Das Wesen der Freiheit liegt in seiner Existenz). Thought therefore cannot define freedom; rather freedom defines thought, because freedom is ontologically prior to thought, to humans, to being:

Freedom Manipulated (by powers, by capital): this could be the title of our half-century. Thinking freedom should mean: freeing freedom from manipulations, including, first of all, those of thinking. This requires something on the order of revolution, and also a revolution of thinking (164).

After this revolution of thinking, thinking would no longer analyze, classify and ground existence. Rather, thinking would encounter unanalyzable, unclassifiable and groundless freedom. If existence, according to Sartre, preceded essence, essence withdraws from existence, argues Nancy, when freedom unleashes itself as the ever-elusive, unfounded 'foundation' of existence. In this anarchic unleashing of freedom's freedom, Kantian causality and necessity, the Hegelian dialectic and Heideggerian Dasein and Being become meaningless productions and deductions of thought. In other words, they are all post-freedom constructions and freedom is the parent and original.

Though freedom has played an important role in philosophy, it has been continually incarcerated: hence, freedom has never been free to be freedom. Despite this semantic imprisonment, freedom, as the unfounded founder (the pun here is intended to be suggestively ironic, but not ironic through and through), has continually asserted itself (Nancy both anthropomorphizes and theomorphizes freedom throughout the work), insisting on its 'essence' as freedom. This is particularly obvious in the works of Kant and Heidegger. Kant, as Heidegger has already shown, reduces freedom to necessity and causation, a move which thereby denies freedom its freedom. Consequently freedom, which seeks its own freedom, repeatedly problematizes Kantian thought.

According to Nancy, the early Heidegger (from Being and Time (1927) to the 1936 course devoted to Schelling's treatise "On the Essence of Human Freedom") gets close to liberating freedom, because he nearly develops "a more originary thinking' of freedom" (39). However, by 1942:

Heidegger firmly demotes freedom to non-'originary' thought, this is because at every point metaphysics presents him definitively (but this is nothing new since Being and Time) with the closure of a beingness of being (corollary to the subjective closure of the will that he recognized at that time, after having used up, as we've indicated, a motif of free will) (39).

Heidegger's and Kant's philosophical systems, then, remain strained because freedom has not been securely founded as the originary groundless ground.

The logical conclusion of Nancy's conception of freedom is his definition of evil (this is one of the most interesting and complex chapters in the book). Traditionally, evil was considered a negation of existence, god serving as the fullest manifestation of being. Evil, then, was a renunciation of god, or rather it was an...
absence (no-thing) inserting itself in being as being. But for Nancy, "the evil that was 'nothing' has become 'something' that thought cannot reduce" (123). Since thought cannot rationalize evil out of existence, as thought has formerly tried to do by defining evil as no-thing, evil must then be the ontological equal of good. For this reason, Nancy speaks of the positivity of evil: "evil has not only been confirmed as a positivity, it is perhaps confirmed as the positivity of freedom" (133).

As a positive 'reality,' '[e]vil is the hatred of existence as such" (128). Since freedom is ontologically prior to thought, and since thought cannot reduce freedom to necessity, causality, a natural right, or anything else, thought must abandon itself to freedom, and not vice versa. But when thought does try to subject freedom to necessity, when it tries to systematize or conceptualize freedom, then thought, as an emissary of evil, denies existence, it refuses to acknowledge existence as such. In this instance, thought usurps freedom and fashions itself the groundless ground:

to say of birth and death that 'we can only think them' means that we can only think in them, and that freedom is at stake in them. Auschwitz signified the death of birth and death, their conversion into an infinite abstraction, the negation of existence: this is perhaps above all what 'culture' made possible (122).

Borderlessness as the determining and determinate ground of postmodern thought, freedom as a natural right, a thought before freedom—these are the current evils that plague philosophy. For Nancy, when such thoughts are the originary precepts of philosophy, 'culture' once again makes possible, what with dread, the undoing of freedom. Under these postmodern cliches, freedom is demoted to non-originary thought. According to Nancy, "existence as its own essence is nothing other than the freedom of beings" (23). With this definition in mind, borderlessness becomes not a foundational precept: rather, it is a pre-thought entity. Borderlessness (as a clearly defined thought), therefore, cannot be the beginning of any systematic philosophical doctrine: on the contrary, borderlessness, like freedom, can only be experienced before thought, outside of thought, on the 'borders' of thought, for groundlessness is the ground of borderlessness. And, '[w]hat is groundless," according to Nancy, "is also to the same extent, perhaps more 'profoundly,' what comes-up from nothing, on nothing, what, instead of climbing out of the abyss, freely rises up, suspended in free air, the simple pulsating of a released existence" (133).

Though Nancy deftly argues his point, one is inclined to question his inflated claims for freedom. At moments, freedom is described like the Jewish deity from the Kabbalah, while at other times it appears to be a version of the Christian unmoved mover who is apprehended only in the cloud of unknowing. Recently Heidegger's debt to the mystical tradition (in particular to Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius) has been more carefully documented and these studies help account for Heidegger's rather mystical claims. Such a study would also prove useful, not to discredit any of Nancy's assertions, but to give them a fuller context. Because this work is so intelligently argued and so profoundly insightful, it is certain that it will be the impetus for many future studies in Continental philosophy.

Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change
Stephen L. Fisher (Ed)
Reviewed by Phil Jenks
University of Kentucky

Stephen L. Fisher's anthology Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change can be read as a (postmodern?) response to the late 1970s Appalachian classic, Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case. Whereas Lewis, Johnson, and Askins sought to delineate the relations of domination through theoretical spheres of culture, political institutions, and economics, Fisher's anthology seeks to formulate a more comprehensive notion of active dissent. Colonialism is a fantastic book, but the authors all too often fell into a Manichean trap of bifurcating between Us and Them. This process of essentializing the Appalachian 'native' risks reifying a monolithic vision of what constitutes Appalachia and subsequently problematizes any narrative of collective and individual resistance.

It would seem that Fisher et al. seek to reconstitute the Appalachian narrative in such a way that a multiplicity of powerful voices can be heard, thus challenging the legitimacy of singularizing Appalachia. Fisher seeks to dismantle the stereotype of the 'Appalachian' as a passive victim by documenting dissent in Appalachia. The book contains an introductory essay by Fisher, and fifteen essays by activists and scholars in the field in three sections on "Grassroots Organizing," "Strategies in Labor Struggles," and (my favorite) "Culture, Class and Gender in..."