

METHOD

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CONTENTS

- | | | |
|---------------------------|-----|---|
| <i>James Marsh</i> | 1 | Self-Appropriation, Polymorphism, and <i>Différance</i> |
| <i>Robert Doran, S.J.</i> | 13 | The Ninth Functional Specialty |
| <i>Michael Sharkey</i> | 17 | Heidegger, Lonergan, and the Notion of Being |
| <i>Patrick Brown</i> | 45 | Functional Specialization and the Methodical Division of Labor in Legal Studies |
| <i>Paul Osslington</i> | 67 | Lonergan's Reception Among Economists: Tale of a Dead Fish and an Agenda for Future Work |
| <i>Hugo Meynell</i> | 79 | Groarke, Aristotle, and Induction |
| <i>Nick Olkovich</i> | 89 | Beyond Radical Particularism: A Lonerganian Response to S. Mark Heim's 'Pluralistic Inclusivism' |
| <i>David Oyler</i> | 123 | Review of Pierrot Lambert and Philip McShane, <i>Bernard Lonergan: His Life and Leading Ideas</i> |
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SELF-APPROPRIATION, POLYMORPHISM, AND DIFFÉRANCE

James L. Marsh

I HAVE, FOR some time now, been involved in writing a book on post-modernism, *French Ideology*, which is meant to complement my book on Habermas, *Unjust Legality: A Critique of Habermas's Philosophy of Law*, which was a critique, among other things, of the way his philosophy of law functions as an ideology for capitalism expressing, legitimating, and covering up its irrationality, exploitation, and oppression. Habermas's, I argue, while ultimately more insightful than post-modernism and on whose thought I draw in many positive ways, is a modernist ideology, whereas post-modernism is a form of post-modern ideology, aiming to criticize, transcend, and transform modernist forms of rationality and social life, but in attempting to do so, ending up, like Habermas, expressing, legitimating, and covering up capitalism.¹

These two books are intended to complement, build on, extend, and test my earlier, three volume, systematic trilogy, *Post-Cartesian Meditations, Critique, Action, and Liberation*, and *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence*. A phenomenology of self and self-appropriation leading horizontally to an ethics and social theory and vertically to a metaphysics and philosophy – theology of liberation. In these three books the main idea animating my thought is the link between rationality and radicalism, self-appropriation and liberation. No fully adequate rationality without radicalism, no adequate radicalism without a fully developed defense and account of

1 James L. Marsh, *Unjust Legality: A Critique of Habermas's Philosophy of Law* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

rationality.²

In the light of this claim, both Habermas and post-modernism fall short, one by a deficit of radicalism, the other by a defect of rationality. In this book on post-modernism, I also criticize it as counter-positional, inconsistent, experientially and hermeneutically oversimplified, and totalizing. In contrast to its proclamation of *différance*, it flattens out human experience and history in a way that minimizes or denies *différance*. Another task is to give an account of positive, redeeming, fruitful questions and insights and claims that can be incorporated into a more adequate philosophy, social theory, and philosophy of religion. It is this task that I take on today.³

Unlike Mark Antony, therefore, I have come today not to bury post-modernism, but to praise it.⁴ I was helped in conceiving this task by a very fine book on Lonergan by Gerard Walmsley, *Lonergan on Philosophic Pluralism: The Polymorphism of Consciousness as the Key to Philosophy*, one of the many fine books on Lonergan coming out of the University of Toronto Press. In this book, Walmsley links polymorphism and pluralism in philosophy, including the kind of pluralism represented by post-modernism. He contrasts an earlier more negative, less sympathetic critique influenced by *Insight* with a later, more nuanced version based on *Method*, able to do justice to both positive and negative aspects of post-modernism.⁵

I propose in this essay to develop and emphasize the positive by discussing the link between self-appropriation, polymorphism, and *différance*, this latter term and concept referring not just to Derrida in a specific way, but also to a more general sense and emphasis running through many post-modern thinkers. Polymorphism becomes the middle term between self-appropriation and *différance*, used not only to criticize

2 *Post-Cartesian Mediations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988). *Critique, Action, and Liberation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). *Process, Praxis, and Transcendence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

3 I dealt with these issues 18 years ago in a book co-authored with John Caputo and Merold Westphal, *Modernity and its Discontents* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992).

4 "Julius Caesar," William Shakespeare: *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1951), p. 986.

5 The full reference is Gerard Walmsley, *Lonergan and Philosophical Pluralism: The Polymorphism of Consciousness as the Key to Philosophy* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2008). Pp. 47-52. Among the many commentators, on Lonergan mentioned by Walmsley, Mark Morelli is mentioned the most and is thus the hero of this discussion. See, among other citations, pp. 6, 9, 11, and 252-253.