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Edited by
Victor E. Taylor
and **Charles E. Winquist**

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The Post-Colonial Critic, Spivak argues that the benevolent subject's desire to do good and to promote the happiness of others involves "welcoming those others into his own understanding of the world, so that they too can be liberated and begin to inhabit a world that is the best of all possible worlds" (Spivak 1990: 19). US President Truman's inaugural address in 1949 is a good example of what Spivak means by benevolent subjectivity. First describing the emergent decolonized Third World as "inadequate," "primitive," and "stagnant," Truman then suggests that "we make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life" (quoted in Escobar 1995: 3). However, in the performance of such good intention, the norm remains the benevolent rationalist.

This benevolent humanist does not always need to be a representative of Western power. In neo-colonialism, secular bourgeois Third World governments might inscribe the tribal ethnic societies within their national borders by a similar rhetoric of benevolence. Brazilian government defines Amazonian tribals as "our Indians," "condemned to poverty and misery" because of their lifestyle, and considers it its "duty to help them emancipate themselves from servitude... to raise themselves to the dignity of Brazilian citizens, in order to participate fully in the development of national society and enjoy its benefits" (quoted in Clastres 1994: 45). Thus an "integrationist" strategy, already implied in Foucault's criticism, can also be found in neo-colonial or governmental benevolence towards the subaltern populations in non-Western countries.

The postmodern critique of neo-colonialism reveals benevolence as a denial of difference and constitution of hegemonic subject. The production of Western sovereign self is disguised by othering the Third World disenfranchised as lacking appropriate agency. Thus, in benevolent discourse, difference is accepted and denied at the same time, that is to say, it is made into a natural hierarchy. This is why, for the postmodern critic of benevolent subjectivity, discourses on Third World poor or the tribal minorities are never far from being problematic. Such designations as "stagnant," "lacking" or "primitive" are not merely

objective factual descriptions but often rhetorical displacements of global socio-economic determinations into cultural or geographical traits. Rather than representing or helping the subaltern, benevolent discourse performs the hegemony of the neo-colonial subject and constitutes his/her world as naturally superior. This blocks the possibility of talking with the subaltern.

Benevolent humanism is not simply a legitimating ideology in the service of economic interests inscribed elsewhere. The International Monetary Fund's and World Bank's aid and development programs are instances of benevolence as forms of extraction of economic value. As these are essential to the system of neo-colonial exploitation, the so-called benevolent subjectivity and morality are inevitably politico-economic inscriptions.

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MAHMUT MUTMAN

Benjamin, Walter

b. 15 July 1892, Berlin, Germany; d. 26 September 1940, near Port-Bau, Spain

Philosopher and cultural critic

Walter Benjamin's fascination with the avant-garde

invites comparison to the iconoclastic origins of postmodernism in 1960s' America. However, comparing Benjamin to the postmodernism emerging after the mid-1970s – essentially an uncritical culture of eclecticism – is more problematic.

At first glance, Benjamin appears to remain compatible with recent trends in postmodernism. "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" appears to welcome a nascent "high tech" society and to prefigure postmodernism's rejection of the hierarchy of high versus pop culture. In "On the Concept of History," Benjamin sounds rather "postmodernist" by championing "peripheral" voices. Similarly, Benjamin's frequent use of quotations and *montage* resembles postmodernist practices of "intertextuality" and "paralogism." Such resemblances, however, are superficial. Recent postmodernists such as Lyotard privilege language games above the *métarécits* of "liberation" and "totality." Benjamin's messianism–Kantianism–Marxism, by contrast, pivots upon notions of truth, critique, totality, and redemption.

Benjamin and the Enlightenment project of "Liberation"

Unlike the postmodernists, Benjamin commits himself to Marxist ideas of oppression, class struggle, and revolution, and upholds the Kantian and Marxist traditions of "critique" and truth (see *Trauerspiel*, "Critique of Violence," "Task of the Translator," and *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften*). In the essay on "Technical Reproducibility," the critical act of "shattering... the aura" prevents the art object from casting a spell on the beholder, thereby allowing truth to emerge.

Benjamin endorses the Enlightenment values of truth and liberation, of which myth is the antithesis. For Benjamin, truth is pure, absolute, and unquestionable (*O* 30); unlike the postmodernists' focus on "contamination" and "impurity." Whereas postmodernists celebrate "undecidability," Benjamin stresses de-cision as a critical gesture that cuts through "ambiguity" and the "mythical web of fate." Postmodernists such as Baudrillard reduce truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, to an overarching "hyperreality" of simulacra – thus removing any sense of critical distance between rhetoric and reason, individual phenomena and

truth. In Benjaminian terms, the postmodernists' transformation of truth into textual phenomena amounts to aestheticizing politics.

Benjamin and "Totality"

Benjamin also differs from the postmodernists in his view of "totality." For Benjamin, the singular is inseparable from the whole. Schlegel inspires him to see the fragment as an "intensive totality" "contain[ing] the kernel of the system" (*Kunstkritik*, 47–248). Leibniz's monad offers him another means for articulating the way one idea figures a "world" (see *Trauerspiel* and "History"). Benjamin's favorite image for expressing the sudden illumination of truth in its entirety is "constellation."

Benjamin's commitment to a unifying relationship between fragments and "totality" argues against collapsing his writings into postmodern theories of "multiplicity" and "incompleteness." Even though postmodernists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard have been influenced by Benjamin, their refusal of his politicized vision of history as a redemptive whole and their celebration of "hybridity" *without limit* easily lapse into a hypostatization of textual "free play" and an aestheticization of politics.

Reading Benjamin alongside postmodernism helps recall the avant-garde spirit and critical edge of early postmodernism. This juxtaposition, in other words, may assist us to rethink and redefine a postmodernism of resistance.

Further reading

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SINKWAN CHENG

Benveniste, Émile

b. 25 May 1902, Aleppo, Syria; d. 3 October 1976, Paris, France

Linguist

Although the 1966 Johns Hopkins symposium on **structuralism** is remembered for Jacques **Derrida**'s critique of the structuralist dream of unifying the human sciences, participants acknowledged another student of language, a linguist who had specified, since the 1930s, the shortcomings of a general linguistics grounded in **Saussure**'s theory of the sign. This linguist was Émile Benveniste, professor at the Collège de France specializing in comparative studies of Indo-European grammars. Against Saussure's privileging of *la langue*, Benveniste's articles advocated a linguistics of the speech event (*la parole*). Republished in 1966 as *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (translated as *Problems in General Linguistics* in 1971), these studies catalyzed ideas that would become known as **poststructuralism**, particularly the "textual" theory of **subjectivity** elucidated by the Tel Quel group of the late 1960s (Roland **Barthes**, Derrida, Jean-Joseph **Goux**, Julia **Kristeva**, and Philippe Sollers).

With his 1939 publication, "Nature du signe linguistique," Benveniste established a controversial presence among Saussure's disciples, arguing that a semiology based on the arbitrary relation of signified/signifier diverts attention from the core semantic relationship of sign and reality: "To decide that the linguistic sign is arbitrary... is equivalent to saying that the notion of mourning is arbitrary because in Europe it is symbolized by black, in China by white" (1971: 44). The analogy reveals Benveniste's interest in the *act* of speech as locus of linguistic meaning. As primary object of study, *la parole* would advance linguistics beyond Saussure's conventionalism (which Benveniste regarded as a complacency of nineteenth-century

historicism) and foreground the difficult question of "*physei* or *thesei*?" (natural law or conventional law), an allusion reflecting Benveniste's debt to Stoic thought on the relationship between things and names. The Stoic *thesis* (meaning both "arbitrary determination" and "position") echoes throughout Benveniste's work, especially his influential studies on "enunciation."

Benveniste's interest in enunciation begins in the 1950s, during his association with Jacques **Lacan**. "Remarques sur la fonction du langage dans la découverte freudienne" (1956) posits psychoanalysis as a model of the interlocutory structure of speech events and defines this structure as a dialectical relationship of speaker/hearer, "positioning" the speaking subject (*thesis*): "the subject makes use of the act of speech and discourse in order to 'represent' himself to himself as he wishes to see himself and as he calls upon the 'other' to observe him" (1971: 67). "De la subjectivité dans le langage" (1958) focuses on linguistic resources that determine subjectivity: "It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject..." (1971: 224). This process of enunciation operates through pronouns designating the interlocutors ("I" and "you") and their spatio-temporal context (demonstrative and relative pronouns, verb tenses). "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français" (1959) introduces a rudimentary typology of discourse based on degrees of enunciative features. Armed with Benveniste's studies, Barthes proclaimed at the Hopkins symposium that "the writer [is] no longer one who writes something, but one who writes — absolutely" (1986: 18).

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JAMES COMAS

List of contributors

Thomas Altizer

State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA

Philip Arnold

Syracuse University, USA

Babette E. Babich

Fordham University, USA

Robert Bambic

State University of New York, Stony Brook, USA

Stephen Barker

University of California at Irvine, USA

Robert Barsky

University of Western Ontario, Canada

Tom Beaudoin

Boston College, USA

Brigitte H. Bechtold

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Matthew Beedham

Chonnam National University, Republic of Korea

Nicholas Birns

New School University, USA

Patrick L. Bourgeois

Loyola University, USA

Ian Buchanan

University of Tasmania, Australia

David M. Buyze

University of Toronto, Canada

Tamara Campbell-Teghillo

University of California, Irvine, USA

Peter Canning

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Tom Carlson

University of Santa Barbara, USA

Judith Carmel-Arthur

Kingston University, UK

James Castonguay

Sacred Heart University, USA

Matthew Causey

Georgia Institute of Technology, USA

Catherine Chaput

The University of Arizona, USA

Sinkwan Cheng

City College, City University of New York, USA

Tracy Clark

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, USA

Tammy Clewell

Kent State University, USA

David Clippinger

Pennsylvania State University, USA

Sharyn Clough

Rowan University, USA

James Comas

University of Missouri-Columbia, USA

Clayton Crockett

College of William and Mary, USA

Didier Debaise

University of Brussels, Belgium



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Professor Sinkwan Cheng
Carl H. Pforzheimer Professor
CCNY
453 W. 141st Street, Unit 2B
New York
NY 10031
USA

Dear Professor Cheng,

Encyclopedia of Postmodernism

This letter is to confirm that you are the author of the entry on 'Benjamin, Walter' which appears in the *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, edited by Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist. Your name was omitted in error from the first print run but will be included in all new editions.

With best wishes,

Stephanie Rogers
Development Editor
stephanie.rogers@routledge.co.uk
www.routledge.com

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