

Polish Perspective on the Postmodern American Academy

The Rice Thresher, December 6, 1991

and

The Houston Chronicle, January 19, 1992

As a Pole born immediately the Second World War I have naturally become an admirer of the United States. Americans fought against the Nazis. After the war, they sent milk to nourish Polish children. And it was Americans who kept alive my parents' generation hope for the future without Communism. To do so, it sufficed to keep telling us the truth. I shall never forget my parents and myself listening to the Radio Free Europe during the Budapest uprising in June 1956, and during our own uprising later that year. It was mainly that broadcasting that prevented unnecessary bloodshed in Poland then.

In the early seventies, my admiration turned to an interest in the American market of ideas. From the outset, I was surprised to find considerable sympathy for the Soviets and their agenda among the American intellectual fashion kings. As I continued to examine the dominant political and ideological strands expressed in American journals of opinion and in the press, I noticed that the academics' assault on traditional morality, which had started in the sixties, was to stay in full swing for good.

In the academic year 1985 to 1986, I was fortunate to be given a visiting position at Rice University. I found the American academic situation to be much worse than I had expected. Marxist and neo-Marxist authors were either included or tried to be included, in University curricula all over the U.S. It seemed to me that the progressivist agenda was mostly ideological, not scholarly. The assault was no more on the traditional moral law only. It was directed against something more fundamental; the notion of the objective existence of truth.

As an outside observer I could not prove at that time that the progressivist agenda was mostly ideological. But I had good reasons to be suspicious, because I had been subject to that sort of scholarship for years in a country governed by Marxists. In Poland, my friends and I went through all this, and we stubbornly and staunchly opposed it. Nobody could then, and will ever, fool me into believing that what we experienced was a "bad Marxism", or that there is another Marxism, the one with a "human face". An obvious answer to that claim was then, and is now: Show me that other one, but not on paper, in reality!

American scholars try to fool me by referring to a poor Communist Gramsci, who spent 10 years in jail. Perhaps Gramsci was a good-hearted guy, and I don't blame him for his error: For inventing the theory of cultural hegemony for future use by Communists to subjugate European societies. He died in 1937, soon after

his release from jail, so he neither was aware of the Soviet reality in the thirties, nor was he alive when the cultural hegemony of the "Communist avant-garde" was implemented in 1/3 of the world. But his best friend and co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, Mr. Togliatti, was. Togliatti fled Mussolini's Italy in the twenties and, before coming back to Italy in the forties, he spent most of the time in Moscow. He necessarily knew about Stalin's genocide, he happily accepted Stalin's annexation of East-Central Europe, and he remained a Communist until his death in 1963. All for the cause of building a better world under the cultural hegemony of avant-garde thinkers.

Referring to Gramsci and quoting "one of the principal insights of post-structuralist criticism" which echoes Gramsci's theory, Rice University Professor Daniel J. Sherman (Rice Thresher, November 15, 1991, and Houston Chronicle, January 5, 1992) tries to convince us that "those working from a left perspective employ [...] complex and subtle analytical tools". No, Sir! Your subtle and complex tools are the tools of hatred and manipulation.

First, as I already mentioned, after the Stalinist terror ended, it was exactly the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony that the Communist elites tried on us in East-Central Europe. And second, the post-structuralist principle that "power relations are not confined to the realm of politics or social conflict but permeate language, culture, all the forces that shape our daily experiences" rests on the false neo-Marxist premise that fundamental relations within society can be reduced to power relations. Just as the Gramscian theory, the post-structuralist principle is an invitation for avant-garde elites to foster cultural changes that would allow the elites to dominate the rest of society. Almost 50 years ago, Oxford professor, Michael Oakeshott, pointed out the flaws of modern rationalism in the context of political sciences. In the seventies and eighties, another Oxford (and University of Chicago) professor, Leszek Kolakowski, presented an in-depth philosophical analysis showing that it is impossible for an Enlightenment rationalist to speak of objective truth. Within rationalism and its many children, post-structuralism included, it remains either to accept the absurdity of existence or, for that matter, to start a power struggle. Dr. Sherman's premises suggest that the academic left has chosen the latter solution.

However, had Dr. Sherman used a better example of post-structuralist achievements (if there are such!), I would have eagerly learned the lesson and used that particular achievement in my own reflections. Which brings me to the following point. Now, in 1991, contrary to what Dr. Sherman claims, it is easily seen that the progressivist agenda is not a scholarly one. Were it otherwise, post-structuralists would teach their post-structuralism (and women studies would be offered at all Universities, etc., etc.) without any opposition whatsoever. No one would think of opposing a course in Levi-Strauss' anthropology if the course were free of Levi-Strauss' ideology.

The problem begins when Levi-Strauss puts on a robe of a philosopher, generalizes his scientific findings into a philosophy of sorts, and, finally, tells me that my self is just an interiorization of my native tongue. That is, it is not that I think but, rather, it is my tongue that thinks through me.

It was Levi-Strauss' belief in Marxist materialism, that led him to that strange conclusion. While Levi-Strauss has provided us with interesting conclusions concerning different cultures, it is his disputable philosophy which has become a focal point of interest among progressive gurus.

Why do the progressive gurus arrange the curricula in such a way as to promote relativism, to make a student convinced that there is no such thing as objective truth? Why do they put so much emphasis on contemporary postmodernism, as if it could be a match for two thousand years of European thought? Isn't it that they want to engineer a change of our students' mores, that they work toward the rejection of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Graeco-Christian thought? But then, it is not a scholarly endeavor but an ideological and a revolutionary one.