



Nina Power
Think again

Postmodern theory can be pretentious and overblown. But a new series of reissues calls for more than the glib rejection characterizing much of the contemporary Anglo-American humanities, writes Nina Power.

Given the present intellectual climate one could be excused for thinking that the arrival of a new series of books from Verso entitled "Radical Thinkers" is more likely to provoke an extravagant yawn than an excited cry of delight. Do we really need to be reminded of those days in the late '60s and '70s when "theory" reigned supreme, when names like Baudrillard, Jameson, Mouffe and Rose were on every undergraduate's lips and in every doctoral bibliography? Shouldn't we feel relieved that we are at last free of the convoluted speculations of such postmodern theorists and able to engage with more concrete intellectual debates: arguments about Darwin and creationism, the limits of free speech, the causes of the present financial crisis, the nature of a multicultural globalised world, the problems with contemporary democracy?

But important though these debates are, they often seem to involve their protagonists in defending a particular patch rather than developing broader insights. Thus the "New Atheists", for example, end up reiterating one or two main points — the evils of organised religion, or the perils of Islamic fundamentalism — but lack gravity when it comes to analysing the direction of society as a whole. Many would say that this was a good thing: who needs a new Jean-Paul Sartre or Bertrand Russell? We are beyond the need for great men (and it was pretty much always men) to tell us what to think. And yet, as Verso's "Radical Thinkers" series shows, we are impoverished if we simply turn our back on those able to point to the paradoxes and impasses of contemporary thought and society: we need more philosophy, not less, if we are to understand both the history and meaning of our own ideas and the beliefs of those we disagree with.

"Theory", an American coinage for a mishmash of political, philosophical and sociological writings that came primarily from France and Germany, along with some Anglophone fellow-travellers, has perhaps lost some of the racy edge it enjoyed during the '60s and '70s. As the Verso reissues show, these ideas can, and possibly should, be quite easily received beyond the circles of the radical academics and daring artists who initially fell for the charms of thinkers like Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida. Indeed, with the death of Derrida in 2004, a certain age seems to have drawn to a close for Continental thought (Althusser died in 1990 and Baudrillard in 2007). Virilio is in his late 70s, and many of the other main theorists and philosophers that could be counted as a "Radical Thinker" of one

stripe or another are similarly venerable. But perhaps it was less Derrida's death than the ceremonial and very public execution of postmodernism in the late 1990s in the widely read *Intellectual Impostures*, a critique by two professors, Alan Sokal and Jen Bricmont, of the misuse of scientific ideas by so-called "postmodern" thinkers. Whilst many are happy to take their demolition of French theory at face value, as it provides a convenient justification for not reading any of it, it is often forgotten that part of the authors' point was a plea for clearer writing among leftwing thinkers in the face of the continuing march of neo-liberalism, not simply to damn any and all contemporary thought as "fashionable nonsense", however appealing this easy gesture might be.

So what can be salvaged from this weather-beaten set of ideas? As it turns out, quite a lot. The selection of books in Verso's fine series is in turn prescient, relevant and extremely useful as a way of deepening our understanding of some of today's most difficult and persistent debates. Fredric Jameson's *The Cultural Turn*, a collection of essays spanning 15 years, tackles a series of themes that remain of specific relevance. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" from 1982, Jameson describes the way in which it has become increasingly difficult "to map the great global, multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects". The financial crisis of the past year or so has brought this particular insight home hard, both at the personal and at the national level — who knew that Britain had so many ties to Iceland's banks? That personal debt could play such a role in sustaining a collapsing economy? That the "trickle-down" effect would mean the passing on of losses through job cuts and negative equity rather than any kind of positive redistribution? Jameson identifies early on the difficulty of seeing the whole situation — social and financial — and warns us that we must be on our guard against the media, which would have us forget the bad news we heard yesterday in favour of the worse news we hear today: "The informational function of the media would be to help us to forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia."

Elsewhere Jameson discusses calmly and soberly whether we have any reason to use the term "postmodern" to characterise changes in the way we work and our relation to culture, concluding that it is best understood as a new way to understand the system as a whole, to attempt to "cognitively map" the changing patterns of financialisation and information flow. He points out in "The Antinomies of Postmodernity" (1991) that "it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism", reminding us, quite brilliantly, that for all our focus on environmental catastrophe, a trend that has surely only increased since Jameson's claim, we may be neglecting issues of class and inequality that we have a much better chance of improving, should we find the will.

Though rather more free-wheeling with his prose and his claims than Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, long considered the clown prince of postmodernism (Sokal and Bricmont set the tone by defining his work as "a gradual crescendo of nonsense"), still has something to say of contemporary relevance. His description of the present state of affairs (he is writing in 1990) as "after the orgy" seems prescient in the light of the collective guilt-ridden hangover of the moment. Now that "everything has been liberated", Baudrillard claims, we find ourselves confronted with the question "what do we do now the orgy is over?"

This kind of hyperbolic prose might tempt readers to scurry back to their popular history, but read as an almost poetic take on the information age, there is much to appreciate here, whether it be the minor observations ("At one time the body was a metaphor for the soul, then it became a metaphor for sex") or the haunting images of the future: "One day the image of a person sitting watching a television screen voided by a technicians' strike will be seen as the perfect epitome of the anthropological reality of the twentieth century."

So much for the poetry of postmodernism, what of the politics? Chantal Mouffe's *The Democratic Paradox* from 2000, her most recent book, addresses a question made increasingly important by the visibility and success of parties like the BNP in Britain. What cannot be contestable in a liberal democracy, she argues, is the idea that "it is legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of liberty". What does this mean? At base, that democracy as we understand it in practice must always consist of a series of tensions (what Mouffe calls "agonisms" -- "friendly enemies ... persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organise this common symbolic space in a different way"). The political move towards the Third Way, which has been the essence of the New Labour project since its inception, is a distraction: we might have given up on the idea of a radical alternative to the capitalist system, she writes, but even a renewed and modernised social democracy "will need to challenge the entrenched wealth and power of the new class of managers if it wants to bring about a fairer and more accountable society". Those in charge of regulating the banking system would have done well to heed her words.

Of all the books in the series, it is the philosopher Gillian Rose's *Hegel Contra Sociology* that is the most difficult, but also the most rewarding. Rose died tragically young in 1995, but deserves to be remembered as one of the most serious and important thinkers of her generation. *Hegel Contra Sociology*, a defence of the significance of Hegel for leftist critique, is a brilliant study of German philosophy and sociology from Kant onwards. Her attempt to synthesise politics, culture and philosophy through a close reading of the missing elements of 19th- and 20th-century thought is systematic, scholarly and an important, if forbiddingly dense, contribution to the ongoing discussion of political form: what can we retain from socialist, humanist and democratic thought of an earlier age? Rose's notorious deathbed conversion to Christianity adds yet another layer of mystery and interest to her distinct ethics.

The "Radical Thinkers" series forces you to re-examine your presuppositions, to analyse the glib rejection of "postmodernism" that characterises so much of the contemporary Anglo-American humanities, and to think harder about the broader social forces that might be connecting such apparently disparate things as the rise of radical religion, the collapse of the banking system and the emergence of the English Defence League on the streets of British cities. Postmodernist thinkers did not always, or even often, get it right, but their attempt to dig beneath the surface and connect continues to be an inspiration to us all to think and think again.

The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena by Jean Baudrillard, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* by Fredric Jameson, *The Democratic Paradox* by Chantal Mouffe and *Hegel Contra Sociology* by Gillian Rose are published by Verso.

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