

The 'Post': Or, The Semantic and Conceptual Cannibalization of the Domain of the *Possible*

Richard Cohen*

Translated by Jesse Cohn*

Abstract

In the terms 'postmodernity' / 'postmodernism,' the seemingly innocent prefix 'post' promises that we have transcended some previous condition, inaugurating a new relationship with the world. What if, however, this is yet one more effort to re-brand an increasingly bankrupt capitalist modernity? Might it not help to guarantee that we never look for a way outside of its intellectual, social, and political parameters?

From the perspective of a critical theory, far removed from commonplace notions about the subject, the idea associated with the 'post' (of transcending some earlier *state of affairs*) serve to objectify the realities of which they speak.

This standpoint, and the *state of affairs* to which it is attributed, 'modernity,' the questioning of which is re-ideologized via the concept of 'postmodernity' and its countless (in)variants, will define the problematic of our approach, at once functional and structural, to this seemingly quite harmless prefix.

* Richard Cohen is currently completing a doctorate in Sociology at CERREV, Université de Caen, Basse-Normandie, France, focusing on ways in which September 11 has functioned as a spectacle encouraging submission to the security State. A recent issue of *Signes, Discours et Sociétés* features his piece, "La *middle class*: identité nucléaire et esthétiques de la domination," on the construction of identities in the U.S. sitcoms *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Big Bang Theory*, and an essay on the fascist "Égalite et Réconciliation" party will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Illusio*.

* Jesse Cohn teaches courses in American fiction, literary theory, and popular culture at Purdue University North Central in Indiana. He is one of the founding members of the North American Anarchist Studies Network and has served as an editorial board member for Continuum Books' Contemporary Anarchist Studies series, *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, and the *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, 1500 to the Present*. Notable publications include *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Politics* (2006) and *Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture, 1848-2011* (2014).

Thus, we will not concern ourselves here with analyzing, via the ‘post,’ the conditions for transcending the myth of ‘modernity’ as a *reifying* discourse of the bourgeois idealization of industrial and technological society, and as the ideologized goal of the capitalist mode of production as such, for which the *trente glorieuses*¹ furnished the full and complete empirical demonstration. This is why, in the collective consciousness of the West, nostalgia for the postwar period remains, even today, the driving thought behind all liberal ideological productions.

Here, indeed, we will have to understand the ‘post’ as a linguistic safety mechanism designed to prevent any genuinely critical thought and any attempt to conceptually transcend the dominant ideology in which the civilisational discourse of ‘modernity’ reproduces itself on the terrain of a simulacrum of transcendence. This illusory transcendence is, in reality, necessary for the fundamental (or, in Marcuse’s phrase, ‘one-dimensional’) imposition of modernity upon whatever has remained outside of it – politically, aesthetically, technologically, economically, etc:

[T]he ‘far-reaching change in all our habits of thought’ [...] serves to coordinate ideas and goals with those exacted by the prevailing system, to enclose them in the system, and to repel those which are irreconcilable with the system. [...] But such modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative. They are rather the ceremonial part of practical behaviorism, its harmless negation, and are quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet.²

To illustrate this approach, we will venture a comparison with George Orwell’s ‘Newspeak’ (from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) and with the functional effects of its reduced vocabulary on the relations which both sender and receiver may maintain with the world.

In ‘Orwell on Language and Politics’ John E. Joseph quotes Orwell:

This was done partly by the invention of new words,

but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give a single example. The word free still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as ‘This dog is free from lice’ [...] It could not be used in its old sense of ‘politically free’ or ‘intellectually free’ since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless. [...] Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.³

The author illustrates this phenomenon via the example of Katherine, Winston’s wife, who “‘had not a thought in her head that was not a slogan’ – that is, a collocation of words and thought pre-packaged by the Party.” For, “[b]y reducing the number of words and their possible collocations, the Party strictly limits the occurrence of original thought, whether based on empirical observation or individual reasoning,” thereby stifling “sensory evidence and creativity in combining words.”⁴

Thus, far from the supposed transcendence that subtends the ‘post,’ including the critical dimension of ‘modern’ thought with which some of its authors claim to charge it, what it *marks* is the inescapability or irrevocability of the referents to which it is applied. For, to the detriment of a conceptual development of the domains of the *possible*, which are genuinely alien to the one-dimensional and objectified reality of capitalist culture, the ‘post’:

(1) participates in the reduction of critical thinking, which it would mean, to a semantic invariant of which it remains a prisoner. The irony of the situation lies in the fact of the incisive radicalism of a postmodernist elite, which consists in transcending modernity and thus the ostensibly critical intellectual products of the time, without even managing to free themselves from the linguistic referent of a historical period they dream of leaving behind. Subjecting the definition of their intellectual stance to that brand name [*appellation contrôlée*]⁵ de

facto disavows the claim to a real critical transcendence of the modern world and of the political ideology that produces it. In its semantic essence it testifies to the negation of *any other possibility* and confirms Guy Debord's observation that "[c]omplacent acceptance of the status quo may also coexist with purely spectacular rebelliousness - dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material."⁶

(2) offers to unify a separate world through "the juxtaposition of competing yet mutually reinforcing spectacles and of distinct yet interconnected roles (signified and embodied primarily by objects),"⁷ displayed as symbolically critical or avant-garde totalities (political, aesthetic, metaphysical, etc.), all correlated within the universe of the 'post', but actually trapped in this semantic typology that compartmentalizes them like artifacts in a museum. Beyond this imprisonment, the 'post' *marks* their integration, not as praxis of critique or of the transcendence of forms of (non-)life governed by an authoritarian "democratic" organization, but reduced to a parodic and ideologized product of a content that, in its false realization (albeit its *real* projection), is bereft of any (revolutionary) historical character, to the "*unity of poverty*" lurking behind "[s]pectacular oppositions": "If different forms of the same alienation struggle against each other in the guise of irreconcilable antagonisms, this is because they are all based on real contradictions that are repressed."⁸

If, in the collective imagination, it symbolizes the transcendence of an economic, political, technological, and / or aesthetic stage, the creation of a new *state of affairs* or the establishment of a new relationship with the world, the 'post' really only means the reformulation of an inescapable collective conformity to the structural referents of the capitalist culture that it unifies, in a kind of general re-certification (a makeover), in the continuum of its *own* one-dimensional reality. Within the mental and imaginary reproduction of the world, it presides over the perpetual process of (re-)integration and subjection of all productions (political, artistic, intellectual, critical, etc.) to the concepts of *development* and *rationality* belonging to a cultural worldview issuing from the positivist production of the linear time of the authoritarian "democratic" organization.

In this respect, Cornelius Castoriadis aptly explains that the labels *postindustrial* and *postmodern* demonstrate “the pathetic inability of the epoch to conceive of itself as something positive – or as something *tout court*.”⁹ However, where he goes on to consider “its self-definition as simply ‘post-something,’ that is, through a reference to that which was but is not anymore, and to its attempts at self-glorification by means of the bizarre contention that its meaning is no-meaning and its style the lack of any style,”¹⁰ we consider it to be the *mea culpa* of a resigned, prostrate intellectual thought that is unable to see the possibilities of a theoretical and practical transcendence of the forms of life and the overall conditions – both infrastructural and superstructural – of existence.

Indeed, the definition of our time as modern, the totalitarian and totalizing linguistic and structural referent of a finished, completed and definitive conceptualization of History, *ipso facto* neutralizes any imaginative expression, any potential for creation and creativity, any opportunity to consider historical time as something other than that of the authoritarian “democratic” organization. This is also what Castoriadis sees a little further when questioning modernity, as the institution of a “perpetual present [...] [that] pre-empts any genuine further development.” He clarifies by opposing *actual history* to its ideologized conceptualization as “the history of ideas”: “real struggles and conflicts exist only through their pale representation in the antinomies of the system.” He also underlines the contradiction Habermas faces, as a good student of Hegel, when Hegel apprehends the association between modernity and rationality, acting in a symbiotic manner within the philosopher’s discourse, since *rationality* becomes his *absolute spirit*: the unification of the technicist Ideology and History which constitutes “Hegel’s *illusion*.”¹¹

This, then, is the full extent of the domain of the possible visible within a praxis of transcendence of modernity (in its various forms and expressions) that the ‘post’ cannibalizes and regurgitates in the vocabulary of the established reality.

That is why, if we are to establish a dissident, seditious, and above all practical critical thought on the mental and physical terrain of autonomous individual and collective realizations, it is vital that we

make a clean break with the alienating concept of “modernity,” but even more so with concepts of *post-something*, which are nothing but rhetorical imitations [*simulacres*] of historical materialist evolutionism, of its unifying and one-dimensional rationality. And only through emancipation from the technicist and productivist ideology that establishes *ahistorical time* as the History, not of human societies, but of a *single* human society, will it be possible to create the conditions for autonomous existence.

Let us substantiate our words by way of two examples here.

The first is the concept of the *postindustrial* to which Castoriadis previously alluded, supposed to describe the transcendence of an earlier, industrial stage. How are these two states of affairs dialectically articulated? If this articulation refers to a level of technological development, improvement in the means of production, and the material transformation of industrial forms, then the idea of progress to which this type of dialectic is subject confirms the notion of a change, a transition to a purportedly higher level. Indeed, one cannot deny that since the Second Industrial Revolution, the service sector has gradually colonized the space of production, and that the degree of technologization, both of forms of production and consumer goods, has proven almost limitless. Conversely, if it refers to a globalizing mode of production and a globalized society ideologically invested with the values of ‘development’ and ‘rationality,’ imprisoning the course of time in a mathematical and technocratic conceptualization of history, the dialectical approach to the object dissolves into the juxtaposition of a few well-known *industrial trends*, which, behind their *evolutionary* appearance, only consecrates the reign of its own structural inertia: what remains absolutely the same is the capitalist mode of social and economic organization of production (as goes the creation of value, the extortion of surplus value, the superstructure dominating industry under its hierarchical and productivist forms, etc.).

The second example, in a completely different context, speaks as much to the intellectual and conceptual sclerosis exacerbated by the use of the ‘post,’ when these are used to name a new state of affairs, a new aesthetic period. For this, we refer to its association with ‘alternative’ music in which it sees a particular transformation or transcendence of *earlier represented forms* (such as “post-

hardcore,” “post-rock,” “post-punk,” “post-metal,” etc.). Indeed, if thereby simulates a transcendence, it definitively circumscribes artistic practice within the aesthetic continuums established by the genre that is the dominant referent. This means, in other words, that praxis, as an artistic project fully realized in the creation (not the reproduction) and the realization (not the automation) of the new forms that traverse it (aesthetic, social, political, ecological, etc.), is replaced by the *updated* reinterpretation of a musical format (prisoner of the images that signify it within the collective imagination) that denies any reality, any political and historical character, that would lie outside of its own aesthetic institution. From an empirical point of view, in its process of unification of musical practice, this branding [*appellation contrôlée*]¹² is reduced to an aesthetic referent, often rather porous, overshadowing the qualitative character of their mode of production and realization, whether in terms of their media forms (mainstream, “indie,” DIY, etc.), the positioning of their project within physical, social, or political space (the boycott of sponsored events, of the clinical resuscitation of the ‘non-living’ cultures that are State structures of entertainment, etc., in a truly alternative approach).

At this point in the analysis, we must return to the two main ideological levers that we target in our first example (‘development’ and ‘rationality’), through which the authoritarian organization of work is accomplished, both materially and in the imagination; and in order to understand the place the ‘post’ occupies in this objectification of a new state of a ready-made world.

In effect, postmodernist positions present a distorted reflection of spectacular production, and merely confirm the asymptotic idea of evolution tied to this concept of ‘development.’ They do enunciate *another possibility* but just *one more step* in this fixed path leading humanity to an absolute truth.

But this idea of ‘absolute progress’ cannot function without its conceptualized double, present at the foundation of the authoritarian “democratic” organization: a *technicist reason* (mathematical and scientific “rationality”) that will confirm “the idea that the unlimited growth of production and of the productive forces (i.e., the accumulation of capital, even in its most primitive forms) is *in fact* the central objective of human existence,” in which “what

counts is whatever can be counted,”¹³ and especially whatever can be reproduced,¹⁴ from the moment that the commodity, and the evaluation of the world it carries with it, appears in the format of the ‘ready-made’ in the process of its own consumption.

Thus, according to Castoriadis, “development has come to signify an indefinite growth, and maturity, capacity to grow without end,” based on “the virtual ‘omnipotence’ of technique,” “the ‘asymptotic illusion’ relating to scientific knowledge,” “the ‘rationality’ of economic mechanisms,” and other propositions implying that “humanity and society are ‘naturally’ predestined to progress, growth, etc.,” in a world that is defined and unified through its internal poll results just as it defines humanity in its own image, as “*homo economicus*,” “*homo madisoniensis Pavlovi*,” etc.¹⁵

And in this autonomous movement of the spectacle, the ‘post’ acts not as a real factor of opposition but as a modulator¹⁶ of the forms of existing capitalism, without contesting the mode of production or its material manifestations. It carries with it no more danger than would bear the bombastic slogans of a vulgar marxism lambasting the mode of distribution of wealth without ever calling its (re)productive essence into question.¹⁷ “This position,” as Castoriadis remarks, “rests upon two intertwined fallacies: the fallacy of the total separability of means and ends, and the composition fallacy.”¹⁸

In its “‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ interpretation and realization of ‘Reason,’” the West has reached “the point where there is no longer, and can no longer be, any reference point or fixed state, any ‘norm.’”¹⁹ The spectacle thus establishes, as a fundamental dynamic of its “nonstop discourse about itself,” a safety routine in which the specialization of human beings and their activity (the totality of social activity) renders them dependent on this objectification (the experience of new forms of life being ‘democratically’ forbidden them), defining them in its image – in which they will see themselves mirrored, and through which they will (re-)project themselves as subject/object in the spectacle²⁰ – and, at the same time, programs them with an urgent need to ‘feel safe’: a need that makes itself felt not just in the police-military domain, but also, and primarily, in the perpetual (re)construction of the familiar world, since the *outside* or the *other* signify, at any given moment, the *inhuman*, *disorder*,

irrational imbalance, and especially *danger*.²¹

Gunther Anders recounts the tale

[...] of a wicked fairy who cures a blind man, not by restoring sight to his eyes but by inflicting an additional blindness: she also left him blind to the existence of his disability and made him forget what reality looked like - an effect she obtained by constantly sending him new dreams. The alienation that disguises itself as familiarization works much like this magic: it also seeks, through pictures, to keep people who have been deprived of the world under the illusion that they are always at one with it: not only with their world, but with a world which is familiar to them in all its details, which is theirs, which resembles them. It manages to make us forget what a non-alienated life and a non-alienated world are like. [...] But the fairy who conceals our blindness from us is the same one who has blinded us.²²

Thus, to reinterpret Marcuse, the realities that the ‘post’ objectifies “are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order. [...] [T]he most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference.”²³

In this way, it imposes the discourse of globalized de-eroticization of the relationship to the world and of its ‘living’ practice, the only one feasible or even viable within the closed circuit of its commercial production.

The true reality even of “cherished images of transcendence” is nullified by a society that “incorporat[es] them into its omnipresent daily reality”²⁴ - a dynamic of the qualitative homogenization of practices, which is reduced, in substance, to the totalizing and historically neutralizing idea of the ‘post.’

Because this idea functions linguistically as an operational mode consisting of “consider[ing] the names of things as being indicative at the same time of their manner of functioning, and the names of properties and processes as symbolical of the apparatus used to detect or produce them” - in other words, “technological reasoning,

which tends ‘to identify things and their functions’²⁵ and to implement “the well-known technique of the advertisement industry, where it is methodically used for ‘establishing an image’ which sticks to the mind and to the product (i.e., via its various commercial manifestations, whether these be political, critical, aesthetic, technological, etc.), and helps to sell (i.e., to assure the serial reproduction of) the men and the goods (likewise serially reproduced). [...] The reader or listener is expected to associate (and does associate) with them a fixated structure of institutions, attitudes, aspirations, and he is expected to react in a fixated, specific manner.”²⁶

And much like the common journalistic technique of “abridgment [...] in phrases joining technology, politics, and the military,” the ‘post’ affects the mind in a manner “magical and hypnotic,” effecting a “projection of images which convey irresistible unity, harmony of contradictions.”²⁷

Thus does it preside as the porous operational concept of false consciousness narrating the transcendence of a *past* state of affairs with which it is associated in the simulacra of their syntactic confrontation, the better to neutralize its historical and revolutionary potential by cannibalizing and thus negating the creative imagination and its infinite potential.

It integrates discourses, as contradictory as they may be, within the neutrality of the signified as well as in their (in)significant globalization, in order to narrate the total process of pacified capitalist *hegemonization* across space and time, up to the most intimate realms of the body politic (artistic, critical, relational, etc.) and of the human body.

1 The “thirty glorious years” of Western economic prosperity following the end of WWII.

2 Herbert Marcuse. (1964) *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press. pp. 13-4.

3 Orwell qtd. in John E. Joseph (2001) “Orwell on Language and Politics,” in *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought II: The Western Tradition in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John E. Joseph, Nigel Love, and Talbot J. Taylor. London: Routledge. p. 36.

4 Joseph (2001) p. 37.

5 [Translator’s note: there is a play on words here. An “*appellation contrôlée*”

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- is the label placed on wines, cheeses, and other products certifying their distinctive regional origins. However, the phrase can be translated literally as “controlled naming” – evoking the earlier references to Newspeak and the use of a restrained vocabulary to restrain thought.]
- 6 Guy Debord. [1967] (2014) *Society of the Spectacle* (Ken Knabb, Trans.). Bureau of Public Secrets.,p. 59.
 - 7 Ibid., 62.
 - 8 Ibid., 63.
 - 9 Cornelius Castoriadis. (2001) “The Retreat From Autonomy: Post-Modernism as Generalised Conformism,” *Democracy & Nature*. Vol. 7., No. 1 p. 17. [Translator’s note: this English translation of Castoriadis’ essay omits his application of this critical remark to the term “*postindustriel*” as well as to the “*postmoderne*.”]
 - 10 Ibid., 17.
 - 11 Ibid., 18-9.
 - 12 [Translator’s note: see note 5, above.]
 - 13 Cornelius Castoriadis. (1991) *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (David Ames Curtis, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. p. 184.
 - 14 “What ‘really’ exists, in the sense of economic ontology, is thus neither the individual nor nature but only the totality of finished products that have been fabricated as a series. [...] If the jam is good, we say that it is ‘real’ jam. It reveals itself to be the product we need, and it is by responding to this need that it provides the proof of its reality.” Gunther Anders. (2002) *Obsolescence de l’Homme: sur l’âme à l’époque de la deuxième révolution industrielle* Paris: Éditions Ivrea. pp. 216-7.
 - 15 Op.Cit., fn. 13., p. 186.
 - 16 “Modulation is ultimately more fundamental than serial reproducibility, distinct oppositions more than quantitative equivalences, and the commutation of terms more than the law of equivalences.” Jean Baudrillard, (1993) *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Iain Hamilton Grant, Trans.) London: Sage. p. 56.
 - 17 “At the core of all forms of traditional Marxism is a transhistorical conception of labor. [...] Labor, so understood, is considered to lie at the heart of all social life: it constitutes the social world and is the source of all social wealth. This approach attributes to social labor transhistorically what Marx analyzed as historically specific features of labor in capitalism. [...] [Thus,] that mode is implicitly understood as a purely technical process, intrinsically independent of capitalism. [...] Relatedly, social domination in capitalism is understood essentially as class domination, which remains external to the process of production. [...] Hence, [Cohen’s note: in a vulgar marxism] the transition from capitalism to socialism is seen as a transformation of the mode of distribution (private property, the market), but not of production. [...] Once developed, though, the industrial mode of production based upon proletarian labor is considered historically final.” Moshe Postone. (1996) *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. pp. 7-9. Ironically, this author might also be criticized for not being able to break away from “work,” the final

semantic, philosophical, and social level of the ideologized domination manifested in the fullness of the spectacle. We find this same paradox in writers such as Wilhelm Reich (in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*), opposing *authoritarian organization* (of labor) to the *democratic society of labor*. Wilhelm Reich. [1933] (1980) *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (Vincent Carfango, Trans.). Farrar Straus Giroux.

18 Op.Cit., fn. 13., p. 192.

19 Ibid., 196

20 “The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.” Op.Cit., fn. 6., p. 4

21 “Universality is in fact based exclusively on tautology and doubling, and this is where the ‘Human’ takes on the force of a moral law and a principle of exclusion. This is because the ‘Human’ is from the outset the institution of its structural double, the ‘Inhuman.’ This is all it is: the progress of Humanity and Culture are simply the chain of discriminations with which to brand ‘Others’ with inhumanity, and therefore with nullity” Op.Cit., fn. 16., p. 125.

22 Gunther Anders. (2002) *Obsolescence de l’Homme: sur l’âme à l’époque de la deuxième révolution industrielle* Paris: Éditions Ivrea. pp. 146-7.

23 Op.Cit., fn. 2., pp. 59, 61.

24 Ibid., 60.

25 Stanley Gerr, as quoted Ibid., 86-7.

26 Ibid., 91.

27 Ibid., 93.