

## WITHOUT SENSE OR REFERENCE

J.G. Merquior's  
*From Prague to Paris: A Critique of Structuralist and  
Post-Structuralist Thought.*  
(London: Verso, 1986)

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J.G. Merquior (1941-1991) was a Brazilian diplomat, intellectual historian, and social scientist. The holder of three Ph.D.'s, he was the author of twenty books in three languages, including six English-language titles: *Rousseau and Weber: Two Studies in the Theory of Legitimacy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), *The Veil and the Mask: Essays on Culture and Ideology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), *Liberalism Old and New* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), *Foucault* (London: Fontana, 1985; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), *Western Marxism* (London: Paladin, 1986), and *From Prague to Paris: A Critique of Structuralist and Post-Structuralist Thought* (London: Verso, 1986; Henceforth cited as *PTP*).

These books, together with Merquior's other works, are unified by a single project: a sustained defense of modernity. Merquior was a radical individualist. He was also a liberal in the classical tradition. Unlike many contemporary classical liberals, however, he was skeptical about basing his convictions upon Lockean rights theories or free mar-

ket economics. The precise nature of this skepticism is unclear. Merquior could have been skeptical of the philosophical and scientific validity of these ideas. Or, as a sociologist and intellectual historian, he could have permanently bracketed the question of validity to focus on the question of contingent social-historical origins.

If, however, one focuses upon the question of "Why, as a matter of fact, do people believe in the morality of individualism or the utility of the free market?" - as opposed to the question "Why ought they believe such things?" - then one soon realizes that capitalism and individualism are inseparable from the broader phenomenon of modernity. They cannot be understood apart from it, and if one despairs of defending them directly, by philosophical means, it is tempting to defend them indirectly, through a comprehensive theory of history culminating in a defense of modernity.

The positive aspects of Merquior's account of modernity are largely derivative of the work of Rousseau, Hegel, Weber, and Gellner. There are, moreover, significant weaknesses in his positive account of modern political legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> Instead of working out an adequate positive account of modernity, Merquior devoted a large part of his energies to the negative task of criticizing anti-modernist and postmodernist strands of thought, which he called *Kulturkritik*. On Merquior's account, *Kulturkritik* has two essential features: a moralistic hatred (his word) of modernity, specifically of bourgeois culture, and a systematic obscurantism, a denial of rational methods and criteria in the study of society. Three of Merquior's English-language titles are devoted to the criticism of *Kulturkritik*: *Foucault*, *Western Marxism*, and *From Prague to Paris*.

The best of these studies are *Western Marxism* and *Foucault*, which are minor classics. *From Prague to Paris* - the title under review - is, however, a much weaker effort, which is not to say that it is without value. At its best it equals Merquior's best work. But it is not always at its best, occasionally lapsing into cheap polemics - e.g., against Lacan and Derrida. In general, Merquior is at his best when dealing with the Saussurean elements of structuralism and post-structuralism and the applicability of these ideas to sociology, anthropology, and literary theory and criticism. He is weakest in dealing with the philosophical sources of post-structuralism, particularly its Husserlian, Heideggerian, and Nietzschean aspects. Thus the illuminating quality of his explication and critique wanes as the philosophical element of his subject waxes: from full moon (his treatment of Levi-Strauss) to half-moon (Barthes) to total eclipse (Derrida).

The questions that Merquior asks of structuralism and post-structuralism are: Do they allow us to understand the historical and causal genesis of the phenomena they study? (In this case, Merquior's focus is almost entirely upon the phenomena of literature, art, and myth.)

Do they take into account and accord with the best interpretive and factual data available while allowing us to discover and interpret new data? Do they grant the reality and integrity of phenomena, or do they seek reductionistically to eliminate them? And finally: In advancing our knowledge of man and world, do they impede or advance the cause of human emancipation?

*From Prague to Paris* is divided into five chapters, the first, "The Rise of Structuralism," being a brief sketch of the origins of structuralism in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and the main lines of its development in France into high structuralism and post-structuralism. Especially illuminating is Merquior's account of the peculiar structuralist combination of scientism and romanticism. On this account, high structuralism's attitude toward science is profoundly scientific rather than scientific, for it is essentially a romanticization and aestheticization of science, with no more scientific content than the average science fiction novel, but sporting all the accoutrements of scientific form and formalism (a stylistic infatuation most hilariously exemplified by Lacan's "algorithms"). Merquior claims that the scientism, anti-humanism, and anti-subjectivism of high structuralism is a reaction to - or determinate negation of - the subjectivistic excesses of Bergsonian *Lebensphilosophie* and Sartrean existential phenomenology. The romanticism is accounted for by the fact that a trace of the other survives every differentiation. The post-structuralist abandonment of the scientism and universalism of high structuralism is accounted for by the superficiality and epistemological groundlessness of their original adoption.

Saussure's most influential teaching is his analysis of the referential, i.e., object-directed nature of language. His analysis, therefore, presupposes for its very intelligibility the reality of the phenomenon of reference - an obvious though important fact all too hastily discarded by many structuralists and post-structuralists. The thrust of Saussure's teaching is rather simple: the object-directedness of a sign - say "sheep" - cannot be accounted for solely in terms of a causal chain of physical and then neurological excitations given off by the sheep; nor can it be accounted for solely in terms of an active "ray" of intentionality directed from the mind to the sheep, a ray which imbues the sign with object-directedness.

To be sure: there is nothing in Saussure that would prevent both causality and intentionality from playing roles in an account of reference; but the phenomenon cannot be reduced solely to these factors, either taken separately or in tandem. The understanding of reference presupposes a third element: the differentiation of the sign "sheep" from other, closely related signs. Consider the English "sheep" and the French "mouton." At first glance, both words refer to the same kind of placid, stupid beast. But a closer inspection reveals otherwise. In

English, "sheep" is related to and differentiated from "mutton," whereas in French there is no such distinction. In virtue of this fact, the reference of "mouton" is wider than those of either "sheep" or "mutton."

Thus the analysis of the phenomenon of reference requires that the differential relationship of a sign to other signs also be taken into account. Aphoristically: difference determines the range of reference. Or, in analytic language: intension determines extension. To borrow Frege's terminology in a slightly different context: meaning must be analyzed both in terms of sense (*Sinn*), the relations of signs to other signs, and reference (*Bedeutung*), the relationship of signs to the world. An interesting phenomenon, but hardly, one would think, cause for alarm.

The second chapter, "The Prague Crossroad: Between Formalism and Socio-semiotics," sketches the fateful divergence of two different appropriations of Saussure's work in aesthetics and literary criticism: the assimilation of Saussurean categories to the tradition of formalist criticism, led by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), and the socio-semiotic school led by Jan Mukarovsky (1881-1975), which combined a Saussurean theory of the linguistic sign with a sensitivity to the social context of literature. Jakobson's formalism, not Mukarovsky's socio-semiotics, became the most historically effective tradition, exercising an immense influence on the subsequent development of structuralism and post-structuralism.

Merquior regards this as a disaster. The socio-semiotic combination of a Saussurean theory of the sign with a concern for history and social context preserves the referentiality of signs and literature, the idea that meaning is not simply constituted by the internal relations of signs and texts, but also by the relationship of signs and texts to the world. Returning to Frege's terms, the socio-semiotic school analyzes the phenomenon of meaning both in terms of sense and reference. By contrast, the formalist appropriation of Saussure stresses only the aspect of sense: of the relations of signs to other signs within a holistically-conceived semiotic system. In Merquior's words: "Formalist structuralism . . . looked at the verbal stuff of literature as though its meaning lay in a narcissistic self-reflection. The first commandment became: never treat literature as if were about anything except language" (*PTP* 29). This move represents a reductionism in the analysis of meaning: the reduction of meaning to sense and the dismissal or outright denial of its referential aspect. Difference swamps reference.

Merquior counters this reductionist move with an analogy:

From the fact that literature is made of language it does not follow that literary meaning (let alone value) is some-

thing reducible to language. My car is made of metal, glass and rubber; but it would never cross my mind to say that it is in any sense 'about' rubber, glass or metal; it is 'about' transportation. (PTP 31)

One can amplify this anti-reductionist point along the following lines. When meaning is reduced to difference and reference is eliminated, skepticism quickly follows. From the very beginning, philosophers have been indulging the nigh irresistible temptation to spatiotemporally "locate" manifestly non-spatial, non-physical "beings" like language, ideas, thoughts, concepts, appearances, etc. either "in here," in our heads, "out there" in the world, or way out there in some "Platonic" realm or the mind of God. (It is probably useless to protest this physicalistic prejudice, for the genuine Platonist claim - repeated by such thinkers as Plotinus, Hegel, Frege, Husserl, and even Heidegger and Popper - is that language, thoughts, ideas, etc., are nowhere at all, but real nonetheless, which sounds to most just as outlandish as the alternatives.)

If we locate language "in here," then we naturally understand reference as the bridge that takes us from "in here" to "out there." Thus, when we hear Derrida claim that the differential nature of signs means that reference is forever deferred, for each signifier refers us not to the world but to yet another signifier, ad infinitum, we naturally conclude that we are hearing a skeptical argument that we are locked up inside the prison house or padded cell of language, cut off from the world. Reversing Rorty's popular "mirror of nature" metaphor: if reference can be likened to a ray of illumination and sense to the mirror which reflects it onto the world, illuminating things under a particular aspect, then Derridean *differance* is the claim that the ray of reference is caught in a hall of mirrors, bouncing back and forth from one to the other and never escaping to illuminate the world.

Now, whether Derrida holds this to be the case or not is an open question. He himself has denied it strenuously - but, as he would be the first to remind us, Derrida is not the final authority on the meaning(s) of his texts.<sup>2</sup> What is clear, though, is that many of his students do read him this way. But it is a bad argument, resting on the reductionist premise that *either* meaning is reducible to reference without difference *or* difference without reference. The presence of one entails the absence, the exclusion, of the other. Aristotle is probably the only thinker to have held anything like the former position. Consider the following passage from *De Anima*:

If thinking is indeed like sensing, then it would either be a

process of being affected in some way by the object of thought or be some other thing such as this. So [the thinking part of the soul] should be incapable of being affected but capable of receiving the form [of the object of thought] and be potentially such as that but not the [form] itself; and the intellect should be related to the object of thought in a manner similar to that in which the sense is related to its sensible object. And, since the intellect can think every [object of thought], it must exist without being blended in order that, as Anaxagoras says, "it may rule," that is, in order that it may know. For if it appears along [with some other thing] the [latter will] prevent or obstruct [the knowledge of] another kind; hence it is necessary for [the intellect] to be of no nature other than that of potentiality. (429a14-23)<sup>3</sup>

Here Aristotle seems to argue that since the intellect can know all things, it must be nothing in itself, for if it were to have a determinate structure of its own - a differential system of signifiers, for instance - then these determinacies would impede it in taking on the forms of all things, thus coming to know (i.e., refer to) them. Thus Aristotle holds that the intellect, prior to knowing anything other than itself, has no determinate structure of its own; it is pure potentiality to take on the forms of other things; it is like soft wax awaiting the impression of the signet, or a polished mirror, passively reflecting the world. Aristotle's premise: If difference (determinate structure), then no reference (taking on of forms). Aristotle affirms reference, thereby denying difference.<sup>4</sup> The deconstructionist accepts the same either/or, but comes to the opposite conclusion, affirming difference, thus denying reference. Both, however, are mistaken. Both difference and reference are undeniable aspects of the phenomenon of meaning; thus both of them must be taken into account in any descriptively adequate account of meaning, rather than simply ignored or denied in favor of rationalistic constructs derived from reductionist premises.

Returning now to Merquior's book for a quick summary of the remainder of the text: The balance of *PTP* is given over to three very long chapters in which the foregoing criticisms, augmented with many more specialized points, are deployed in detailed discussions of major structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers. Chapter three, "Claude Levi-Strauss: The Birth of Structuralism in Social Science," is the high point of the book. In seventy masterfully compressed pages Merquior presents a comprehensive, sympathetic, yet critical survey of Levi-Strauss's work, evidencing an intimate familiarity with his texts and a genuine respect for their author gained from the five years Merquior

spent in Levi-Strauss's seminar at the College de France. Especially valuable is the discussion of Levi-Strauss's aesthetics, a topic treated at greater length in Merquior's *L'Esthetique de Levi-Strauss* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1977). Particularly of interest is Levi-Strauss's critique of modern art, which throws a great deal of light on Merquior's own frequent critical asides on the subject. Merquior acknowledges the full measure of Levi-Strauss's genius: his exquisite prose, the myriad subtle illuminations cast by his writings, the dazzling intellectual acrobatics of his structuralist analyses.

Nonetheless, Merquior also advances a number of criticisms, both scientific and ideological. The scientific objections are primarily methodological, having to do with Levi-Strauss's conformity, not to empiricism, but to *empeiria*: the frequent vacuousness and Procrusteanism of his obsession with binary oppositions as classificatory schemes, his refusal (wholly admirable to my Platonist ears as a resistance to physicalistic biases) to "locate" mind and structure;<sup>5</sup> his reductionistic exclusion of historical evolution and social context from his explanations, etc. The ideological criticisms focus on Levi-Strauss's deeply conservative anti-modernism, which issues in a revulsion against history and an ethics of despair and withdrawal, and which prevents him from producing a full-fledged theoretical account of modernity.

Chapter four, "Literary Structuralism: Roland Barthes," and chapter five, "Structuralism into Post-structuralism: An Overview," also span about seventy pages each. In them the quality of Merquior's exposition and critique steadily declines. The argumentative thrust of the Barthes chapter is that the genuine critical value of Barthes's works does not stem from their structuralist conceptuality; quite the contrary; to the extent that Barthes's work was self-consciously structuralist his critical intelligence became stilted and straightjacketed. The principal value of the chapter is Merquior's careful attempt to separate the genuine critical value of Barthes's work from both his structuralist conceptuality and his anti-modernist *Kulturkritik*. The worst aspects are the increasingly hasty and shrill polemics and asides directed at such figures as Lacan and Bataille, whose works may well be every bit as mantic (the former) and decadent (the latter) as Merquior claims, but no arguments or even exegesis in support of such claims is to be found.

This unfortunate tendency worsens in the final chapter, in which the transformation from structuralism to post-structuralism is characterized in terms of the progressive radicalization of the former's reductionism of meaning to difference and the progressive abandonment of its universalism in favor of various forms of particularism, historicism, and pluralism. Philosophically, Merquior's treatment of the Hegelian, Nietzschean, Husserlian, and Heideggerian elements of post-structuralism are wholly inadequate. Rhetorically, the chapter is an unremitting, rabid

diatribe.

In sum: *From Prague to Paris* is a flawed effort, but one deserving of a qualified recommendation. The first two chapters are sketchy but provocative. Chapter three, on Levi-Strauss, is a masterful and economical critical introduction to his thought. Chapters four and five, however, decline so rapidly into diatribe that one cannot resist thinking that although Merquior was truly a scholar among diplomats, he was no diplomat among scholars.

1. For a fuller account of the strengths and weaknesses of Merquior's work, see my essays "A Friend of Reason: Jose Guilherme Merquior," *Critical Review* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 421-46 and "Modernity and Postmodernity in the Thought of J.G. Merquior," in Ernest Gellner and Cesar Cansino, eds., *Liberalism in Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Jose G. Merquior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), particularly the latter.
2. Derrida calls this reading "stupid." See "Dialogue with Derrida," in Richard Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Philosophers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 123-4.
3. *Aristotle's On the Soul*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press, 1981).
4. This is the interpretation offered by John Hermann Randall, Jr., in his *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 91
5. There is, of course, a grain of truth to this criticism, especially as pressed by such wilters as Pierre Bourdieu. Even though Levi-Strauss is in my eyes admirable for refusing to "locate" ideal structures, it is still incumbent upon him at least to try to explain the interaction or overlap between ideal structures and psychic states on the one hand and concrete social institutions and practices on the other. Perhaps, however, it is unfair to demand too much on these lines, for what is at issue is actually one of the oldest and thorniest of all philosophical problems: the problem of participation. I think that, at this point, the best thing we can say about this problem is that the relationship is one of "identity in difference," i.e., that ideal structures are both *identical* with psychic states and concrete institutions and practices (thus accounting for interaction and overlap) and *different* from them (thus accounting for their ideality, their "ontological difference"). Of course this is hardly a deep "explanation" of the situation. It is simply a description of it, but it may be the case that we are dealing with such a fundamental phenomenon that one cannot go beneath it or behind it to explain it; one must simply contemplate the "surfaces," and acquiesce to their ultimacy and inescapability.