The Postmodern Prince

Critical Theory, Left Strategy,
and the Making of a New Political Subject

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MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS  New York
INTRODUCTION

When the serpent sloughs off its skin, its cry goes from one end of the world to the other, but its voice is not heard.—MIDRASH, CA. 650–900 C.E.

*Perestroika,* part two of Tony Kushner’s epic utopian play *Angels in America,* begins with a speech by Aleksii Antediluvianovich Prelapsarionov, billed as “the World’s Oldest Living Bolshevik,” before the Hall of Deputies in the Kremlin in 1986, a few short years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Prelapsarionov, an “antediluvian” socialist present at the socialist Genesis, when Marx’s face moved upon the surface of the waters and the “seed words” of revolution sprouted and took root, chides those among his comrades who would abandon the security of a Beautiful Theory that could unite all through a common Word. “If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready,” he intones, “naked will he be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without his skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence, and die.”

In a sense, the question posed in this work is the one left hanging in the air at the end of Prelapsarionov’s speech: Can the now-dispersed forces of emancipation, having been forced by history to abandon the “skin” of socialism and the International, the Party, discover or invent a new form? A way to unite the many dispersed, confused, largely reactive elements struggling to right injustice and bring about a new civilization—before it is too late? And it is fast becoming too late.

World systems theorists have argued that the singular economic, social, political, and ecological crises of our time stem from the systemic crisis of capitalism as a whole—the unraveling of the modern world system put into place half a millennium ago. As they and other critics have pointed out, what makes resolving this crisis difficult is that one of its effects is the waning of the nation-state. At the very
moment when conscientious and concerted leadership is needed, that is, to grapple with pressing social problems on a global scale, the bases of liberal political authority and international concord are coming undone. As the world system becomes more and more unstable, meanwhile, the ruling classes of America, the greatest hegemony in the history of the world, are attempting to exert control over these centrifugal forces, but in ways that are certain to provoke only more enmity and resistance abroad. In short, a violent, possibly epochal confrontation is growing between the American imperium and its tributary agencies, on the one hand, and the majority of humankind, on the other.

Immanuel Wallerstein indeed predicts a “period of hell on earth” as the forces of reaction forcibly resist the initiatives of those striving for radical social change:

_We shall not witness a simple, laid-back political debate. It will be a global struggle, conducted on a life-and-death level. For we are talking about laying the bases for the historical system of the next five hundred years. And we are debating whether we want to have simply one more kind of historical system in which privilege prevails and democracy and equality are minimized, or whether we want to move in the opposite direction, for the first time in the known history of humanity._

Wallerstein argues that what is at stake in this political struggle is nothing less than the terms of the global order likely to emerge at the end of what promises to be a period of upheaval and violence, the shape of a new social compact that might replace the older order wrought by European colonialism. Paradoxically, despite the strength of those who wish to prop up, indefinitely, the present order, the “chaotic situation is . . . that which is most sensitive to deliberate human intervention. It is during periods of chaos, as opposed to periods of relative order . . . that human intervention makes a significant difference.” It is possible, in other words, that a disciplined and focused transnational social movement, or series of movements, could play a significant role in shaping the order to come, possibly even imposing its own will on the failing status quo. What is needed, Wallerstein suggests, is “a substantive alternative to offer that is a collective creation” in place of the old system.

The question is, who will pose such an alternative? Surely not the scattered forces of the powerless who, dispersed, lacking strategy or direction, are in a poor position even to preserve the democratic gains of the
last two centuries, to say nothing of intervening forcefully in the global crisis in an imaginative way to lay the foundation for a new civilizational order. Despite the deepening legitimation crisis of the liberal state, forced between the Charybdis of neoliberal reform and the Scylla of rising social discontent, it is the right, not the left, with its revanchist "war of position" to preserve traditional patriarchal values and race hierarchies, and its heavy dreams of a seamless corporate world order immune to dissent, that seems to have capitalized on growing conditions of crisis. If anything, the disjunction between the vast historical challenge before us and the ad hoc and confused response mounted by movements on the left appears to be widening. Innumerable small groups struggle, valiantly, to protect forests and estuaries from corporate pillage, or to end male violence against women, or to provide shelter or food or medical care to the billions of human beings left behind by neoliberal capitalism. Yet the sum of the disparate parts is far less than we might hope.

Observing the strivings of nations and peoples toward recognition, Hegel observed: "In world history, only those peoples that form states can come to our notice." Today, similarly, we might conclude that without a perceptible form or shape, existing social movements have little reality for the majority of human beings. To the extent we can still speak meaningfully of a global "left," at all, it is gestalts—"without form." But without a "body" through which to appear in the temporal world, movements are doomed to roam the earth unperceived—like spirits of the dispossessed whose rumored appearances, mysterious and fleeting, occasionally startle the living but have no effect on the course of human events.

It was not always thus. For over a century, socialism provided a shape or form for much of the world left. The power of socialism lay in its utopian imaginary, which tapped into the ancient religious vision of recuperation of the unity of humankind that had been lost at Babel. "Socialism is not merely the labor question," the narrator of The Brothers Karamazov observed, "it is above all things the atheistic question, the question of the form taken by atheism today, the question of the tower of Babel built without God, not to mount to Heaven from earth but to set up Heaven on earth." Socialism took up this question, and provided, for a time, a convincing answer to it.

The story of Babel, one of the oldest archetypes in civilization, speaks to our penchant as a species for disunity, conflict, and misunderstanding. In Genesis it is said that after the Flood, the earth was said to be of
one language, one speech. All nations gathered to build a single tower of humanity, "a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven." At the work site, they decided to give themselves a name, lest they "be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." But God, seeing this, was displeased. "Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language . . . and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." He descends to "confound their languages, that they may not understand one another's speech." Unable to understand one another, the people scatter "upon the face of all the earth." The moral of the Babel story is that unity cannot be won on this earth through human effort, that we must not imagine that we can invent whatever we can conceive in our minds. If we dream that we are capable of creation, our hubris will destroy us. Better, in short, to think locally (or tribally), not globally.

Yet we would not be human if we did not continue to rebel: the utopian image of universal harmony on earth was preserved by later generations. Ancient Jewish mystics held that the Word of God (the divine logos) was originally One. In the beginning, there was no distinction between words and things. The tragedy of human existence could be traced back to this sundering of signs from their divine essences, which has been the cause both of our alienation from God and of the perpetu-al conflict among the nations of humanity. The Gnostics and Kabbalists later studied the apocrypha and other obscure revealed texts in hopes of discovering the esoteric clues by which humankind could be led back to the Ursprache, the one, pure speech. "The stakes were very high," George Steiner observes. "If man could break down the prison walls of scattered and polluted speech [the rubble of the smashed tower], he would again have access to the penetralia of reality. He would know the truth as he spoke it. Moreover, his alienation from other peoples, his ostracism into gibberish and ambiguity, would be over." 9

Christianity and, later, Islam, took up the ancient dream of a world made whole and made it the basis of their dreams of universal justice. Later still, the Enlightenment secularized the Abrahamic longing for a rebuilt Babel. In the dreams of modern reason, from the Encyclopedists and Jacobins in the eighteenth century to the socialists and anarchists of the nineteenth and twentieth, the Tower of Babel would be rebuilt, the whole restored. From the bricks and mortar of what is, human beings would construct a unified structure capable of bridging the vast difference to what ought to be: the New Jerusalem, a heavenly city on
earth. When Feuerbach wrote of the abolition of religion as the starting point of the human race, he meant that by recognizing ourselves as the source of what we call the divine—another name for love—we might become masters of our own self-making. Marx agreed with Feuerbach that God was a projection of human essence, and he followed Feuerbach in holding that only an embodied, sensuous practice could lead to the externalization of our essence as universal consciousness. The issue on which he parted company with Feuerbach concerned the kind of practice that would lead to world transformation.

Marx’s thought represented the quest for a common language of politics, able to unite the scattered forces of the working class and create the basis for a common project of historical construction or poeisis. Though capitalism had despoiled nature and broken the minds and bodies of countless human beings, Marx believed that it was also a revolutionary force, unleashing enormous productive powers and demolishing national, cultural, and other kinds of differences—creating, in effect, the basis for a common, universal culture, a new “world-historical being.” After a socialist revolution, born in the womb of history, each would share equally in the fruits of nature, and each would fulfill his or her own creative potential in harmony with a universal species interest. The world would be as one, and human beings would “again” share a common language and tongue. “The name of Esperanto has in it, undisguised, the root for an ancient and compelling hope,” Steiner observes. Socialism would be an Esperanto, a common language to unite the many “nations” of the working classes, whose erstwhile differences were differences only in appearance, not in essence.

But by the end of the twentieth century, Babel had largely been abandoned. After decades of historical defeats, socialism suddenly dispersed, like a mirage of history, as much a victim of its own burdensome dreams as of its powerful enemies (and there were many). A whole way of living and imagining politics seemed to have died, and with it, the notion of a form for sustaining critical practice and carrying collective dreams of an earthly utopia. Globalization encouraged a broad retreat from politics and from the public sphere, a retreat into localist “enclaves.”

Some activists did try to reinvigorate the public sphere with a vision of participatory democracy and universal human rights, and still others spoke urgently of the need to create a coherent, unified movement to contain and represent the aspirations of all movements. Without
such a unified approach, Lydia Sargent argued, the separate movements of the left would never “exist as a collective project in anyone’s mind.” Rather than “growing interactively, each benefiting from the actions of the rest,” today’s scattered movements “exist at best side by side, often surprisingly competitively... Without organization and strategy, there is nothing to work for and no way to evaluate what we’ve done.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by other movement leaders in a variety of progressive media and grassroots journals in the United States throughout the 1980s and 90s, e.g., by leading figures in the peace movement, in the gay and lesbian movement, among leading feminists, environmentalists, and people of color.

Yet within academic critical theory, a strong theoretical bias had developed that was positively allergic to any discussion of the need for a new synthesis of theory and practice. Postmodernists, in particular, had taken to advocating not unity but rather the deconstruction of the discourse of unity, and not solidarity but “difference.” Thus the joint statement issued by two well-known Western European intellectuals in 1987:

> The goal [of praxis] is not to arrive at a rough consensus on a few general statements covering the ensemble of current problems, but, on the contrary, to favor what we call a culture of dissensus that strives for a deepening of individual positions and a resingularization of individuals and human groups. What folly to claim that everyone—immigrants, feminists, rockers, regionalists, pacifists, ecologists, and hackers—should agree on a same vision of things! We should not be aiming for a programmatic agreement that erases their differences.

Both authors of this declaration initially came to the world’s attention in connection with the extraordinary events in Paris in the month of May 1968—Daniel Cohn-Bendit (Danny the Red) was the self-styled “anti-Jacobin” who became the public face of the student revolt; Gilles Deleuze, the late French philosopher, was an enthusiast of that same revolt. Indeed, the provenance of the bias against unity in theory today can be traced here, to the 1960s period. It was then that a “New Left” movement came forward to challenge received wisdoms of Marxist orthodoxy, setting in motion a sea change in the way intellectuals in the West conceived of collective action.

The first half of the present work examines the intellectual, cultural, and economic factors that led eventually to a shift in the dominant
religious trope of Western praxis, a shift from the socialist dream of rebuilding Babel to the new, poststructuralist image of “speaking in tongues”—speaking in the expressive tongues of difference. In the first two chapters, I show how the valuation of “ecstatic” speech as the ultimate horizon of political practice can be traced back to the “structure of feeling” of the Sixties period. In a close reading of a public debate between two of the icons of the youth movement, Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, I show how the crucial debate among New Leftists about the relative value of strategy versus aesthetic expression was won by the expressivists, and how this expressivist bias eventually become a “common sense” in leading arenas of critical social thought.

Then, in chapter 3, I show how the decline of social movements and a widening gap between theory and practice left critical theory vulnerable to changes in the political economy of knowledge production in the 1980s and 1990s (the rationalization of the university). The “baroque” or superficial formal density of postmodernist texts, I suggest, represents the extension of commodity logics into the previously protected sphere of critical thought. I relate the emergence of “baroque” postmodernist discourse to Marx and Engels’s critique of idealism in The German Ideology in chapter 4, arguing that the refusal of subjective experience as the basis of theoretical knowledge by French structuralists has led to the mystification of actual social relations in contemporary works like Hardt and Negri’s Empire.

Chapter 5, “The Prince and the Archaeologist,” forms a bridge between these early chapters and the rest of this work that attempts to reconstruct a basis for a theory of praxis by expanding Gramsci’s strategic phenomenology of political action, leadership, and form. The Prince of this chapter, then, is Gramsci, who offered a theory of how to realize a collective socialist virtù and “will” in the political realm. The Archaeologist, meanwhile, is Michel Foucault—the poststructuralist critic whose broad attack on all varieties of strategic political thought, I argue, has done the most damage to the radical tradition.

Chapters 6 and 7 attempt to reclaim Gramsci’s specific theory of a new form, what he called the “Modern Prince,” for the present. The title of the present work, The Postmodern Prince, in fact echoes two earlier “princes” in modern political thought. The first is of course Machiavelli’s The Prince, the early-sixteenth-century manual for princes on how to achieve and maintain political power. The Prince was the first recogniz-
ably "realist" work in Western political thought. Its appearance scandalized generations of pious readers for its unapologetic celebration of power and its seeming indifference to moral convention. Nearly five centuries later, the work retains some of its original air of controversy: scholars still quarrel over whether Machiavelli’s chief motivation in writing *The Prince* was really to educate princes and rulers themselves, or whether he wanted rather to educate *il popolo*, the people, about the ruthless nature of princes. Centuries after Machiavelli’s death, another Italian thinker would apply Machiavelli’s principles to the problem of socialist revolution.

An obscure work, *The Modern Prince*, was written by a Marxist revolutionary, politician, and journalist named Antonio Gramsci. Imprisoned for his anti-fascist and socialist political activities in Italy in the 1920s, Gramsci spent the last decade of his life languishing in prison, where his active life ended in 1937, aged only forty-six. While in prison, Gramsci worked on what was to become his lasting legacy to the radical tradition, the *Notebooks*. It is in the *Notebooks*, a fascinating collection of Gramsci’s fragmentary observations on politics, intellectuals, Marxism, Italian history, and literature, that we find the scattered “Notes on Machiavelli,” the basis of a monograph he had hoped to publish on “the Modern Prince.” Gramsci in fact modeled his “Modern Prince” on *The Prince*: Machiavelli’s book had such chapters as, “On Avoiding Being Despised and Hated,” “On Mixed Principalities,” or “On the Various Kinds of Troops and Mercenary Soliders”; Gramsci’s *Note sui Machiavelli* similarly isolated elements of socialist praxis under such subheadings as “Analysis of Situations,” “Elements of Politics,” “The Theorem of Fixed Proportions,” “Number and Quality in Representative Systems of Government,” “Spontaneity and Conscious Leadership,” etc.

In many ways the most coherent and most theoretically original of his works, *The Modern Prince* synthesized Machiavelli’s theory of a politics without illusions with Marx’s theory of history. In much the same way that Machiavelli had sought to outline a politics adequate to the task of establishing a new kind of social and political order at a moment of systemic chaos and disarray—the disintegration of the feudal order—Gramsci theorized the cultivation of a “collective subject” adequate to the conditions of systemic crisis in interbellum Europe. As Benedetto Fontana observes:
The central importance of Machiavelli for Gramsci lies in the former’s profound sense that all traditional and accepted forms of political activity and social relations are disintegrating, and in the consequent search for a new and ever-elusive topos upon which to reconstitute a meaningful cultural and political order. It is this juxtaposition of disintegrating sociopolitical structures and institutions, and of an emerging “mass” or people as a new and powerful force in history, that forms the organizing center of the theoretical, ideological, and sociopolitical struggles of modern society in general.16

For Gramsci, as for Machiavelli, the question of unity, of how to construct a collective will, capable of leading society, was paramount. The socialist movement would have to assume form as a “modern” prince if it hoped to win the consent of the working class, and its allied classes, in leading them in the construction of a new democratic order. “The modern prince, the myth-prince,” Gramsci wrote, “cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form.”17

Eventually, building a political and cultural program in dialectical conversation with the people, the modern prince would gather around itself, irresistibly, the psychic and social energies of society, until its values had replaced those of the prevailing order.

In the same vein, the “postmodern prince,” similarly, is the name of the new collective subject which must gather up the myriad dispersed movements of oppositional practice and culture in the form of a single movement whose outward expansion establishes a genuinely democratic and ethical human culture. Only in cohering into a unified identity and worldview can the dispersed remnants of the left place themselves in a position, at least potentially, to respond meaningfully to the legitimation crisis of the state and the colonization of the lifeworld by the commodity. To give this form the name of the postmodern prince is to signal that the condition of postmodernity does not require an abandonment of the struggle for such a unified identity. Rather, we must theorize and build a “concrete form” of our own, one that would be strategically adequate to our own historical condition.

My use of the term postmodern to describe this new prince, hence, is not to be mistaken to signal an affinity between my construction and a postmodernist or poststructuralist sensibility, only to describe the
transitional nature of our period. The convergence of several overlapping systemic crises—the breakdown of an array of institutional, cultural, semiotic, communal, and ecological systems associated with the modern epoch—has led to the disintegration and recomposition of the traditional basis for authority, cultural reproduction, and hence our praxis. In David Harvey's characterization, our newly fragmented and compressed experience of time and space—a "condition of postmodernity"—results from fundamental changes in the economic and symbolic organization of global capitalism from the early 1970s to the present, linked to the shift to a post-Fordist regime of capital accumulation—i.e., to transnational production, fragmented or "batch" production, and the global integration of finance capital. As a result of these transformations, the range of social experiences and cultural contradictions we identify with "the postmodern" are recognizably different from those long associated with European modernity. If modernity was long associated with, among other things, the rise of the European nation-state system, the notion of history as the expressive site of the unfolding of reason, colonization, and the emergence of a racially homogenous world elite, postmodernity might be said to consist of the legitimation crisis of the liberal nation-state, the destruction of local place, technological distention, decline of Europe as the "center" or core of world economy and culture, and the emergence and proliferation of counternarratives based in the experiences of subalterns—among other things.

My use of the term "postmodern prince" also differs from Stephen Gill's use of that term. Gill similarly urges the development, also after Gramsci and Machiavelli, of a theory of a postmodern prince on the basis of existing tendencies in collective practice. Gill argues that environmentalists, labor rights advocates, civil rights activists, and others in the anti-globalization movement seem to be converging toward a latent unity to challenge the "rational" structure of the neoliberal capitalist order and to define a new vision of democratic economic and social participation. These movements are tending toward a possibly "effective political form for giving coherence to an open-ended, plural, inclusive and flexible form of politics" based in "innovative conceptions of social justice and solidarity, of social possibility, of knowledge, emancipation and freedom." In the "new strategic context" or fortuna provided by the neoliberal global economy, Gill writes, the "postmodern prince" emerges as the sign of a corresponding virtù to challenge
the system—i.e., the nascent form of “new, ethical, and democratic political institutions and forms of practice.”

Much of this I agree with. However, I am less confident than Gill on that scattered and differentiated movements can be said to have a “form” in any meaningful sense, and more in favor of a practice that leads to the coalescence of the “different” movements. Socialists, anarchists, and academic critics alike have tended toward an “optimism of the intellect” in their assessments of the anti-globalization movement—at once overstating its accomplishments and underappreciating the degree to which these diverse movements, lacking a coherent ideology and shared strategic outlook, are unlikely to pose a significant threat to capitalism and other systems of domination and inequality. The result is that theory once again lags behind practice. Critics fail to perceive what is most extraordinary about contemporary praxis, which is not difference but a felt need for unity, while practice, unaware of its own historical overdeterminations and contradictions, stumbles courageously but blindly through the dust storms of current events. But the challenge to contemporary theory is not merely to comprehend analytically the movements of the present, but to identify the deepest needs and desires that drive them, and to help them flower. Theory must, in a sense, water the germinal truths buried in the loam of practice.

Thus, while I agree with Gill that one of the material and historical bases of the postmodern prince is the anti-globalization movement, then, I do not think that such a prince either can or should be conflated with that movement. As I argue in chapters 6 and 7, the totality of claims made by contemporary movements for liberation goes beyond a critique of global capitalism, per se, to pose a deeper challenge to existing human civilization. Moreover, while the emergence of a postmodern prince is importantly related to conditions and trends in the capitalist economy, its emergence cannot be predicated on the existence of macrostructural contradictions alone; it must find its basis in the psychic and material life needs of animal existence. While the contradictions of capitalism generate points of friction and opposition, counter-identities and counter-discourses, the “resistance identities” that emerge can take any of a variety of forms, not all of them progressive. It is therefore of utmost importance that we specify the normative as well as ontological bases of the unity of the postmodern prince. To this end, I conclude with a sketch of what I call metahumanism,
a general ontology and ethics to serve as the philosophical basis of the unity and telos of the postmodern prince. Metahumanism is the life-philosophy through which the postmodern prince would strive to achieve what Gramsci called "the realization of a superior, total form of modern civilization."