"The American Evasion of Philosophy is a highly intelligent and provocative book. . . . What shines through, throughout the work, is West's firm commitment to a radical vision of philosophic discourse as inextricably linked to cultural criticism and political engagement."
—Paul S. Boyer, University of Wisconsin-Madison

"This is a very ambitious effort to tell a story (a clear, vigorously stated, exciting story) about American thought which begins with Emerson, takes Dewey as the central figure, and ends with the present . . . . I believe that The American Evasion of Philosophy will be widely read and respectfully reviewed, and that it may well become a standard account of the role of pragmatism in American thought."
—Richard Rorty, University of Virginia

"One must hope, with West, that philosophical thought in America has taken a turn to what is best in it . . . . There can be little doubt that this book is a major contribution to the recovery of the Deweyan vision of 'creative democracy.' Indeed, in our deeply disillusioned world, The American Evasion of Philosophy is a stunning combination of scholarship, passion, and sensitivity."
—Peter T. Manicas, Sage Urban Studies Abstracts

"When West argues at the end of his book that his prophetic pragmatism, though 'deeply indebted to the continental traveling theories such as Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism . . . remains in the American grain,' it is a conclusion he has earned. The American Evasion of Philosophy is thus a gentle rebuke to the pragmatism without consequences of Richard Rorty, and a powerful call for philosophy to play its role in building a radical democracy in alliance with the wretched of the earth."
—K. Anthony Appiah, The Nation

"A magnificent account of American pragmatism that demonstrates West's formidable learning and insight. It is also an appeal for social change and an impassioned call for intellectuals to join in popular struggle."
—William E. Cain, In These Times

CORNEL WEST is professor of religion and director of Afro-American studies at Princeton University.

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INTRODUCTION

A small-scale intellectual renaissance is occurring under the broad banner of pragmatism. The controversial works of Richard Rorty—aided by the differing views of fellow pragmatists such as Hilary Putnam, Ian Hacking, and Richard Bernstein—have unsettled academic philosophy. Literary critics of the pragmatist persuasion like Frank Lentricchia and Stanley Fish have upset traditional humanists. Creative interpreters of John Dewey—like Sheldon Wolin, Michael Walzer, and Benjamin Barber—who have updated radical democratic thinking now challenge liberal political theory. And pragmatist thinkers such as Jeffrey Stout are reshaping prevailing conceptions of religious thought.

Three basic issues underlie this recent renaissance: First, there is a widespread disenchantment with the traditional image of philosophy as a transcendental mode of inquiry, a tribunal of reason which grounds claims about Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The professional discipline of philosophy is presently caught in an interregnum; mindful of the dead ends of analytical modes of philosophizing, it is yet unwilling to move into the frightening wilderness of pragmatism and historicism with their concomitant concerns in social theory, cultural criticism, and historiography. This situation has left the discipline with an excess of academic rigor yet bereft of substantive intellectual vigor and uncertain of a legitimate subject matter. The unwillingness of many philosophers to tread in the wilderness results from adherence to professional boundaries and academic self-understandings. To put it crudely, most philosophers are neither trained to converse with literary critics, historians, and social theorists nor ready to give up the secure self-image of academicians engaged in "serious" philosophical research.

Second, the disenchantment with transcendental conceptions of philosophy has led to a preoccupation with the relation of knowledge and power, cognition and control, discourse and politics. No longer are humanistic scholars content with a historicizing of science, morality, and art that shuns the ways in which sciences, moralities, and the arts are inextricably linked to structures of domination and subordination. This
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preoccupation with the materiality of language—such as the ways in which styles of rationality and scientificity or identities and subjectivities are socially constructed and historically constituted—has focused cultural investigations on the production, distribution, and circulations of forms of powers, be they rhetorical, economic, or military powers.

Third, this focus on powers has returned humanistic studies to the primal stuff of human history, that is, structured and circumscribed human agency in all its various manifestations. Gone is the once fashionable poststructuralist claim to eliminate the subject. Yet also gone is the old humanist view that elevates the human agency of elite cultural creators and that ignores social structural constraints, constraints that reinforce and reproduce hierarchies based on class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

It is no accident that American pragmatism once again rises to the surface of North Atlantic intellectual life at the present moment. For its major themes of evading epistemology-centered philosophy, accenting human powers, and transforming antiquated modes of social hierarchies in light of religious and/or ethical ideals make it relevant and attractive.

The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse. In this world-weary period of pervasive cynicisms, nihilisms, terrorisms, and possible extermination, there is a longing for norms and values that can make a difference, a yearning for principled resistance and struggle that can change our desperate plight.

The irony of the contemporary intellectual scene in North America is that after an obsession with European theories and philosophies, we are discovering some of what is needed in the American heritage. This intellectual turn to our heritage ought to be neither a simplistic pro-Americanism in the life of the mind nor a naive parochialism that shuns international outlooks. But this turn is a symptom of just how blinded we often are to certain riches in the American intellectual and political past. Needless to say, we approach this past better equipped owing to European products such as Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism. But we also acknowledge the shortcomings of these products, that is, their ultimate inability to come to terms with the specificity of our contemporary predicament. The turn to the American heritage—and especially American pragmatism—is neither a panacea for our ills nor a solution to our problems. Rather, it should be an attempt to reinvigorate our moribund academic life, our lethargic political life, our decadent cultural life, and our chaotic personal lives for the flowering of many-sided personalities and the flourishing of more democracy and freedom.

My basic aim in this book is to chart the emergence, development, decline, and resurgence of American pragmatism. I understand American pragmatism as a specific historical and cultural product of American civilization, a particular set of social practices that articulate certain American desires, values, and responses and that are elaborated in institutional apparatuses principally controlled by a significant slice of the American middle class.

American pragmatism emerges with profound insights and myopic blindnesses, enabling strengths and debilitating weaknesses, all resulting from distinctive features of American civilization: its revolutionary beginning combined with a slave-based economy; its elastic liberal rule of law combined with an entrenched business-dominated status quo; its hybrid culture in combination with a collective self-definition as homogeneously Anglo-American; its obsession with mobility, contingency, and pecuniary liquidity combined with a deep moralistic impulse; and its impatience with theories and philosophies alongside ingenious technological innovation, political strategies of compromise, and personal devices for comfort and convenience. This “hotel civilization” to use Henry James’s apt phrase, with its fusion of the uncertainty of the capitalist market with the quest for security of the home, yielded an indigenous mode of thought that subordinates knowledge to power, tradition to invention, instruction to provocation, community to personality, and immediate problems to utopian possibilities.

American pragmatism is a diverse and heterogeneous tradition. But its common denominator consists of a future-oriented instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action. Its basic impulse is a plebeian radicalism that fuels an antipatrician rebelliousness for the moral aim of enriching individuals and expanding democracy. This rebelliousness, rooted in the anticolonial heritage of the country, is severely restricted by an ethnocentrism and a patriotism cognizant of the exclusion of peoples of color, certain immigrants, and women yet fearful of the subversive demands these excluded peoples might make and enact.

The fundamental argument of this book is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy—from Emerson to Rorty—results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.

The pragmatists’ preoccupation with power, provocation, and personality—in contrast, say, to grounding knowledge, regulating instruction, and promoting tradition—signifies an intellectual calling to administer to a confused populace caught in the whirlwinds of societal crisis, the cross fires of ideological polemics, and the storms of class, racial, and gender conflicts. This deep intellectual vocation, quite different from our sense of
the emasculation of the academic profession, impels the major American pragmatists to be organic intellectuals of some sort; that is, participants in the life of the mind who revel in ideas and relate ideas to action by means of creating, constituting, or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes. It is no accident that the major figures of American pragmatism use the language of crisis—hence the centrality of critical consciousness in their work—and exude urgency as they search for strategies and tactics to facilitate their exercise of intellectual and moral leadership for their constituency. And on a deeper level, these figures grapple with the problem of evil, producing ever-changing yet definite ideological constructions of an American theodicy.

This book does not purport to be a comprehensive account of American pragmatism. Rather, it is a highly selective interpretation of American pragmatism in light of the present state (or my reading) of American society and culture. For instance, the omission of George Herbert Mead or C. I. Lewis is not a negative comment on their significant intellectual contributions to American pragmatism. Similarly, my focus on John Dewey at the expense of Charles Peirce and William James does not reflect my deep respect for the latter two. Rather, it expresses my sense that the thoroughgoing historical consciousness and emphasis on social and political matters found in Dewey speaks more to my purposes than the preoccupations with logic in Peirce and the obsessions with individuality in James.

I consider Peirce and James as profound pioneering figures standing, in part, on the shoulders of Emerson. Yet I believe that it is with Dewey that American pragmatism achieves intellectual maturity, historical scope, and political engagement. In this sense, my genealogy of American pragmatism is an explicitly political interpretation without, I hope, being pejoratively ideological.

My emphasis on the political and moral side of American pragmatism permits me to make a case for the familiar, but rarely argued, claim that Emerson is the appropriate starting point for the pragmatist tradition. Furthermore, by including treatments of a historian (Du Bois), theologian (Niebuhr), sociologist (C. Wright Mills), and literary critic (Trilling), I try to show the way in which Emersonian sensibilities and pragmatist progeny cut across the modern disciplinary division of knowledge.

In regard to method, this work is a social history of ideas. It conceives of the intellectual sphere of history as distinct, unique, and personal sets of cultural practices intimately connected with concomitant developments in the larger society and culture. On the one hand, this book benefits from the ground-breaking research of social historians who delve into the institutional constraints on and agency of exploited and oppressed peoples, yet the book focuses principally on how the complex formulations and arguments of American pragmatists shape and are shaped by the social structures that exploit and oppress. On the other hand, this text learns from—without endorsing—the grand tradition of idealist historiography in that it tries to get inside the formulations and arguments of American pragmatists so that the social roles and functions of ideas do not exhaust their existence or curb intellectual curiosity. This fusion of the intrinsic interest (or hedonistic effect) and the instrumental interest (or political use) of American pragmatism is the goal of this social history of ideas.

This book also attempts to address the crisis of the American left. It does this primarily by providing an interpretation of a progressive tradition that can inspire and instruct contemporary efforts to remake and reform American society and culture. My own conception of prophetic pragmatism—a phrase which I hope is not oxymoronic to the reader after elucidation and illustration—serves as the culmination of the American pragmatist tradition; that is, it is a perspective and project that speaks to the major impediments to a wider role for pragmatism in American thought.

I began this work as an exercise in critical self-inventory, as a historical, social, and existential situating of my own work as an intellectual, activist, and human being. I wanted to make clear to myself my own contradictions and tensions, faults and foibles as one shaped by, in part, the tradition of American pragmatism. My first book, Prophecy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity (1982), attempted to lay bare the oppositional potential of prophetic Christianity—especially as filtered through the best of the black church tradition. Prophecic Fragments (1988) followed in the same vein. My critical acceptance of certain elements of Marxist analysis linked me to the worldwide Christian anti-imperialist and anticapitalist movement often referred to as liberation theology. Yet my promotion of American pragmatism as both a persuasive philosophical perspective and an indigenous source of left politics in America perplexed many people. So just as my earlier texts emerged out of my own political praxis in and my identity with prophetic Christianity, this book consists of my attempt to come to terms with my philosophic allegiances in light of my participation in the U.S. democratic socialist movement (Democratic Socialists of America), my particular role in the American academy (Princeton University), and my existence on the margins of the black church (as a lay preacher).

This book is principally motivated by my own disenchantment with intellectual life in America and my own demoralization regarding the political and cultural state of the country. For example, I am disturbed by the transformation of highly intelligent liberal intellectuals into tendentious neoconservatives owing to crude ethnic identity-based allegiances and vulgar neonationalist sentiments. I am disappointed with the professional incorporation of former New Left activists who now often thrive on a self-serving careerism while espousing rhetoric of oppositional politics of little seriousness and integrity. More important, I am depressed about the concrete nihilism in working-class and underclass American communities—the pervasive drug addiction, suicides, alcoholism, male violence
against women, white violence against black, yellow, and brown people, and the black criminality against others, especially other black people. I have written this text convinced that a thorough reexamination of American pragmatism, stripping it of its myths, caricatures, and stereotypes and viewing it as a component of a new and novel form of indigenous American oppositional thought and action, may be a first step toward fundamental change and transformation in America and the world. Like Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* and Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form*, this book is, among other things, a political act.

I write as one who intends to deepen and enrich American pragmatism while bringing trenchant critique to bear on it. I consider myself deeply shaped by American civilization, but not fully a part of it. I am convinced that the best of the American pragmatist tradition is the best America has to offer itself and the world, yet I am willing to concede that this best may not be good enough given the depths of the international and domestic crises we now face. But though this slim and slight possibility may make my efforts no more than an impotent moral gesture, nonetheless, in the heat of battle, we have no other choice but to fight.
Prophecic Pragmatism:
Cultural Criticism and
Political Engagement

At the level of theory the philosophy of praxis cannot be confounded with or reduced to any other philosophy. Its originality lies not only in its transcending of previous philosophies but also and above all in that it opens up a completely new road, renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself . . . the whole way of conceiving philosophy has been “historicised,” that is to say a new way of philosophising which is more concrete and historical than what went before it has begun to come into existence.

—Antonio Gramsci

The move from Rorty's model of fluid conversation to that of the multi-leveled operations of power leads us back to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Emerson is first and foremost a cultural critic obsessed with ways to generate forms of power. For Rorty, these forms are understood as activities of conversation for the primary purpose of producing new human self-descriptions. But for Emerson, conversation is but one minor instance of the myriad of possible transactions for the enhancement of human powers and personalities. Ironically, Rorty's adoption of Michael Oakeshott's metaphor of “conversation” reflects the dominant ideal of the very professionalism he criticizes. This ideal indeed is more a public affair than are Emerson's preferred ideal
transactions, e.g., gardening, walking, reading, and yet it also is more genteel and bourgeois.

The tradition of pragmatism—the most influential stream in American thought—is in need of an explicit political mode of cultural criticism that refines and revises Emerson’s concerns with power, provocation, and personality in light of Dewey’s stress on historical consciousness and Du Bois’ focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth. This political mode of cultural criticism must recapture Emerson’s sense of vision—his utopian impulse—yet channel it through Dewey’s conception of creative democracy and Du Bois’ social structural analysis of the limits of capitalism democracy. Furthermore, this new kind of cultural criticism—we can call it prophetic pragmatism—must confront candidly the tragic sense found in Hook and Trilling, the religious version of the Jamesian strenuous mood in Niebuhr, and the tortured grappling with the vocation of the intellectual in Mills. Prophetic pragmatism, with its roots in the American heritage and its hopes for the wretched of the earth, constitutes the best chance of promoting an Emersonian culture of creative democracy by means of critical intelligence and social action.

The first step is to define what an Emersonian culture of creative democracy would look like, or at least give some sense of the process by which it can be created. In retrospect, it is important to note that Emerson’s swerve from philosophy was not simply a rejection of the Cartesian and Kantian models of epistemology; it was also an assertion of the primacy of power-laden people’s opinion (doxai) over value-free philosophers’ knowledge (episteme). Emerson’s swerve was a democratic leveling of the subordination of common sense to Reason. Emerson realized that when philosophers “substitute Reason for common sense, they tend to view the sense of commoners to be nonsense.” Emerson’s suspicion of philosophy was not simply that it bewitched thinkers by means of language but, more important, that it had deep antidemocratic consequences. For Emerson, reason, formal thought, foundations, certainty were not only far removed from the dynamism of human experience; they also were human creations that appear as detached abstractions which command their creators and thereby constrain their creators’ freedom. This consequence is both antilibertarian and antidemocratic in that human potential and participation are suppressed in the name of philosophic truth and knowledge. Emerson’s sensibilities are echoed in our own time by Benjamin Barber:

In conquering the muddled uncertainties of politics and suborning reasonableness to rationality, they [philosophers] have served the ideal of enlightenment better than they have informed our political judgment... Rights get philosophically vindicated but only as abstractions that undermine the democratic communities that breathe life into rights; justice is given an unimpeachable credential in epistemology without giving it a firm hold on action or the deliberative processes from which political action stems; talk is revivified as the heart of a political process and then recommended to citizens, but in a form that answers to the constraints not of citizenship but of philosophy; civility is celebrated, but construed as incompatible with the sorts of collective human choice and communal purposes that give civility its political meaning.

To speak then of an Emersonian culture of creative democracy is to speak of a society and culture where politically adjudicated forms of knowledge are produced in which human participation is encouraged and for which human personalities are enhanced [...]. Social experimentation is the basic norm, yet it is operable only when those who must suffer the consequences have effective control over the institutions that yield the consequences, i.e., access to decision-making processes. In this sense, the Emersonian swerve from epistemology is inseparable from an Emersonian culture of creative democracy; that is, there is political motivation and political substance to the American evasion of philosophy.

Politics is what men do when metaphysics fails... It is the forging of common actuality in the absence of abstract independent standards. It entails dynamic, ongoing, common deliberation and action and it is feasible only when individuals are transformed by social interaction into citizens.

The political motivation of the American evasion of philosophy is not ideological in the vulgar sense; that is, the claim here is not that philosophy is a mere cloak that conceals the material interests of a class or group. Rather, the claim is that once one gives up on the search for foundations and the quest for certainty, human inquiry into truth and knowledge shifts to the social and communal circumstances under which persons can communicate and cooperate in the process of acquiring knowledge. What was once purely epistemological now highlights the values and operations of power requisite for the human production of truth and knowledge.

The political substance of the American evasion of philosophy is that what was the prerogative of philosophers, i.e., rational deliberation, is now that of the people—and the populace deliberating is creative democracy in the making. Needless to say, this view is not a license for eliminating or opposing all professional elites, but it does hold them to account. Similarly, the populace deliberating is neither mob rule nor mass prejudice. Rather, it is the citizenry in action, with its civil consciousness molded by participation in public-interest-centered and individual-rights-regarding democracy.

Prophetic pragmatism makes this political motivation and political substance of the American evasion of philosophy explicit. Like Dewey, it understands pragmatism as a political form of cultural criticism and locates politics in the everyday experiences of ordinary people. Unlike Dewey, prophetic pragmatism promotes a more direct encounter with the
Marxist tradition of social analysis. The emancipatory social experimentation that sits at the center of prophetic pragmatic politics closely resembles the radical democratic elements of Marxist theory, yet its flexibility shuns any dogmatic, a priori, or monistic pronouncements.

The encounter of prophetic pragmatism with Marxist theory can be best illustrated by an examination of the most significant and elaborate effort to put forward a Marxist-informed (though not Marxist) democratic social vision: namely, that found in Roberto Unger's multivolume work Politics. Unger is not a prophetic pragmatist—yet there are deep elective affinities between Unger's work and prophetic pragmatism. To put it crudely, both are noteworthy exemplars of third-wave left romanticism.

Roberto Unger and Third-Wave Left Romanticism

Roberto Unger's distinctive contribution to contemporary social thought is to deepen and sharpen a radical manner John Dewey's notion of social experimentation in light of the crisis of Marxist theory and praxis. Unger's fundamental aim is to free Marxist conceptions of human society from evolutionary, deterministic, and economistic encumbrances by means of Deweyan concerns with the plethora of historically specific social arrangements and the often overlooked politics of personal relations between unique and purposeful individuals. The basic result of Unger's fascinating efforts is to stake out new discursive space on the contemporary political and ideological spectrum. Prophetic pragmatism occupies this same space. This space is neither simply left nor liberal, Marxist nor Lockean, anarchist nor Kantian. Rather, Unger's perspective is both post-Marxist and postliberal; that is, it consists of an emancipatory experimentalism that promotes permanent social transformation and perennial self-development for the purposes of ever-increasing democracy and individual freedom. Yet, in contrast to most significant social thinkers, Unger is motivated by explicit religious concerns, such as a kinship with nature as seen in romantic love, or transcendence of nature as manifest in the hope for eternal life. In this way, Unger highlights the radical existential insufficiency of his emancipatory experimentalism, which speaks best to human penultimate matters. For Unger, human ultimate concerns are inseparable from yet not reducible to the never-ending quest for social transformation and self-development.

I shall argue three claims regarding Unger's project. First, I shall suggest that his viewpoint can best be characterized as the most elaborate articulation of a third-wave left romanticism now sweeping across significant segments of principally the first-world progressive intelligentsia (or what is left of this progressive intelligentsia). Second, I shall show that this third-wave romanticism—like prophetic pragmatism—is discursively situated between John Dewey's radical liberal version of socialism and Antonio Gramsci's absolute historicist conception of Marxism. Third, I shall highlight the ways in which this provocative project, though an advance beyond much of contemporary social thought, remains inscribed within a Eurocentric and patriarchal discourse that not simply fails to theoretically consider racial and gender forms of subjugation, but also remains silent on the antiracist and feminist dimensions of concrete progressive political struggles.

The most striking impression one gets from reading Unger's work is his unabashedly pronounced romanticism. By romanticism here, I mean quite simply the preoccupation with Promethean human powers, the recognition of the contingency of the self and society, and the audacious projection of desires and hopes in the form of regulative emancipatory ideals for which one lives and dies. In these postmodern times of cynicism and nihilism—after the unimaginable atrocities of Hitler, Stalin, Tito, Mussolini, and Franco, and the often forgotten barbarities committed in Asia, Africa, and Latin America under European and American imperialist auspices; and during the present period of Khomeini, Pinochet, Moi, and Mengistu in the third world, bureaucratic henchmen ruling the second world, and Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, and Chirac setting the pace in the first world—Unger's romanticism is both refreshing and disturbing.

The ameliorative energies and utopian impulses that inform Unger's work are refreshing in that so many of us now "lack any ready way to imagine transformation."34 We feel trapped in a world with no realizable oppositional options, no actualizable credible alternatives. This sense of political impotence—"this experience of acquiescence without commitment"—yields three basic forms of politics: sporadic terrorism for impatient, angry, and nihilistic radicals; professional reformism for comfortable, cultivated, and concerned liberals; and evangelical nationalism for frightened, paranoid, and accusatory conservatives. Unger's romantic sense that the future can and should be fundamentally different from and better than the present not only leads him to reject these three predominant kinds of politics, but also impels him to answer in the negative to "the great political question of our day: Is social democracy the best that we can reasonably hope for?" Unger believes we can and must do better.

Yet Unger's third-wave left romanticism is disturbing in that we have witnessed—and are often reminded of—the deleterious consequences and dehumanizing effects of the first two waves of left romanticism in the modern world. The first wave—best seen in the American and French Revolutions—unleashed unprecedented human energies and powers, significantly transformed selves and societies, and directed immense human desires and hopes toward the grand moral and credible political ideals of democracy and freedom, equality and fraternity. Two exemplary figures of this first wave—Thomas Jefferson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—would undoubtedly affirm the three basic elements of Unger's conception of
human activity: the contextual or conditional quality of all human activity; the possibility of breaking through all contexts of practical or conceptual activity; and the need to distinguish between context-preserving, i.e., routinized, and context-breaking, i.e., transformative, activities.7

Furthermore, both Jefferson and Rousseau would agree with Unger's romantic conception of imagination as a human power that conceives of social reality from the vantage point of change and for the purposes of transformation.8 In this regard, Unger is deeply within the North Atlantic romantic grain. Why, then, ought we to be disturbed? Despite the great human advances initiated and promoted by first-wave left romanticism, its historical and social embodiments reinforced and reproduced barbaric practices: white supremacist practices associated with African slavery and imperial conquest over indigenous and Mexican peoples; male supremacist practices inscribed in familial relations, cultural mores, and societal restrictions; and excessive business control and influence over the public interest as seen in low wages, laws against unions, and government support of select business endeavors, e.g., railroads. These noteworthy instances of the underside of first-wave left romanticism should be disturbing not because all efforts to change the status quo in a progressive direction are undesirable, but rather because any attempt to valorize historically specific forms of human powers must be cognizant of and cautious concerning who will be subjected to those human powers.

The second wave of left romanticism, following upon the heels of profound disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the American and French Revolutions, is manifest in the two great prophetic and prefigurative North Atlantic figures [Ralph Waldo Emerson and Karl Marx]. Both were obsessed with the problem of revolution, that is, the specifying and creating of conditions for the transformation of context-preserving activities into context-breaking ones. Both had a profound faith in the capacity of human beings to remake themselves and society in more free and democratic ways. And both looked toward science—the new cultural authority on knowledge, reality, and truth—as an indispensable instrument for this remaking and betterment.

Emersonian themes of the centrality of the self's morally laden transformative vocation; the necessity of experimentation to achieve the self's aims of self-mastery and kinship with nature; and the importance of self-creation and self-authorization loom large in Unger's work. In fact, the penultimate paragraph of volume 1 of Politics reads as if it comes right out of Emerson's Nature.

In their better and saner moments men and women have always wanted to live as the originals that they all feel themselves to be and to cement practical and passionate attachments that respect this truth rather than submerge it. As soon as they have understood their social worlds to be made up and pasted together, they have also wanted to become the co-makers of these worlds. Some modern doctrines tell us that we already live in societies in which we can fully satisfy these desires while others urge us to give them up as unrealistic. But the first piece of advice is hard to believe, and the second is hard to practice.9

Similarly, Marxist motifs of the centrality of value-laden political struggle; the necessity for transformation of present-day societies and for control over nature; and, most pointedly, the ability of human powers to reshape human societies against constraints already in place diminishes. Unger's project. Indeed, the last paragraph of volume 1 of Politics invokes the same metaphors, passions, and aims as Marx's 1844 Manuscripts and 1848 Manifesto.

The constraints of society, echoed, reinforced, and amplified by the illusions of social thought, have often led people to bear the stigma of longing under the mask of worldliness and resignation. An anti-naturalistic social theory does not strike down the constraints but it dispels the illusions that prevent us from attacking them. Theoretical insight and prophetic vision have joined ravenous self-interest and heartless conflict to set the fire that is burning in the world, and melting apart the amalgam of faith and superstition, and consuming the power of false necessity.10

The second wave of left romanticism is dominated by Emersonian ideas of America and Marxist conceptions of socialism. From roughly the 1860s to the 1940s, human hopes for democracy and freedom, equality, and fraternity around the globe rested on the legacy of either Emerson or Marx. Needless to say, European efforts at nation building and empire consolidating—the major sources of second-wave right romanticism—violently opposed both the Emersonian and the Marxist legacies. Yet by the end of the Second World War, with the defeat of Germany's bid for European and world domination at the hands of the Allied forces led by the United States and Russia, the second wave of romanticism began to wane. The dominant version of the Marxist legacy—Marxist-Leninist (and at the time led by Stalin)—was believed by more and more left romantics to be repressive, repulsive, and retrograde. And the major mode of the Emersonian legacy—Americanism (led then by Truman and Eisenhower)—was viewed by many left romantics as racist, penurious, and hollow.

The third wave of left romanticism proceeded from a sense of deep disappointment with Marxist-Leninism and Americanism. Exemplary activist stirrings can be found in the third world or among people of color in the first world—Gandhi in India, Maritaequi in Peru, Nasser in Egypt, and Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States. Yet principally owing to the tragic facts of survival, myopic leadership, and limited options, most third-world romanticism was diverted from the third wave of left romanticism into the traps of a regimenting Marxist-Leninism or a rapacious Americanism. The major exceptions—Chile under Salvador Allende,
Jamaica under Michael Manley, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas—encoun-
ter formidable, usually insurmountable, obstacles. Needless to say, similar
projects in second-world countries—Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in
1968, Poland in 1970—are tragically and brutally crushed.

The two great figures of the third wave of left romanticism are[John
Dewey and Antonio Gramsci.] Dewey applies the Jeffersonian and Em-
ersonian viewpoints to the concrete historical and social realities of our
century. Similarly, Gramsci sharpenes and revises the Rousseauist and
Marxist perspectives on these realities. As we observed earlier, in numer-
ous essays, articles, and reviews, and, most important, in his texts The Public
and Its Problems (1927), Individualism: Old and New (1929), Liberalism and
Social Action (1935), and Freedom and Culture (1939), Dewey put forward
a powerful interpretation of socialism that builds upon yet goes beyond
liberalism. This interpretation highlights a conception of social experi-
mentation which "goes all the way down"; that is, it embraces the idea
of fundamental economic, political, cultural, and individual transfor-
mation in light of Jeffersonian and Emersonian ideals of accountable power,
small-scale associations, and individual liberties. In various fragments,
incomplete studies, and political interventions, and in works such as The
Prison Notebooks (1929–35) and The Modern Prince, Gramsci sets forth a
penetrating version of Marxism that rests upon yet spills over beyond
Leninism. This version focuses on a notion of historical specificity and
a conception of hegemony which preclude any deterministic, economistic,
or reductionist readings of social phenomena. In this way, Dewey and
Gramsci partly set the agenda for any acceptable and viable third wave
of left romanticism in our time.

Unger's provocative project occupies the discursive space between
Dewey and Gramsci; it is the most detailed delineation of third-wave left
romanticism we have. Like prophet pragmatism, he stands at the inter-
section of the Jefferson-Emerson-Dewey insights and the Rousseau-Marx-
Gramsci formulations. Ironically, as an intellectual with third-world origins
and sensibilities (Brazilian and first-world academic status and orienta-
tions (Harvard law professor for almost twenty years), Unger is much more
conscious of and concerned with his Rousseau-Marx-Gramsci heritage
than with his Jefferson-Emerson-Dewey sentiments. In fact, his major aim
is to provide an alternative radicalism—at the levels of method and political
and personal praxis—to Marxism in light of his third-world experiences
and first-world training.

Politics is also the product of two very different experiences. One of these
experiences is exposure to the rich, polished, critical and self-critical but
also downbeat and Alexandrian culture of social and historical thought
that now flourishes in the North-Atlantic democracies. This social-
thought culture suffers from the influence of a climate of opinion in which
the most generous citizens hope at best to avert military disasters and
to achieve marginal redistributive goals while resigning themselves to
established institutional arrangements. The other shaping experience is
practical and imaginative engagement in the murky but hopeful politics
of Brazil, a country at the forward edge of the Third World. There, at the
time of writing, at least some people took seriously the idea that basic in-
stitutions, practices, and preconceptions might be reconstructed in ways
that did not conform to any established model of social organization.

Much in this work can be understood as the consequence of an
attempt to enlist the intellectual resources of the North-Atlantic world in
the service of concerns and commitments more keenly felt elsewhere. In
this way I hope to contribute toward the development of an alternative to
the vague, unconvincing, and unconvincing Marxism that now serves the
advocates of the radical project as their Lingua Franca. If the arguments
of this book stand up, the transformative focus of this theoretical effort has
a cognitive value that transcends its immediate origins and motives.11

In this sense, Unger privileges Marxist discourse. On the one hand,
Marxism's "structure and institutional fetishism"—its tendency to impose
historical and social scripts in the name of deep-structure logics of inevi-
tability—stands as the major impediment to Unger's radical project.12 On
the other hand, Marxism more than any other social theory contains
the resources and analytical tools to resist this tendency and thereby aid
and abet Unger's work.

Much of this book represents a polemic against what the text labels deep-
structure social analysis. The writings of Marx and of his followers pro-
vide the most powerful and detailed illustrations of the deep-structure
moves. Yet Marx's own writings contain many elements that assist the
effort to free ambitious theorizing from deep-structure assumptions.
People working in the Marxist tradition have developed the deep-
structure approach. Yet they have also forged some of the most powerful
tools with which to build a view of social life more faithful to the anti-
naturalistic intentions of Marx and other classic social theorists than
Marx's original science of history.13

Unger even more closely associates his project with a particular group
of Marxists (whom he dubs "political Marxists"), though he by no means
affirms their efforts to stay within the Marxist explanatory framework.
The major figure in this group is Antonio Gramsci. Indeed, it can be said
with assurance that Gramsci's flexible Marxism which emphasizes and
explores "the relative autonomy of class situations and class conscious-
ness from the defining features of a mode of production like capitalism"
serves as the principal springboard for Unger's work.14 His explicit acknow-
ledgment of his debts to political Marxists such as Gramsci—a rare moment
in Unger's self-authorizing texts—bears this out.

At times the political Marxists have sacrificed the development of their
insights to the desire to retain a connection with the central theses of
historical materialism. To them these tenets have seemed the only available basis for theoretical generalization and for critical distance from the arrangements and circumstances of the societies in which they lived. At other times, the political Marxists have simply given up on theory... They have then paid the price in the loss of an ability to convey a sense of sharp institutional alternatives for past, present, and future society. The constructive theory of Polities just keeps going from where the political Marxists leave off. It does so, however, without either renouncing theoretical ambitions or accepting any of the distinctive doctrines of Marx's social theory.15

Unger believes it is necessary to go beyond Gramsci not because Gramsci is a paradigmatic Marxist "super-theorist" who generates theoretical generalizations and schemas that fail to grasp the complexity of social realities, but rather because Gramsci despite his Marxism is an exemplary "ultra-theorist" who attempts to avoid broad explanations and theoretical systems in order to keep track of the multifarious features and aspects of fluid social realities.16 As an unequivocal supertheorist (who tries to avoid the traps of positivism, naive historicism, and deep-structure logics), Unger criticizes ultratheorists like Gramsci and Foucault for rejecting explanatory or prescriptive theories and thereby ultimately disenabling effective emancipatory thought and practice. For Unger, the ultratheorist sees a deep-structure logic inside every theoretical system, confuses explanatory generalizations with epistemic foundationalism, and runs the risk of his work's degenerating into a nominalistic form of conventional social science. In short, the major lesson Unger learns from Gramsci is to be a more subtle, nuanced, and sensitive supertheorist than Marx by building on elements in Marx and others.

Despite the prominence of certain Deweyan themes in his project, Dewey is virtually absent in Unger's text. Furthermore, the one reference to Dewey is a rather cryptic and misleading statement. After alluding to Foucault and Gramsci as major ultratheorists, Unger adds:

Moreover, it would be wrong to associate ultra-theory solely with leftist or modernist intellectuals. Why not, for example, John Dewey (despite the gap between the commitment to institutional experimentalism and the slide into institutional conservatism).17

This passage is perplexing for three reasons. First, is Unger implying that Dewey was neither a leftist nor a modernist intellectual? Second, is Unger drawing a distinction between his own social experimentalism and Dewey's institutional experimentalism? Third, in what sense and when did Dewey slide into institutional conservatism? If Unger answers the first question in the affirmative, he falls prey to the misinformed stereotypical view of Dewey as a vulgar Americanist. For as we saw earlier, Dewey's sixty-five-year political record as a democratic socialist speaks for itself. And no argument is needed for Dewey's being a modernist intellectual, when he stands as the major secular intellectual of twentieth-century America. If Unger is making a distinction between his form of experimentalism and that of Dewey, its validity remains unclear unless one remains fixated on Dewey's educational reform movement and neglects the broader calls for fundamental social change put forward during the years Dewey concentrated on progressive education as well as afterward, in the late twenties, thirties, and forties. And the implausible notion that Dewey slid into institutional conservatism holds only if one wrongly views his brand of anti-Stalinism in the forties as conservatism, for his critique of American society remained relentless to the end.

I do believe Unger has simply slipped in his brief mention of Dewey. Yet this slip is significant in that Dewey could provide Unger with some enabling insights and tools for his project. These insights and tools will not be comparable to those of Marx, for Dewey was not a social theorist. Yet Dewey's own brand of ultratheory could like Gramsci's chasten and temper Unger's supertheory ambitions.

For example, Unger's attempt to work out an analogical relation between scientific notions of objectivity and social conceptions of personality is prefigured—and more persuasive—in Dewey's linkage of scientific attitude (as opposed to scientific method) to democracy as a way of life. The key notions become not so much objectivity—not even Rorty's ingenious reformulation of objectivity as self-critical solidarity—as, more fundamentally, respect for the other and accountability as a condition for fallibility.18 Similarly, Dewey's brand of ultratheory does not exclude, downplay, or discourage explanatory generalizations. In fact, Dewey holds that we cannot get by without some form of supertheory, for the same reasons Unger invokes (i.e., for explaining and regulating our practices). Yet Dewey admonishes us to view supertheories as we do any other instruments or weapons we have and to use them when they serve our purposes and satisfy our interests, and criticize or discard them when they utterly fail us. The significant difference between Gramsci and Dewey is not that the former accepts Marxist theory and the latter rejects it, but rather that Gramsci tenaciously holds onto Marxist theory in those areas where it fails, e.g., politics and culture. Dewey accepted much of the validity of Marxist theory and simply limited its explanatory scope and rejected its imperial, monistic, and dogmatic versions. These Deweyan correctives to Unger's project point toward prophetic pragmatism.

Dewey's radical liberal version of socialism might dampen Unger's fires of utopian quest in that Dewey recognized that authoritarian comunism and liberal capitalist democracies were and are the major credible options in the first world and second world at the moment. And social experimentation in the third world remains hampered by these limits. This is not to say we ought not to dream, hope, live, fight, and die for
betterment, yet such romantic longings, even when dressed up in sophisticated social thought, do not alter the severe constraints of the international coordination of capital in the West and the bureaucratic stranglehold in the East. In this sense, Dewey’s petit bourgeois radicalism, which is no tradition to trash despite its vast shortcomings, could not but be an incessant effort at radical reform in the West and a beacon light on repression in the East. In the same way, Gramsci’s Communist party leadership, whose legacy now resides principally in Italy and Sweden, could not but comprise audacious attempts at democratization in the East and a beacon light on socially induced misery (e.g., poverty, racism) in the West. The fundamental challenge to Unger is to find space for historical maneuvering—for his emancipatory experimentalism—between Dewey and Gramsci, between petit bourgeois radicalism and Marxist socialism.

This challenge should be approached on two levels—that of highbrow academic production and consumption, and that of popular political organization and mobilization. Both levels have their own kinds of significance. Universities, colleges, and some professional schools, though increasingly given over to hi-tech and computers, still provide one of the few institutional arenas in which serious conversation about new ideological space can take place in liberal capitalist democracies. It indeed is no accident that much of the legacy of the New Left in the sixties now resides in such places. Most of the consumers of Unger’s project consist of these progressive professional managers who exercise some degree of cultural authority in and from these educational institutions. Their importance, especially as transmitters of elite cultural values and sensibilities, should not be overlooked. But neither should their influence be exaggerated. In fact, for the most part, what they produce and consume of a left political orientation remains within the academy. Despite Unger’s admirable efforts to write in a relatively jargon-free language, this holds for his own texts.

So his attempt to put forward a left project between Dewey and Gramsci will more than likely remain the property of the same disillusioned progressives he chastises. The importance of influencing the left sectors of the “downbeat and Alexandrian” intellectual culture of our time ought not to be minimized; nevertheless, Unger wants to do more than this—he wants to make a significant programmatic intervention in the real world of politics.

This brings us to the level of political organization and mobilization. Unlike Dewey and Gramsci, Unger pays little attention to the burning cultural and political issues in the everyday lives of ordinary people—issues such as religious and nationalist (usually xenophobic) revivals, the declining power of trade unions, escalating racial and sexual violence, pervasive drug addiction and alcoholism, breakdowns in the nuclear family, the cultural and political impact of mass media (TV, radio, and videos), and the exponential increase of suicides and homicides. Unger invokes a politics of personal relations and everyday life, yet he remains rather vague regarding its content.

When I claim that Unger’s discourse remains inscribed within a Eurocentric and patriarchal framework, I mean that his texts remain relatively silent—on the conceptual and practical levels—on precisely those issues that promote social motion and politicization among the majority of people in the country. I am not suggesting that Unger write simple pamphlets for the masses, but rather that his fascinating works give more attention to those issues that may serve as the motivating forces for his new brand of left politics. To write a masterful text of social theory and politics that does not so much as mention—God forbid, grapple with—forms of racial and gender subjugation in our time is inexcusable on political and theoretical grounds. To do so is to remain captive to a grand though flawed Eurocentric and patriarchal heritage. More pointedly, it is to miss much of the new possibilities for a realizable left politics. Needless to say, to take seriously issues such as race and gender is far from a guarantee for a credible progressive politics, but to bypass them is to commit the fatal sin of supertheory: to elide the concrete at the expense of systemic coherence and consistency.

In conclusion, Unger’s ambitious project warrants our close attention and scrutiny. It articulates many of the motives and ideals of the political project of prophetic pragmatism. It is, by far, the most significant attempt to articulate a third-wave left romanticism that builds on the best of the Jefferson-Emerson-Dewey and Rousseau-Marx-Gramsci legacies. Unfortunately, he remains slightly blinded by some of the theoretical and practical shortsightedness of these grand North Atlantic legacies. Yet Unger would be the first to admit that all prophets are imperfect and that all emancipatory visions and programs are subject to revision and transformation.

The Challenge of Michel Foucault

To praise Unger’s project and that of prophetic pragmatism for their third-wave left romanticism is to go against the grain in some progressive circles owing to the influence of Michel Foucault. Foucault is the exemplary antiromantic, suspicious of any talk about wholeness, totality, telos, purpose, or even future. Prophetic pragmatism shares with Foucault a preoccupation with the operation of powers. It also incorporates the genealogical mode of inquiry initiated by the later phase of Foucault’s work. In fact, prophetic pragmatism promotes genealogical materialist modes of analysis similar in many respects to those of Foucault. Yet prophetic pragmatism rejects Foucault’s antiromanticism for three basic reasons.

First, despite the profound insights and rich illuminations of Foucault’s renowned archeologies and genealogies, he remains preoccupied by one particular kind of operation of power, namely, the various modes
The question itself is inextricably tied to a conception of validity that stands above and outside the social practices of human beings. In this regard, Foucault's answer—anonymous and autonomous discourses, disciplines, and techniques—is but the latest addition to the older ones: the dialectical development of modes of production (vulgar Marxisms); workings of the Weltgeist (crude Hegelians); or activities of transcendental subjects (academic Kantians). All such answers shun the centrality of dynamic social practices structured and unstructured over time and space.

The second prophetic pragmatist objection is, unsurprisingly, to the reification of discourses, disciplines, and techniques. By downplaying human agency—both individual and collective human actions—Foucault surreptitiously ascribes agency to discourses, disciplines, and techniques. There indeed are multiple unintended consequences and unacknowledged antecedent conditions of human actions that both produce and are produced by institutions and structures. Methodological individualism in social theory, according to which isolated and atomistic individual actions fully account for humans' societies and histories, will not suffice. But the alternative is not the exclusive ascription of agency to impersonal forces, transcendental entities, or anonymous and autonomous discourses. For prophetic pragmatists, human agency remains central—all we have in human societies and histories are structured and unstructured human social practices over time and space. Edward Said perceptively states regarding Foucault:

Yet despite the extraordinary worldliness of this work, Foucault takes a curiously passive and sterile view not so much of the uses of power, but of how and why power is gained, used, and held onto. This is the most dangerous consequence of his disagreement with Marxism, and its result is the least convincing aspect of his work... However else power may be a kind of indirect bureaucratic discipline and control, there are ascertainable changes stemming from who holds power and who dominates whom.

... what one misses in Foucault is something resembling Gramsci's analyses of hegemony, historical blocks, ensembles of relationship done from the perspective of an engaged political worker for whom the fascinated description of exercised power is never a substitute for trying to change power relationships within society.

Foucault is a political intellectual—a "specific" intellectual geared to and affiliated with local struggles rather than a "universal" intellectual representing and speaking for the interests of a class, nation, or group—yet his Kantian questions lead him to downplay human agency, to limit the revisability of discourses and disciplines, and thereby to confine his attention to a specific set of operations of power, i.e., those linked to constituting subjects. For instance, he pays little attention to operations of power in economic modes of production and nation-states.
The last prophetic pragmatist criticism of Foucault's project is that he devalues moral discourse. His fervent anti-utopianism—again in reaction to Hegelian and Marxist teleological utopianism—rejects all forms of ends and aims for political struggle. Therefore, he replaces reform or revolution with revolt and rebellion. In this way, Foucault tends to reduce left ethics to a bold and defiant Great Refusal addressed to the dominant powers that be. Yet by failing to articulate and elaborate ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom, Foucault provides solely negative conceptions of critique and resistance. He rightly suspects the self-authorizing and self-privileging aims of "universal" intellectuals who put forward such ideals, yet he mistakenly holds that any attempt to posit these ideals as guides to political action and social reconstruction must fall prey to new modes of subjection and disciplinary control. Foucault rightly wants to safeguard relentless criticism and healthy skepticism, yet his rejection of even tentative aims and provisional ends results in existential rebellion or micropolitical revolt rather than concerted political praxis informed by moral vision and systemic (though flexible) analyses. In stark contrast, prophetic pragmatists take seriously moral discourse—revisable means and ends of political action, the integrity and character of those engaged, and the precious ideals of participatory democracy and the flowering of the uniqueness of different human individualities.

Therefore, prophetic pragmatists reject Foucault's Kantian question, viewing it as a wheel that turns yet plays no part in the mechanism. Instead, they move directly to strategic and tactical modes of thinking and acting. These modes highlight the operations of powers and the uses of provocation for the development of human personalities. Like Foucault, prophetic pragmatists criticize and resist forms of subjection, as well as types of economic exploitation, state repression, and bureaucratic domination. But these critiques and resistances, unlike his, are unashamedly guided by moral ideals of creative democracy and individuality.

Tragedy, Tradition, and Political Praxis

A major shortcoming of Emersonian pragmatism is its optimistic theodicy. The point here is not so much that Emerson himself had no sense of the tragic but rather that the way he formulated the relation of human powers and fate, human agency and circumstances, human will and constraints made it difficult for him and for subsequent pragmatists to maintain a delicate balance between excessive optimism and exorbitant pessimism regarding human capacities. The early Emerson stands at one pole and the later Trilling at another pole. For prophetic pragmatism only the early Hook and Niebuhr—their work in the early thirties—maintain the desirable balance.

This issue of balance raises a fundamental and long-ignored issue for the progressive tradition: the issue of the complex relations between tragedy and revolution, tradition and progress. Prophetic pragmatism refuses to sidestep this issue. The brutalities and atrocities in human history, the genocidal attempts in this century, and the present-day barbarities require that those who accept the progressive and prophetic designations put forth some conception of the tragic. To pose the issue in this way is, in a sense, question begging since the very term "tragic" presupposes a variety of religious and secular background notions. Yet prophetic pragmatism is a child of Protestant Christianity wedded to left romanticism. So this question begging is warranted in that prophetic pragmatism stands in a tradition in which the notion of the "tragic" requires attention.

It is crucial to acknowledge from the start that the "tragic" is a polyvalent notion; it has different meanings depending on its context. For example, the context of Greek tragedy—in which the actions of ruling families generates pity and terror in the audience—is a society that shares a collective experience of common metaphysical and social meanings. The context of modern tragedy, on the other hand—in which ordinary individuals struggle against meaninglessness and nothingness—is a fragmented society with collapsing metaphysical meanings. More pointedly, the notion of the "tragic" is bound to the idea of human agency, be the agent a person of rank or a retainer, a prince or a pauper.

... The events which are not seen as tragic are deep in the pattern of our own culture: war, famine, work, traffic, politics. To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings, and especially with permanent and universal meanings, is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy, which no rhetoric of tragedy can finally hide.

It is no accident that James, Hook, Niebuhr, and Trilling focused on the content and character of heroism when they initially grappled with the notion of the tragic. Although they had little or no interest in revolution, their preoccupation with human agency, will, and power resembles that of the Prometheus romantics, e.g., Blake, Byron, Shelley. Yet the ideological sources of their conceptions of the "tragic" loom large in their deployment of the term.

James's focus on the individual and his distrust of big institutions and groups led him to envision a moral heroism in which each ameliorative step forward is a kind of victory, each minute battle won a sign that the war is not over, hence still winnable. Hook's early Marxism provided him with a historical sense in which the "tragic" requires a choice between a proven evil, i.e., capitalism, and a possible good, i.e., socialism. As the possible good proved to be more and more evil, the old "proven evil" appeared more and more good. The notion of the "tragic" in Hook
underwent a metamorphosis such that all utopian quests were trashed in the name of limits, constraints, and circumstances. The later Trilling is even more extreme, for the mere exertion of will was often seen as symptomatic of the self's utopian quest for the unconditioned.

Niebuhr held the most complex view of the "tragic" in the pragmatist tradition. Even more than the middle Trilling's intriguing ruminations on Keatsian theodicy, Niebuhr's struggle with liberal Protestantism—especially with Richard Rorty's grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch—forced him to remain on the tightrope between Protestantism and Augustinian pessimism. In fact, Niebuhr never succumbs to either, nor does he ever cease to promote incessant human agency and will against limits and circumstances. In his leftist years, mindful of the novel forms of evil in the new envisioned social order yet fed up with those in the present, he supported the insurgency of exploited workers. In his liberal years, obsessed with the evil structures in the leftist world and more and more (though never fully) forgetful of the institutional evil in American society, Niebuhr encourages state actions against the Soviet Union and piecemeal reformist practice within America.

Prophetic pragmatism affirms the Niebuhrian strenuous mood, never giving up on new possibilities for human agency—both individual and collective—in the present, yet situating them in light of Du Bois' social structural analyses that focus on working-class, black, and female insurgency. Following the pioneering work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Edward Shils, prophetic pragmatism acknowledges the inescapable and inexpungible character of tradition, the burden and buoyancy of that which is transmitted from the past to the present. This process of transmittance is one of socialization and appropriation, of acculturation and construction. Tradition, in this sense, can be both a smothering and a liberating affair, depending on which traditions are being invoked, internalized, and invented.

In this way, the relation of tragedy to revolution (or resistance) is intertwined with that of tradition to progress (or betterment). Prophetic pragmatism, as a form of third-wave left romanticism, tempers its utopian impulse with a profound sense of the tragic character of life and history. This sense of the tragic highlights the irreducible predicament of unique individuals who undergo dread, despair, disillusionment, disease, and death and the institutional forms of oppression that dehumanize people. Tragic thought is not confined solely to the plight of the individual; it also applies to social experiences of resistance, revolution, and societal reconstruction. Prophetic pragmatism is a form of tragic thought in that it confronts candidly individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions—with little expectation of ridding the world of all evil. Yet it is a kind of romanticism in that it holds many experiences of evil to be neither inevitable nor necessary but rather the results of human agency, i.e., choices and actions.

This interplay between tragic thought and romantic impulse, inescapable evils and transformable evils makes prophetic pragmatism seem schizophrenic. On the one hand, it appears to affirm a Sisyphean outlook in which human resistance to evil makes no progress. On the other hand, it looks as if it approves a utopian quest for paradise. In fact, prophetic pragmatism denies Sisyphean pessimism and utopian perfectionism. Rather, it promotes the possibility of human progress and the human impossibility of paradise. This progress results from principled and protracted Prometheus efforts, yet even such efforts are no guarantee. And all human struggles—including successful ones—against specific forms of evil produce new, though possibly lesser, forms of evil. Human struggle sits at the center of prophetic pragmatism, a struggle guided by a democratic and libertarian vision, sustained by moral courage and existential integrity, and tempered by the recognition of human finitude and frailty. It calls for utopian energies and tragic actions, energies and actions that yield permanent and perennial revolutionary, rebellious, and reformist strategies that oppose the status quo of our day. These strategies are never to become ends-in-themselves, but rather to remain means through which are channeled moral outrage and human desperation in the face of prevailing forms of evil in human societies and in human lives. Such outrage must never cease, and such desperation will never disappear, yet without revolutionary, rebellious, and reformist strategies, credible and effective opposition wanes. Prophetic pragmatism attempts to keep alive the sense of alternative ways of life and of struggle based on the best of the past. In this sense, the praxis of prophetic pragmatism is tragic action with revolutionary intent, usually reformist consequences, and always visionary outlook. It concurs with Raymond Williams' tragic revolutionary perspective:

The tragic action, in its deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and its resolution. In our own time, this action is general, and its common name is revolution. We have to see the evil and the suffering, in the factual disorder that makes revolution necessary, and in the disordered struggle against the disorder. We have to recognize this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and not cover it with names. But we follow the whole action: not only the evil, but the men who have fought against evil; not only the crisis, but the energy released by it, the spirit learned in it. We make the connections, because that is the action of tragedy, and what we learn in suffering is again revolution, because we acknowledge others as men and any such acknowledgement is the beginning of struggle, as the continuing reality of our lives. Then to see revolution in this tragic perspective is the only way to maintain it.

This oppositional consciousness draws its sustenance principally from a tradition of resistance. To keep alive a sense of alternative ways of life and of struggle requires memory of those who prefigured such life and
struggle in the past. In this sense, tradition is to be associated not solely with ignorance and intolerance, prejudice and parochialism, dogmatism and docility. Rather, tradition is also to be identified with insight and intelligence, rationality and resistance, critique and contestation. Tradition per se is never a problem, but rather those traditions that have been and are hegemonic over other traditions. All that human beings basically have are traditions—those institutions and practices, values and sensibilities, stories and symbols, ideas and metaphors that shape human identities, attitudes, outlooks, and dispositions. These traditions are dynamic, malleable, and revisable, yet all changes in a tradition are done in light of some old or newly emerging tradition. Innovation presupposes some tradition and inaugurates another tradition. The profound historical consciousness of prophetic pragmatism shuns the Emersonian devaluing of the past. Yet it also highlights those elements of old and new traditions that promote innovation and resistance for the aims of enhancing individuality and expanding democracy. This enhancement and expansion constitute human progress. And all such progress takes place within the contours of clashing traditions. In this way, just as tragic action constitutes resistance to prevailing status quo, the critical treatment and nurturing of a tradition yield human progress. Tragedy can be an impetus rather than an impediment to oppositional activity; tradition may serve as a stimulus rather than a stumbling block to human progress.

Prophetic pragmatism understands the Emersonian swerve from epistemology—and the American evasion of philosophy—not as a wholesale rejection of philosophy but rather as a reconception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism that attempts to transform linguistic, social, cultural, and political traditions for the purposes of increasing the scope of individual development and democratic operations. Prophetic pragmatism conceives of philosophy as a historically circumscribed quest for wisdom that puts forward new interpretations of the world based on past traditions in order to promote existential sustenance and political relevance. Like Emerson and earlier pragmatists, it views truth as a species of the good, as that which enhances the flourishing of human progress. This does not mean that philosophy ignores the ugly facts and unpleasant realities of life and history. Rather, it highlights these facts and realities precisely because they provoke doubt, curiosity, outrage, or desperation that motivates efforts to overcome them. These efforts take the forms of critique and praxis, forms that attempt to change what is into a better what can be.

Prophetic pragmatism closely resembles and, in some ways, converges with the metaphilosophical perspectives of Antonio Gramsci. Both conceive of philosophical activity as "a cultural battle to transform the popular 'mentality.'" It is not surprising that Gramsci writes:

What the pragmatists wrote about this question merits re-examination. ... they felt real needs and "described" them with an exactness that was not far off the mark, even if they did not succeed in posing the problems fully or in providing a solution. Prophetic pragmatism is inspired by the example of Antonio Gramsci primarily because he is the major twentieth-century philosopher of praxis, power, and provocation without devaluing theory, adopting multidimensional conceptions of power, or reducing provocation to Clausewitzian calculations of warfare. Gramsci's work is historically specific, theoretically engaging, and politically activist in an exemplary manner. His concrete and detailed investigations are grounded in and reflections upon local struggles, yet theoretically sensitive to structural dynamics and international phenomena. He is attuned to the complex linkage of socially constructed identities to human agency while still convinced of the crucial role of the ever-changing forms in class-ridden economic modes of production. Despite his fluid Leninist conception of political organization and mobilization (which downplays the democratic and libertarian values of prophetic pragmatists) and his unswerving allegiance to sophisticated Marxist social theory (which is an indispensable yet ultimately inadequate weapon for prophetic pragmatists), Gramsci exemplifies the critical spirit and oppositional sentiments of prophetic pragmatism.

This is seen most clearly in Gramsci's view of the relation of philosophy to "common sense." For him, the aim of philosophy is not only to become worldly by imposing its elite intellectual views upon people, but to become part of a social movement by nourishing and being nourished by the philosophical views of oppressed people themselves for the aims of social change and personal meaning. Gramsci viewed this mutually critical process in world-historical terms.

From the disintegration of Hegelianism derives the beginning of a new cultural process, different in character from its predecessors, a process in which practical movement and theoretical thought are united (or are trying to unite through a struggle that is both theoretical and practical).

It is not important that this movement had its origins in mediocre philosophical works or, at best, in works that were not philosophical masterpieces. What matters is that a new way of conceiving the world and man is born and that this conception is no longer reserved to the great intellectuals, to professional philosophers, but tends rather to become a popular, mass phenomenon, with a concretely world-wide character, capable of modifying (even if the result includes hybrid combinations) popular thought and mummified popular culture.

One should not be surprised if this beginning arises from the convergence of various elements, apparently heterogeneous... Indeed, it is worth noting that such an overthrow could not but have connections with religion.
Gramsci's bold suggestion here relates elite philosophical activity to the cultures of the oppressed in the name of a common effort for social change. Prophetic pragmatist sensibilities permit (or even encourage) this rejection of the arrogant scientific self-privileging or haughty secular self-images of many modern philosophers and intellectuals. The point here is not that serious contemporary thinkers should surrender their critical intelligence, but rather that they should not demand that all peoples mimic their version of critical intelligence, especially if common efforts for social change can be strengthened. On this point, even the nuanced secularism of Edward Said—the most significant and salient Gramscian critic on the American intellectual scene today—can be questioned. For Gramsci, ideologies of secularism or religions are less sets of beliefs and values, attitudes and sensibilities and more ways of life and ways of struggle manufactured and mobilized by certain sectors of the population in order to legitimate and preserve their social, political, and intellectual powers. Hence, the universities and churches, schools and synagogues, mass media and mosques become crucial terrain for ideological and political contestation. And philosophers are in no way exempt from this fierce battle—even within the "serene" walls and halls of the academy. Similar to the American pragmatist tradition, Gramsci simply suggests that philosophers more consciously posit these battles themselves as objects of investigation and thereby intervene in these battles with intellectual integrity and ideological honesty.

Prophetic pragmatism purports to be not only an oppositional cultural criticism but also a material force for individuality and democracy. By "material force" I simply mean a practice that has some potency and effect or makes a difference in the world. There is—and should be—no such thing as a prophetic pragmatist movement. The translation of philosophic outlook into social motion is not that simple. In fact, it is possible to be a prophetic pragmatist and belong to different political movements, e.g., feminist, Chicano, black, socialist, left-liberal ones. It also is possible to subscribe to prophetic pragmatism and belong to different religious and/or secular traditions. This is so because a prophetic pragmatist commitment to individuality and democracy, historical consciousness and systemic social analyses, and tragic action in an evil-ridden world can take place in—though usually on the margin of—a variety of traditions. The distinctive hallmarks of a prophetic pragmatist are a universal consciousness that promotes an all-embracing democratic and libertarian moral vision, a historical consciousness that acknowledges human finitude and conditionedness, and a critical consciousness which encourages relentless critique and self-criticism for the aims of social change and personal humility.

My own version of prophetic pragmatism is situated within the Christian tradition. Unlike Gramsci, I am religious not simply for political aims but also by personal commitment. To put it crudely, I find existential sustenance in many of the narratives in the biblical scriptures as interpreted by streams in the Christian heritage; and I see political relevance in the biblical focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth. Needless to say, without the addition of modern interpretations of racial and gender equality, tolerance, and democracy, much of the tradition warrants rejection. Yet the Christian epic, stripped of static dogmas and decrepit doctrines, remains a rich source of existential empowerment and political engagement when viewed through modern lenses (indeed the only ones we moderns have).

Like James, Niebuhr, and to some extent Du Bois, I hold a religious conception of pragmatism. I have dubbed it "prophetic" in that it harks back to the Jewish and Christian tradition of prophets who brought urgent and compassionate critique to bear on the evils of their day. The mark of the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage—come what may. Prophetic pragmatism proceeds from this impulse. It neither requires a religious foundation nor entails a religious perspective, yet prophetic pragmatism is compatible with certain religious outlooks.

My kind of prophetic pragmatism is located in the Christian tradition for two basic reasons. First, on the existential level, the self-understanding and self-identity that flow from this tradition's insights into the crises and traumas of life are indispensable for me to remain sane. It holds at bay the sheer absurdity so evident in life, without erasing or eliding the tragedy of life. Like Kierkegaard, whose reflections on Christian faith were so profound yet often/so frustrating, I do not think it possible to put forward rational defenses of one's faith that verify its veracity or even persuade one's critics. Yet it is possible to convey to others the sense of deep emptiness and pervasive meaninglessness one feels if one is not critically aligned with an enabling tradition. One risks not logical inconsistency but actual insanity; the issue is not reason or irrationality but life or death. Of course, the fundamental philosophical question remains whether the Christian gospel is ultimately true. And, as a Christian prophetic pragmatist whose focus is on coping with transient and provisional penultimate matters yet whose hope goes beyond them, I reply in the affirmative, bank my all on it, yet am willing to entertain the possibility in low moments that I may be deluded.

Second, on the political level, the culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious. To be in solidarity with them requires not only an acknowledgment of what they are up against but also an appreciation of how they cope with their situation. This appreciation does not require that one be religious; but if one is religious, one has wider access into their life-worlds. This appreciation also does not entail an uncritical acceptance of religious narratives, their interpretations, or, most important, their often oppressive consequences. Yet to be religious permits one to devote one's life to accenting the prophetic and progressive potential within those
traditions that shape the everyday practices and deeply held perspectives of most oppressed peoples. What a wonderful privilege and vocation this is!

The prophetic religious person, much like C. Wright Mills’s activist intellectual, puts a premium on educating and being educated by struggling peoples, organizing and being organized by resisting groups. This political dimension of prophetic pragmatism as practiced within the Christian tradition impels one to be an organic intellectual, that is, one who revels in the life of the mind yet relates ideas to collective praxis. An organic intellectual, in contrast to traditional intellectuals who often remain comfortably nested in the academy, attempts to be entrenched in and affiliated with organizations, associations, and, possibly, movements of grass-roots folk. Of course, he or she need be neither religious nor linked to religious institutions. Trade unions, community groups, and political formations also suffice. Yet, since the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe, most of the progressive energies among the intelligentsia have shunned religious channels. And in these days of global religious revivals, progressive forces are reaping the whirlwind. Those of us who remain in these religious channels see clearly just how myopic such an antireligious strategy is. The severing of ties to churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques by the left intelligentsia is tantamount to political suicide; it turns the pessimism of many self-deprecating and self-pitying secular progressive intellectuals into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This point was never grasped by C. Wright Mills, though W. E. B. Du Bois understood it well.

Like Gramsci, Du Bois remained intimately linked with oppositional forces in an oppressed community. And in his case, these forces were (and are) often led by prophetic figures of the black Christian tradition. To be a part of the black freedom movement is to rub elbows with some prophetic black preachers and parishioners. And to be a part of the forces of progress in America is to rub up against some of these black freedom fighters.

If prophetic pragmatism is ever to become more than a conversational subject matter for cultural critics in and out of the academy, it must inspire progressive and prophetic social motion. One precondition of this kind of social movement is the emergence of potent prophetic religious practices in churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. And given the historical weight of such practices in the American past, the probable catalyst for social movement will be the prophetic wing of the black church. Need we remind ourselves that the most significant and successful organic intellectual in twentieth-century America—maybe in American history—was a product of and leader in the prophetic wing of the black church? Rarely has a figure in modern history outside of elected public office linked the life of the mind to social change with such moral persuasiveness and political effectiveness.

The social movement led by Martin Luther King Jr., represents the best of what the political dimension of prophetic pragmatism is all about.

Like Sojourner Truth, Walter Rauschenbusch, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Dorothy Day, King was not a prophetic pragmatist. Yet like them he was a prophet, in which role he contributed mightily to the political project of prophetic pragmatism. His all-embracing moral vision facilitated alliances and coalitions across racial, gender, class, and religious lines. His Gandhian method of nonviolent resistance highlighted forms of love, courage, and discipline worthy of a compassionate prophet. And his appropriation and interpretation of American civil religion extended the tradition of American jeremiads, a tradition of public exhortation that joins social criticisms of America to moral renewal and admonishes the country to be true to its founding ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy. King accented the antiracist and anti-imperialist consequences of taking seriously these ideals, thereby linking the struggle for freedom in America to those movements in South Africa, Poland, South Korea, Ethiopia, Chile, and the Soviet Union.

Prophetic pragmatism worships at no ideological altars. It condemns oppression anywhere and everywhere, be it the brutal butchery of third-world dictators, the regimentation and repression of peoples in the Soviet Union and Soviet-bloc countries, or the racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and economic injustice in the first-world capitalist nations. In this way, the precious ideals of individuality and democracy of prophetic pragmatism oppose all those power structures that lack public accountability, be they headed by military generals, bureaucratic party bosses, or corporate tycoons. Nor is prophetic pragmatism confined to any preordained historical agent, such as the working class, black people, or women. Rather, it invites all people of goodwill both here and abroad to fight for an Emersonian culture of creative democracy in which the plight of the wretched of the earth is alleviated.

Prophetic Pragmatism and Postmodernity

Prophetic pragmatism emerges at a particular moment in the history of North Atlantic civilization—the moment of postmodernity. A critical self-inventory of prophetic pragmatism—a historical situating of its emergence and possible development—requires an understanding of this postmodern moment.

Postmodernity can be understood in light of three fundamental historical processes. First, the end of the European Age (1492–1945) shattered European self-confidence and prompted intense self-criticism, even self-contempt. This monumental decentering of Europe produced exemplary intellectual reflections such as the demystifying of European cultural hegemony, the destruction of the Western metaphysical traditions, and the deconstruction of North Atlantic philosophical systems. Second, in the wake of European devastation and decline and upon the eclipse of
European domination, the United States of America emerged as the world power with respect to military might, economic prosperity, political direction, and cultural production. Third, the advent of national political independence in Asia and Africa signaled the first stage of the decolonization of the third world.

Much of the current "postmodernism" debate, be it in architecture, literature, painting, photography, criticism, or philosophy, highlights the themes of difference, marginality, otherness, transgression, disruption, and simulation. Unfortunately, most of the treatments of these issues remain narrowly focused on the European and Euro-American predicament. For example, Jean-François Lyotard’s celebrated and influential book *The Postmodern Condition* defines postmodernism as a progressive loss of faith in master narratives, e.g., religion, Marxism, liberalism; a rejection of representation in epistemic outlook; and a demand for radical artistic experimentation. For Lyotard, postmodernism becomes a recurring moment within the modern that is performative in character and aesthetic in content. The major sources from which Lyotard borrows—Kant’s notion of the sublime and Wittgenstein’s idea of language games—are deployed to promote certain modernist practices, namely, nonrepresentational, experimental techniques and viewpoints that shun and shatter quests for wholeness and totality.

Although both Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault reject the term "postmodernism," their philosophies are widely viewed as major examples of postmodern thought. As with their fellow Frenchman Lyotard, Eurocentric frameworks and modernist loyalties loom large in the work of Derrida and Foucault. Derrida’s deconstructionist version of poststructuralism accents the transgressive and disruptive aspects of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Mallarmé and Artaud. As an Algerian Jew in a French Catholic (and anti-Semitic) society, Derrida attacks the major philosophic traditions of the West in the form of fascinating though ultimately monotonous deconstructions. This version of relentless skepticism toward logical consistency and theoretical coherence, which refuses to entertain or encourage novel reconstructions, may be symptomatic of the relative political impotence of marginal peoples, their inability to creatively transform and build on the ambiguous legacy of the Age of Europe.

Foucault provides rich social and historical substance to contemporary inquiries into the operations of otherness and marginality in his studies on the insane and the incarcerated. But even the "others" he investigates remain within European (usually French) boundaries. His heroes, like those of Derrida, are transgressive modernists such as Nietzsche and Bataille. Needless to say, the prominent opponents of "postmodernism"—Jürgen Habermas from the moderate left and Hilton Kramer from the far right—invoke past European projects, that is, the German Enlightenment and Anglo-American modernism, respectively.

Noteworthy attempts to broaden the "postmodernism" debate from its current focus on architecture and painting to post–World War II American cultural practices and artifacts in general can be seen in the work of William Spanos and the early Paul Bové. In their illuminating neohumanist readings of American poets like Wallace Stevens, Robert Creeley, and Charles Olson, postmodern formulations of temporality, difference, and heterogeneity are put forward. Yet both Spanos and Bové remain at the level of philosophic outlooks and artistic strategies; that is, they understand postmodernism as a complex set of sensibilities, styles, or worldviews. This observation holds for the pioneering work of Rosalind Krauss.

The significant breakthroughs of Fredric Jameson, Craig Owens, Hal Foster, and Andreas Huyssen are to push the "postmodernism" debate beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries, insulated artistic practices, and vague pronouncements of men and women of letters. Instead of viewing "postmodernism" as a set of styles, sensibilities, or viewpoints, they posit "postmodernism" as a social category, a cultural dominant. They understand "postmodernism" as embracing certain exemplary social and cultural responses to new structural and institutional processes at work in the world.

For example, Jameson views such prevalent social and cultural features as depthlessness, ubiquitous images and simulacra, waning historical consciousness, escalating emotional intensities, schizophrenic subjects, and the breakdown of the distinction between high and low cultures as having been shaped by and as shaping advanced capitalist societies in which commodity production has a hold over all spheres of contemporary life. The important point here is not whether one fully agrees with Jameson’s laundry list of postmodern constitutive characteristics or whether one approves of his treatments of individual cultural artifacts. Rather, what is salutary about Jameson’s project is that he forces the debate to become more consciously historical, social, political, and ideological. Jameson helps situate the emergence of the "postmodernism" debate in relation to larger developments in society and history by providing a heuristic framework (in his case, a Marxist one) that discloses its broader significance.

Prophetic pragmatism arrives on the scene as a particular American intervention conscious and critical of its roots, and radically historical and political in its outlook. Furthermore, it gives prominence to the plight of those peoples who embody and enact the "postmodern" themes of degraded otherness, subjected alienness, and subaltern marginality, that is, the wretched of the earth (poor peoples of color, women, workers). Prophetic pragmatism is a deeply American response to the end of the Age of Europe, the emergence of the United States as the world power, and the decolonization of the third world. The response is "American" not simply because it appropriates and promotes the major American tradition of cultural criticism, but also because it is shaped by the immediate
Another intellectual legacy of the sixties is the American obsession with theories from continental Europe. These theories internationalized American humanistic discourses, yet also turned American intellectuals away from their own national traditions of thought. Only in historiography did American intellectuals dig deep to recover and revise the understanding of the U.S. past in light of those on its underside. A final legacy was the onslaught of forms of popular culture, such as TV and film, on highbrow literate culture. Academic humanists were rendered marginal to the intellectual life of the country, displaced by journalists usually ill-equipped for the task yet eager to speak to an ever-growing middlebrow audience.

The academic inclusion on a grand scale of the students of color, working-class origins, and women produced ideologies of institutional pluralism to mediate between the clashing methods and perspectives in the structurally fragmented humanistic departments and programs. Dissensus reigned and reigns supreme. Pluralism served both to contain and often to conceal unsolvable ideological conflict; yet it also ensured a few slots for ambitious and upwardly mobile young left professors enchanted with their bold oppositional rhetoric even as they remained too anxious to retain their professional-managerial class status to be anything but politically innocuous in larger American society. The influential conservative strategy was to attack this academic inclusion of the "new barbarians" in the name of standards, tradition, and cultural literacy. Ironically, both the right and left critics posit academicism and commercialism as major culprits in American intellectual life.

Prophetic pragmatism is a form of American left thought and action in our postmodern moment. It is deeply indebted to the continental traveling theories such as Marxism, structuralism, and poststructuralism, yet it remains in the American grain. It is rooted in the best of American radicalism but refuses to be simply another polemical position on the ideological spectrum. Prophetic pragmatism calls for reinvigoration of a sane, sober, and sophisticated intellectual life in America and for regeneration of social forces empowering the disadvantaged, degraded, and dejected. It rejects the faddish cynicism and fashionable conservatism rampant in the intelligentsia and general populace. Prophetic pragmatism rests upon the conviction that the American evasion of philosophy is not an evasion of serious thought and moral action. Rather such evasion is a rich and revisable tradition that serves as the occasion for cultural criticism and political engagement in the service of an Emersonian culture of creative democracy.