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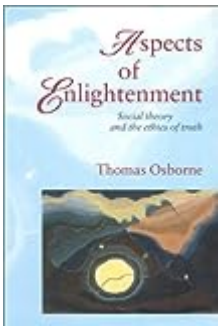

Thomas Osborne. *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and the Ethics of Truth.* Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xv + 216 pp. $34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-9078-7; $104.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9077-0.

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A Third Path toward Enlightenment Truth

We go to the bottom of scandals because there at the bottom is the truth – even if we have to be bottom feeders to find it. Or, we gaze at television in moral superiority at the hidden truths of some people's most personal lives; this is all about truth, right? Aren't we all "all about" truth? Yet in academic settings we teachers of the humanities and social sciences scuttle in and out of classrooms, seemingly less and less inclined to talk about "truth" except under great qualifications, served in a heavy sauce of irony or pickled in cynicism. On the other hand, if blindsided by the postmodern challenge of metatheory and metanarrative to admit truth only as a discursive practice, we reassert our belief in truth and raise our voices above the clamor of the deconstructionist carnival. These two groups – the postmodern solipsists and the fideistic realists – are the targets of this book by Thomas Osborne, Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bristol. He offers a worthwhile, at times provocative, third path between faddish cynicism and simple but equally fashionable reassertion of belief. Intended for social scientists and social theorists, the book is an encouragement to this historian looking for a challenging voice in the debate that centers on the question: under what circumstances and with what justifications can we, as academics, tell the truth?

The book is also an homage to the less well-known ethicist Michel Foucault, critic of social theory and of enlightenment (p. x). For Osborne, Foucault is a moralist in the tradition of (surprise!) Kant, and Osborne wants to examine the Enlightenment as a self-conscious opposition to, or criticism of, the taken-for-granted (p. x). This critical task is the most interesting and most difficult aspect of academic work (pp. 39, 52). For Osborne, this pursuit of truth, but without any foundational commitment to a Truth that cannot be scrutinized, is "enlightenment." Inspired by but not identical with the age of Enlightenment, this "enlightenment" is an ethos for social theory, and social theory is "the discipline that reflects on the character of enlightenment" (p. 181).

The Enlightenment might model a rational critique of all systems, even (as postmodernism suggests) rationalism itself. Postmodernism (represented particularly by Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman) calls academics back to critique, while realism serves us best as critique of our irrationalist bent (194). Conservative fideists of realism

should realize that it's just not enough, as many critics of postmodernism have done, to follow Samuel Johnson's half-volley, "Thus I refute anti-foundationalism." In the middle chapters Osborne examines three disciplinary areas (science, the therapeutic-theories of the self, and art) whose status as sources of truth have been seriously challenged. He suggests for each how they might benefit from a renewed commitment to an enlightened pursuit of truth.

But Osborne's most challenging and stimulating discussion is woven throughout the book in his discussion of the role of the intellectual. He exhorts the intellectual to be a "creative outsider", a "fool" (p. 152), agreeing with Einstein that, if an idea does not at first seem absurd, it is not worth serious consideration. Intellectuals work best as "unevenly developed types" in unevenly developed places (pp. 158-9). Weren't Foucault and Max Weber critics of modernity? Yet they represent two important kinds of intellectual outsiders. Foucault was a modern cynic living life as a "scandal of truth" (p. 129), pursuing critique as "voluntary inservitude" to the powers of modernity (p. 134). Weber suspected evil at the heart of the modern bureaucratic society; we can't turn back on Enlightenment reason, but that reason is not a source of ethical solutions to the world. Osborne seems content with the existential claim: we are free, and therefore responsible "to create the conditions of our own freedom" (p. 145).

Osborne wonders if his admonitions for intellectuals and for the University as a proper place for them are naive and too late (p. 172). Like American historian David Harlan (*The Degradation of American History*), Osborne laments that the University has become a research center where instruction rather than teaching encourages both professors and students to join in the "exploitation of the world" (p. 183, quoting Michael Oakeshott).

What of the extreme rejections of modernity found in conservative "philosophies of loss" represented by MacIntyre, as well as postmodern philosophies of emancipation in the hands of Bauman? In their own ways both ask, "How can we be ethical within the continuing crisis of Western rationality?" Osborne would rather we ask, how do we judge and think in an ethical manner" (pp. 191-2)? Despite the claims that the Western crisis stems from the collapse of reason, such debates over the nature of truth exhibit the endurance of enlightenment, not its demise (p. 194).

At times Osborne's writing is provocative and clear, and on such a subject gratefully so. But occasionally sections are cumbersome and the language obscure (chapter 4 particularly so), or written in high academic jargon (for examples, see pp. 24, 35-6, 193). A few misprints (pp. 21, 105, 122, 171) mar an otherwise handsomely printed book. Still, this stimulating book's exhortation rings clearly. Like David Harlan, Osborne is less concerned about truth than the rational, skeptical pursuit of truth. When guaranteed by commitments to honest self-scrutiny, rationality and evidence sifting, this kind of concern for truth is fine. However, the benefits of doubt, and giving Osborne the benefit of the doubt, require something more than a commitment to truth. If we are to make a case for an academic ethos of truth, could we not also demand love of others, a love properly called because, in this pursuit of truth, it will not tolerate harm to the dignity of one's academic colleagues and others? How might such a love be reconciled to doubt? That is a challenging ethos for academics, one certain to be judged untimely and foolish.

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