

# **Three Intellectual Histories of Modernity:**

## **Arendt, Blumenberg, and Dewey**

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**Abstract:** Much of twentieth-century political philosophy can be seen as a polarized debate shuttling back and forth between two extreme positions. On the one hand we have a bold ‘rationalism’ characteristic of liberal political reflection dominant in recent German and North American philosophy. At the other extreme an ‘irrationalism’ qualifies much work in recent French theory. One source of this polarization is a common intellectual history employed by both sets of political theorists. As is the case with recent political philosophy, much recent intellectual history vacillates between pro-Enlightenment optimism and anti-Enlightenment pessimism. To flesh out these contrasts, I juxtapose an unlikely pair of intellectual historians also influential on political philosophical thought: Hannah Arendt and Hans Blumenberg. I locate in Blumenberg an over-confidence in modernity’s employment of reason. In Arendt I find a too-pessimistic suspicion of reason coupled with a romantic conception of natality. The error common to both is a Weberian simplification: they understand modernity in univocal terms as an age of relentless rationalization. Herein Blumenberg sees an important promise while Arendt discerns a terrible risk. My assessment confirms Bruno Latour’s insight: “Except for the plus or minus sign, moderns and antimoderns share all the same convictions.” We should be dissatisfied with both approaches. I conclude by urging a reconsideration of John Dewey’s pragmatism which steers an intellectual historical course between Blumenbergian optimism and Arendtian pessimism. Rooted in this more plausible intellectual historical frame, pragmatist political philosophy is able to avoid the extremes characteristic of much contemporary theory.

## Interpreting and Evaluating Modernity: Politics and History

My arguments here are motivated by the thought that political philosophy cannot proceed without intellectual history: *a politics without history is blind, just as a history without politics is empty*. In line with this thought I here sketch in thick outlines the historical background for some of the deeper political transformations we have enacted during the modern age. Taking modernity into historical account provides a frame through which to view the political problematics defining our times. I aim to describe central trajectories of modernity in a way that throws into relief some of the more serious drawbacks of assumptions too common amongst intellectual historians of modernity. These drawbacks, I argue, are overcome by philosophical pragmatism, which offers the outlines of a viable and valuable alternative intellectual history of modernity.

Though my aim is to provide a vantage from which to critique central aspects modernity, I do not critique the modern from a simple anti-modern perspective. Such a critique would put on full display the excesses of a theoretical attitude that is itself deeply complicit with pro-modern perspectives. In addition to perpetrating anachronisms, what the anti-modern perspective too often ignores is that we have in fact been modern. A straightforward pro-modern perspective is as equally anachronistic. My reservations regarding the modern attitude are not over what modernity has accomplished, but rather what it may continue to accomplish in the future. The point is neither to congratulate nor castigate ourselves for what we have been doing, but rather to better understand our potential futures within the historical contexts illuminating the problems we have generated for ourselves. A perspective oriented by the future can neither fully accept nor fully reject the past.

What I aim to provide is a vantage for critiquing modernity without relying on a revolutionism that refutes it *in toto*: in this way I steer between the problems besetting both anti-modernism and pro-modernism. I show first that modernity contains alternatives to the *disciplinary rationalization* that has been its major trajectory. I refer to this alternative as *democratic experimentation*. I then argue that the experimentalist alternative to rationalization must be made manifest throughout culture, in both epistemic and political practices at the same time. Abandoning disciplinary rationalization cannot take place if we accept rationalization's own attempt to carve up modern culture into separable scientific and political spheres, dissociated economies of knowledge and power. Unfortunately, intellectual historians are too often tempted to do just this. Acknowledging the inherent reciprocity of power and knowledge clarifies the fact that the troubling assumptions pervading modernity cannot be avoided by simply extending either modern political liberalism or modern scientific inquiry. The best promises of the democratic alternative can be realized only if we accept that democracy is a way of life in which the totality of culture is suffused.

I will proceed as follows. I will first flesh out the disciplinary rationalization that most commentators accept as everywhere qualifying the modern age. I will then turn to two characteristic, and characteristically flawed, assessments of modern rationalization. I shall finally explore the democratic

experimentalist alternative to rationalization which most intellectual historians and political philosophers tend to overlook. Here the work of John Dewey is essential.

### Quintessences of Modernity

I can best sketch the experimentalist aspect of the intellectual history of modernity by way of contrasting it to a historiographical terrain mapped out by an unlikely pair of influential, but still underappreciated, thinkers: Hans Blumenberg and Hannah Arendt. Both Blumenberg and Arendt are equally philosopher and historian. Taken together they provide a useful contrast for beginning to think beyond some of the more politically ineffective interpretations of modernity. While the differences between Blumenberg and Arendt over the legitimacy of the modern age run deep, they share an even deeper consensus on the constitution of modernity as an epoch of rationalization. This confirms Bruno Latour's insight that "[e]xcept for the plus or minus sign, moderns and antimoderns share all the same convictions."<sup>1</sup> My experimentalist *evaluation* of modernity cuts through both the optimism of Blumenberg and the pessimism of Arendt—this is possible because I depart from their shared *interpretation* of modernity as thoroughly rationalizing.

Blumenberg and Arendt provide a useful juxtaposition insofar as their respective optimism and pessimism are representative of two major tendencies of thought in late twentieth century assessments of modernity.<sup>2</sup> Arendt's critique of quintessential modern mentalities exhibits tendencies manifest in Adorno and Horkheimer's totalizing critique of the enlightenment, Heidegger's anti-modern philosophical nostalgia, and countless other variations on the same theme.<sup>3</sup> Although it may sound odd to describe Arendt as an anti-modern pessimist, my point is that she is pessimistic regarding the prospects of modern forms of living. Opposed to too-critical pessimisms, Blumenberg's optimistic interpretation of modernity can be usefully read alongside Habermas's reply to Adorno and Horkheimer: it is high time to abandon the failing subject-centered rationalism formulated by Descartes and Kant and substitute a new rationalism that makes good on the promises of modern enlightenment. Habermas envisions a reconstruction of modernity's central concepts in terms consistent with what Blumenberg describes as the essential modern tendency: self-assertion.<sup>4</sup> Neither Blumenberg nor Habermas are optimistic about modernity in the sense that they believe that everything has gone as well as it possibly could have. Their optimism consists rather in the idea that the central trajectory of modernity should

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<sup>1</sup> Latour 1991, 123

<sup>2</sup> My reading of modernity across Blumenberg and Arendt is not an attempt to establish definitive critiques of two thinkers obviously so productive for political and historical reflection. Engagement loses all value in the mode of pure refutation. My intention is merely to hold up Blumenberg's and Arendt's respective theories of modernity as exemplars of two opposing views that today constitute a fairly strict alternative for historically-informed political reflection.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno 1947, and Heidegger 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jay 1985, 195

not be abandoned: “instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity.”<sup>5</sup>

The shared interpretation of modernity that frames both the optimistic and pessimistic evaluations can be located through the profoundly influential work of Max Weber.<sup>6</sup> On Weber’s account, modernity is an age undergoing the disenchanting process of rationalization. Modernity sought to preserve authority, whose older enchanted forms were increasingly disintegrating ever since the fifteenth century, by way of a separation of cultural practices into autonomous value-spheres such as that of science and politics. Science and politics are purified of one another so that each can accomplish its own standards autonomously: each becomes its own independent vocation or calling with its own isolated set of experts and bureaucracy.<sup>7</sup> This is the meaning of Weber’s bold assertion that “[o]ur age is characterized by rationalization.”<sup>8</sup>

Weber described rationalization as an “iron cage” in which modernity is inextricably “bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism.”<sup>9</sup> And yet he also urged that rationalization presents us with precarious opportunities: “The fate of an epoch which has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the meaning of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect; it must rather be in a position to create this meaning itself.”<sup>10</sup> Optimists like Blumenberg believe that rationalization provides sufficient opportunity for a self-assertive creation of the values demanded by the complexities of modern life. Pessimists like Arendt see rationalization as instituting insuperable obstacles to the distinctly human project of creating the shared meanings that sustain life in a common world. Blumenberg describes modernity’s univocal rationalization as the triumph of ‘self-assertion’ while Arendt sees it as the ultimate degradation of ‘political action’—so both accept Weber’s *interpretation* of modernity as an age of rationalization as the frame for their *evaluation* of modernity in normative terms.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Habermas 1981a, 11

<sup>6</sup> Charles Turner claims that in all the recent debates between pro-moderns and anti-moderns, “the name of Max Weber has hovered in the background” (1992, 8).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Weber 1919a, 1919b; for a recent interpretation of modernity in terms of such rationalizing ‘modalization’ or ‘purification’ see Jay 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Weber 1919a, 30

<sup>9</sup> Weber 1905, 181. In describing universal qualities that pervade modern practice, Weber renews a tradition of philosophical reflection on modernity perfected by the absolutism embodied in the philosophies of history authored by Kant, Hegel, and Marx (cf. Heller 1999, 19-39).

<sup>10</sup> Weber 1904, 57

<sup>11</sup> “Both Blumenberg and Arendt agree that it is the mentality of *homo faber* which guides the emergence of the new science and that this mentality consists precisely in the relinquishing of the measure of truth as *adequatio* in the modern reconstruction of the world” (Brient 2000, 523). To my knowledge, Brient is the only scholar who has yet addressed in any depth the interesting conceptual relations between Arendt and Blumenberg. I have profited very much from her work in formulating my own version of this contrast even though I differ from her on many points.

If defenders of modernity's progress are willing to endure rationalization to save knowledge, critics of modern progress are willing to abandon knowledge to escape rationalization. The problem with both positions is that they too readily hold freedom and intelligence at a theoretical distance from one another. Cultivating synergies between freedom and intelligence enables us to move past the stale inactivity of the pessimists and the brazen confidence of the optimists. Undervalued practices of experimentalism have, throughout the modern age, sought to articulate such synergies.

The nascent experimentalism that I detect in modernity is championed by pragmatist intellectual historians such as John Dewey. Dewey saw modernity as held captive by two irreconcilable quests: the intellectual quest for certainty and the experimental quest for practical wisdom.<sup>12</sup> While the quest for certainty is distinctive of modernity, this project institutes no deep breaks from the ambition for transcendence that has characterized Western civilization since the Socratic beginnings of philosophy. The quest for certainty is simply philosophy's classic quest for purity revamped. Modern rationalization thus remains importantly different from modern experimentation insofar as the former embraces forms of self-assertion aiming at theoretical certainties that free us from the vicissitudes of practice while the latter focuses on the synergistic interplay between theory and practice. Pragmatism is clearly in favor of exploring the uncertain shapes of our theory-practice complexes rather than delimiting theoretical ranges of purity.

The experimentalism embraced by pragmatists provides a strong contrast to both Blumenbergian optimism and Arendtian pessimism. Pessimism is the view that things will likely turn out badly, optimism that they will likely turn out well; pragmatism's meliorist hope is the attitude that we can through our own personal contribution create a future that is better than the present.<sup>13</sup> What pragmatist experimentalism focuses on, which optimists and pessimists are both blind to, are modern practices in which freedom and intelligence are woven together with a density supporting the creation of ever more democratic forms of existence. Pragmatist intellectual history simply encourages us to stop thinking of modernity as nothing but a rationalizing project. Such a historical interpretation—which is certainly not unique to pragmatism alone<sup>14</sup>—enables us to get over the brazen optimism and defeatist pessimism of critics of modern

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dewey 1929; for another way of drawing the contrast between Weberians and Deweyans see Kloppenberg 1986, 298-417 (esp. 386ff.).

<sup>13</sup> For more on the centrality of meliorism in pragmatism see Koopman 2006.

<sup>14</sup> I find the interpretations and evaluations of modernity offered by pragmatists such as Dewey resonant with the work of genealogists such as Foucault. In the final section I will briefly explore a few of these similarities in order to shed light both on the contemporary viability of Dewey's project as well as on ways in which Foucault's project should be located in current debates in intellectual history. While the former aim is my broader project in this essay, the latter aim is useful in counteracting the common and I believe mistaken tendency of lumping Foucault in with the anti-modern pessimists (cf. Bernstein 1991, Rorty 1989, Habermas 1985, and Fraser 1981). Useful alternative interpretations better emphasize the positive aspects of Foucault's political thought (cf. Ashenden and Owen 1999, Simons 1995, Hoy 2005). I suggest that Foucault's more positive meliorism can be glimpsed by emphasizing his similarities with a thinker never accused of pessimism.

culture and get down to the novel experiments in living through which we can build a more democratic future.

### **Blumenberg's Pro-Modern Optimism**

There are three essential characteristics of Blumenberg's account of modern 'self-assertion'. All of these are captured in Robert Wallace's succinct definition of self-assertion as "the determination to make what we can of our lives in this world, in view of the absence of any intelligible divine 'order' that we can adhere to or to strive toward."<sup>15</sup> The three qualities of Blumenberg's modernity are: 1) the factic world as signaling the absence of divine order; 2) the felt need for a new order which is produced by this divine absence; and 3) the recognition of human knowledge as fulfilling this felt need by way of constituting order through its own means.<sup>16</sup> Facing the abyssal lack of a God who prepares the world for good living, those at the threshold of modernity saw a need to locate this preparatory power in themselves.

Knowledge, Blumenberg asserts, was thus dissociated by the moderns from its traditional conceptualization as adequation or correspondence to reality. In modernity, knowledge assumes the status of the "hypothetical". Blumenberg claims that "method emerges as artfulness and self-defense against the metaphysical difference between its object and those of the rest of knowledge; it has the basic character of invention, compensating for a constitutional defect in man, rather than of self-measurement against the given... The highly artificial character of the hypotheses introduced under these circumstances escapes the criterion of adequacy to the object".<sup>17</sup> On such a view, modernity is a legitimate response to inherited problems. In the same vein, Habermas writes that "[m]odernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*... An unprecedented modernity, open to the future, anxious for novelty, can only fashion its criteria out of itself."<sup>18</sup> But what both Blumenberg and Habermas in their own ways fail to sufficiently address are the specific qualities of the experimentation necessary to the kind of self-assertion that will not find itself doomed to a world-weary rationalization.

The value of Blumenberg's approach is to seek in modernity a radical practical experimentalism. Yet he too readily identifies this experimentalism with what looks like rationalization and he thus sees experimentalism practically everywhere. What this obscures are the pernicious forms of rationalization that throughout modernity have clipped the wings of experimentalism's flight. This is exemplified in Blumenberg's redescription of Descartes as a philosopher of self-assertion. The Cartesian "art of hypothesis" is a valuable novelty that

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<sup>15</sup> Wallace 1984, 99

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Blumenberg 1976, 139, 208, Brient 2000, 522ff., and Brient 2001, 22ff..

<sup>17</sup> Blumenberg 1976, 201, cf. 154

<sup>18</sup> Habermas 1985, 7, 41; following this Habermas explicitly refers to Blumenberg as one who defends "the legitimacy or the *proper right*" of modernity in this its fundamental project.

Blumenberg employs to convincingly state an affinity between Cartesian certainty and Galilean experimentalism: both are constructions of the modern mind.<sup>19</sup> Yet such a grouping ignores the radical differences separating Cartesian rationalization from Galilean experimentation.

Descartes indeed theorized and practiced a form of rationalizing experimentalism, but there is a world of difference between Galileo's worldly experimentalism and Descartes's worldless one.<sup>20</sup> The new Cartesian method is not developed in conversation with the world and is therefore not an artifact of practice, but rather an apriori construction of theory. If this is experimentalism, it is certainly not an experimentalism that aims to introduce differences into the known world. In assuming certainty as its goal the Cartesian project abandons experimentalism's worldly uncertainty. Descartes writes that he "decided to leave our world wholly for [the philosophers] to argue about, and to speak solely of what would happen in a new world." He could then "live as solitary and withdrawn as I would in the most remote of deserts."<sup>21</sup> This strategy is perfectly dramatized by Descartes in the first paragraph of the second chapter of *Discourse on Method* where he describes his retreat to the small room and warm stove where he would perform his *Meditations* in complete isolation from the political and scientific wars being waged outside. Given the theatrics of this setting, it is no surprise that Descartes would arrive at an initial conclusion that would handicap from the very beginning his entire philosophical project with a world-weary subjectivism: "Among [my own thoughts] one of the first I examined was that often there is less perfection in works composed of several separate pieces and made by different masters, than in those at which only one person had worked."<sup>22</sup> Descartes's later attempt to return back to the intersubjective world carrying the benefits of subjective certainty over the threshold of his isolation has defined one of the core problems driving the philosophical discourse of modernity. Modern philosophy has never succeeded in this quest.

In the philosophy of Kant, Blumenberg finds the apotheosis of this modern project of the self-construction of knowledge. Blumenberg writes, "Kant's critique concentrated all directed, purposeful processes in man's rational action, and this meant that the world could participate in this sort of directedness only by becoming a substrate subject to man's purposes."<sup>23</sup> But if both Kant and Galileo construct the conditions for knowledge, Kant constructs a rational certainty that appears impossible in our world, while Galileo constructs observations of how our

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Blumenberg 1976, 207

<sup>20</sup> Pippin notes that Blumenberg's "unusual" reading "grounds many of Descartes' theoretical claims in a practical intention," thus stressing "the practical origins of modernity" (Pippin 1987, 545, 546; cf. Brient 2001, 24, Brient 2000 and Wallace 1984, 102).

<sup>21</sup> Descartes 1637b, 132 and 1637a, III.52-3.

<sup>22</sup> Descartes 1637a, II.35-6

<sup>23</sup> Blumenberg 1976, 214; continuing: "In its metaphorical usage, the expression 'unfinished world' no longer legitimates human action by reference to a prescribed definition and obligatory role in nature. Rather, the transcendental turning requires that the world must be 'unfinished', and thus material at man's disposal, because this is a condition of the possibility of human action."

actions can introduce changes into the world.<sup>24</sup> In moral philosophy, for example, Kant is forced to postulate human immortality as the condition of the possibility of rational practical certainty. As Kant saw it, an unworldly eternity, not a worldly temporality, provides the only horizon sufficient to morality: “The perfect fit of the will to moral law is holiness, which is a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable.”<sup>25</sup>

If Kant epitomizes the retreat from the world initiated by Descartes, then Hegel is the usual next in line in the canonical procession. For it was Hegel who wrote that “[p]hilosophy is an isolated sanctuary and its ministers form an isolated order of priests, [who] are untroubled by how it goes with the world.”<sup>26</sup> Hegel here clarifies the deeper meaning of optimism in regards to modern rationalization: the major paradigm for modern philosophy is not experimental knowing, but a deferent kneeling to cool intellect.

### **Arendt’s Anti-Modern Pessimism**

While Blumenberg’s theme of self-assertion is indeed worth emphasizing, locating it in the rationalisms of Descartes and Kant spreads it too thin to be of much value in the project of highlighting those aspects of modernity that we ought to embrace. In Arendt we find a similar mischaracterization, although in inverse form.

In Arendt’s version of modernity, as in Blumenberg’s, “the test of theory became a ‘practical’ one... Theory became hypothesis, and the success of the hypothesis became truth.”<sup>27</sup> The problem, she argues, is that the practical test of theory abandons the world as its context. For Blumenberg, this abandonment of truth as adequation in favor of truth as successful hypothesis is to be celebrated; for Arendt, it is to be deplored because it implies abandoning the world itself along with any intrinsic values embedded within it.<sup>28</sup> But what Arendt’s critique ignores is the capacity of humans to create their own values. An important difference we made in modernity was that in our experimental moods we saw that our values need not be dictated *by* the world itself but could rather be created through better living *in* the world. The modern world really can be the situation and field for our creation of values.

Arendt seems to miss this crucial point where she argues that modern natural science looks at “earth-bound nature from a truly universal viewpoint, that

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<sup>24</sup> “Blumenberg is right that Kant has avoided an opposition between theoretical curiosity and self-knowledge, or between science and salvation, but he did not do so by connecting the two themes. Indeed, he avoided this framework by even more decisively separating the realms, by ‘detaching’ the subjective ‘conditions’ for knowledge from the human, *acting* subject, and that separation is far more his legacy to the contemporary world” (Pippin 1987, 553).

<sup>25</sup> Kant 1788, 122

<sup>26</sup> Hegel 1821, 297. Habermas comments on this quote, saying that for Hegel, “[p]hilosophy cannot instruct the world about how it ought to be; only reality as it is reflected in its concepts” (1985, 43).

<sup>27</sup> Arendt 1958, 278

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Brient 2001, 27ff.



is, from an Archimedean standpoint taken, willfully and explicitly, outside the earth.”<sup>29</sup> On her narrative, the common world fundamental to pre-modern experience was abandoned by the moderns in favor of mathematical and instrumental representations of the world.<sup>30</sup> Facing the problem of a world with no apparent inherent order, “[t]he Cartesian solution... was to move the Archimedean point into man himself.”<sup>31</sup> Human thought thus achieves competency in a subjective rationality which replaces the objective divinization of the pre-moderns. Descartes’ rational man is not a God and yet is still the foundation of human knowledge and action. The essence of knowledge is no longer correspondence to the real, but rather the certainty of self-reflective subjectivity’s creations.

Arendt is right to be concerned with the world alienation implicit in this philosophic perspective. While Blumenberg conceives Descartes as a figure who imposes order upon the world (rather than passively accepting it from the world), Arendt more plausibly reads him as a figure who abandons the world altogether in a rationalizing quest for certainty. And so for Arendt, “world alienation... has been the hallmark of the modern age.”<sup>32</sup> Coupled with this remarkable insight is an equally remarkable mistake: Arendt attributes world alienation to Galileo as well as to Descartes.

Referring to Galileo’s revolution in astronomy she writes: “We have found a way to act on the earth and within terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from outside, from the Archimedean point.”<sup>33</sup> While Galileo surely makes it plausible to conduct experiments from an extra-terrestrial perspective (denying the privileged position of the earth in the universe), it would be a severe mistake to regard this as world-alienation. All he dispenses with is the concept of a privileged point for experimental measurement and in this he anticipates relativity theory. Replacing a substantive concept of matter with a relational ontology and metaphysics, relativity theory implies the very opposite of what Arendt asserts. The world is not abandoned by the experimentalist, but is reoccupied from a perspective of purposive action. We can only alienate ourselves from the world if we hope to achieve a knowledge that is of no relevance to life on earth. Arendt writes that “it is in the nature of the human surveying capacity that it can function only if man disentangles himself from all involvement in and concern with the close at hand and withdraws himself to a distance from everything near him.”<sup>34</sup> But it is difficult to imagine a figure more concerned with the close at hand than Galileo. His telescope may have gazed deep into the heavens, but the decisive difference he introduced was precisely the telescope which he held in the very hands that had fashioned it. The tool use of *homo faber* which Arendt so deplors

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<sup>29</sup> Arendt 1958, 11

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Arendt 1958, 249-52, 284

<sup>31</sup> Arendt 1958, 284

<sup>32</sup> Arendt 1958, 254

<sup>33</sup> Arendt 1958, 262, cf. 265

<sup>34</sup> Arendt 1958, 251

is precisely that which puts us in more effective touch with the world, rather than that which isolates us from the world.

Arendt correctly diagnoses in modern science a tendency toward the world-loss entailed by rationalization. Yet these are only tendencies, albeit quite pronounced ones. Things can in fact proceed other directions. Arendt's totalizing narrative thus misrepresents tendencies as inevitabilities. A similar totalizing rejection of modernity is apparent in her critique of the rise of a social economy of divided labor.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, throughout her work Arendt manifests an unfortunate inability to recognize any affiliation between instrumental thinking and political action.<sup>36</sup> As Mary Dietz perceptively notes, "Arendt's politics cannot embrace performance as the carrying out or active pursuit of purposes in the very world it strives to vitalize."<sup>37</sup> Arendt, like so many anti-moderns, is blind to the freedom immanent in experimental intelligence.

One of the most poignant expressions of this anti-modernism is Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here modern thought is described in categorical terms as domination: "Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination... Being is apprehended in terms of manipulation and administration."<sup>38</sup> Both world and self are fully subsumed under a totalizing logic of absolute mastery. There is no escaping the pervasive grip of enlightenment's dialectic: "Everyone must show that they identify wholeheartedly with the power which beats them... The entire human being has become at once the subject and the object of repression... Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures... Anyone who resists can survive only by being incorporated."<sup>39</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno can nowhere find frictional surfaces that enable them to grip resistance. Even when they turn to art, a traditional locus of experimentalism for moderns, they find little to cheer.<sup>40</sup> Their conclusion is that freedom is *always* illusory: "As far as any decisions are still left to individuals, they are effectively decided in advance."<sup>41</sup> David Hoy succinctly summarizes their extreme pessimism: "What is to be criticized is not

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Arendt 1958, 126

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Arendt 1958, 3

<sup>37</sup> Dietz 1994, 879, continuing, "Arendt surrenders the ability analytically to grasp the difference between instrumental action as utilitarian objectification and instrumental action as, in Weil's [or Dewey's] sense, purposeful performance" (cf. Dietz 2002, 5, 135ff. and Brient 2001, 30; the bracketed comment regarding Dewey is mine and for more on Dewey in this sense see Hickman 2001, 129-57).

<sup>38</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1947, 96, 65

<sup>39</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1947, 124, 169, 21, 104; cf. Habermas 1985, 110 and Honneth 1982, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Defining the "commodity character of art," they argue that aesthetic freedom ("negation of the social utility which is establishing itself through the market") is in fact "essentially conditioned by the commodity economy" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947, 127). And, finally, ferreting out any Kantian romantics still hanging around they claim that "[i]n the demand for entertainment and relaxation, purpose has finally consumed the realm of purposelessness" (128). Adorno's later aesthetic theory is not so pessimistic.

<sup>41</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 1947, 169

simply a rationalistic conception of science, but the rationalism of the entire modern era.”<sup>42</sup>

Such pessimistic visions can draw strength in dark moments only from a utopian vision of a revolutionary break with the modern. For anti-moderns, the only potential escape from the dreaded grip of rationalization is through events that are categorically unpredictable: the epitome of this is Heidegger’s famous plea for the totally passive readiness suggested by his claim that “it is only a God who can save us.”<sup>43</sup> The anti-moderns, in other words, can see no intelligent way out of our impasses. Their desire for the new thus assumes qualities distinctively critical of intelligence. What unites so many otherwise disparate theorists is the belief that, again in Hoy’s words, “the construction of a positive theory would fall back into the self-destructive desire to control everything.”<sup>44</sup> For fear of discipline, intelligence is deposed: we are left to fall back on fortune’s blind opportunities.

### Dewey’s Melioristic Experimentalism

“At a certain moment, the problem of an aesthetics of existence is covered over by the problem of purity.”<sup>45</sup> This remark of Foucault’s, originally made in reference to ethical transformations within the Middle Ages, can also serve usefully within a history of modernity. For in the modern age, too, experimental efforts in self-creation were often replaced by quests for purity. I thus urge that we look at modernity in terms of two alternative tendencies. The first tendency is the more minor effort of *experimentation*. But this is only a minor theme of modernity in comparison to modernity’s major *rationalization*, exemplified by Cartesian and Kantian repulsions at the impure. The quest of experimentalism is covered over, though not fully eliminated, by the rationalizing quest for purity.

This two-sided intellectual history of modernity fits very well with the larger philosophical projects of both pragmatism and genealogy, although it has not been sufficiently developed by leading thinkers in either tradition (Dewey, Rorty, Nietzsche, Foucault). What I am suggesting is that pragmatism and genealogy could offer us a way out of the Weberian interpretation of modernity that everywhere dominates contemporary political reflection. I will conclude by

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<sup>42</sup> Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 114

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger 1966, 107. The same degree of pessimistic suspicion can also be discerned in Arendt. For example, she praises the American Revolution only in terms of “beginning, of an unconnected, new event breaking into the continuous sequence of historical time” (Arendt 1963, 205, cf. 28). Although I share with Arendt an esteem for the American Revolution as of more lasting value than the French, my esteem is founded on the former’s renewal of American traditions articulated in the colonial era (cf. Bailyn 1967). But Arendt writes so as to efface the Revolution’s colonial heritage: “No matter how decisively the colonial experience and pre-colonial history might have influenced the course of the Revolution and the formation of public institutions in this country, its story as an independent entity begins only with the Revolution” (212). On the same disconnectedness of Arendt’s refuge in ‘novel beginnings’ in *The Human Condition* see 144, 191-2, 233, 237, 243-7 and also the criticisms in Dietz 1994, 882.

<sup>44</sup> Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 136.

<sup>45</sup> Foucault 1983, 274

briefly exploring how these two traditions present important alternatives to two key aspects of the Weberian frame: 1) the totalizing picture of modernity as an age of rationalization and 2) the corollary image of modernity as an effort to purify science and politics into separate value-spheres. Blumenberg and Arendt accept both of these aspects of Weber's interpretation, although I have concentrated most of my attention so far on the first.

Typical of most intellectual historians of modernity, Blumenberg and Arendt both too readily conflate what I have identified as modernity's major rationalization and its minor experimentation. That is why the great rationalist Descartes is described by Blumenberg as an experimentalist and the great experimentalist Galileo is described by Arendt as a rationalizer. Blumenberg views modernity as a self-assertive gain of the world. Arendt views it as the rationalizing loss of the world. The pragmatist alternative cuts diagonally across the shared assumptions of such optimistic and pessimistic viewpoints. Pragmatists urge that we look forward to a culture of experiment already nascent in modernity (*pace* Arendt) without regarding the practices appropriate to such a culture as already pervasive (*pace* Blumenberg). We should read Descartes as a rationalizing villain and Galileo as an experimentalist hero. We can do this by reading Galileo as a hopeful alternative to a culture too long fixated on problems first formulated by Descartes.

I am thus suggesting a history of modernity that attempts to negotiate a viable middle ground somewhere between optimistic moderns and pessimistic anti-moderns. Such strategies are typical of pragmatism. Dewey, for example, praises an experimentalism that he finds epitomized in scientific methods of inquiry while Rorty praises a similar experimentalism embodied for him in the core practices of democratic politics.<sup>46</sup> Both recognize this experimentalism as subdued in contrast to modernity's dominant intellectualist quest for purity. And both urge us to play up important aspects of our tradition that we have too often, throughout modernity, played down.

Pragmatists thus recognize that universalistic interpretations of modernity need to be abandoned as implausible historical backdrops for contemporary political reflection. Modernity is not all one thing. Like any process as big and unwieldy as modernity, there are good sides and bad sides. The task for the intellectual historian and political philosopher is to sort through these. For such a task, celebrating or castigating modernity in totalizing terms is hardly going to be helpful.

In urging this view, another thing that a pragmatist historiography of modernity focuses our attention on is the thought that politics and science—or power and knowledge, or value and fact—are reciprocal rather than oppositional practices. One of the great insights of pragmatism is that the cluster of philosophical distinctions that takes as its starting point the dichotomy between fact and value is unhelpful and ought to be abandoned. Experimentation, just like rationalization, works across power and knowledge at once as a quality pervading

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Dewey 1929, 85-6, 94, Dewey 1927, 114, 175, Dewey 1920, 43, Rorty 1998 and Rorty 1988.

the entirety of a culture. It follows that we should not attempt to reconstruct culture on the basis of an experimentalism presently nascent in either science or politics. We should look to neither Descartes and the scientific revolution (as does Blumenberg) nor Jefferson and the American Revolution (as does Arendt) for models of successful experimentalism. Rather, we should reconstruct culture along paths worn by particular cultural moods (experimentalism in science and politics) rather than others (rationalization in science and politics). We should look for the ways in which certain thinkers and practices have simultaneously extended experimentalism in scientific and political domains at once.

This intrinsic reciprocity of power and knowledge urged long ago by pragmatism was very convincingly rearticulated by Foucault, who held power and knowledge as concomitant, intertwined, and synergistic. Power is not held, it is exercised—knowledge too is not stored in reserve, it is practiced.<sup>47</sup> One of Foucault's central themes was that such exercises of power and practices of knowledge necessarily invoke one another: "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."<sup>48</sup> Power and knowledge imply, rely on, demand, and reproduce one another—together they form self-amplifying circuits. This reciprocal amplification is a double conditioning: power and knowledge are not two separate domains, yet they are also not formally identical. They condition—enhance the effectiveness of—one another.<sup>49</sup>

Following the lead of genealogy and pragmatism on these points, I think of modernity not as an age of rationalization in which science and politics were increasingly divorced—rather I think of modernity as an age of decisive transformations reverberating throughout culture including both science and politics. The dominant rationalization of the modern age is a culture-wide project occurring in legislatures and laboratories simultaneously and with reciprocal benefit to both. It occurs in the courtroom and the clinic at the very same moment: the court becomes the theatre for clinical success and the clinic becomes the workshop where judicial effectiveness can be proven. And so the response to a modernity bent on purification cannot be the expansion of an experimentalism thus far developed in only one of science or politics, taking as its model only a Descartes or a Jefferson, but rather must be an experimentalism that increasingly pervades both simultaneously. What we need is a new Galileo or a new Leonardo, a new cultural genius in whom is simultaneously infused the modern virtuosity of Bacon and Shakespeare. This, at least, is in keeping with Dewey's

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Foucault 1976, 94 and 1977, 102.

<sup>48</sup> Foucault 1975, 27

<sup>49</sup> The idea is that of a "cross-fertilizing interplay between different agencies and expertises, public and private like" (Gordon, 1991, 36); that the "production of knowledge and the exercise of administrative or disciplinary power intertwine, and each begins to enhance the other" (Allen 1999, 70); and that "[w]e are promised normalization and happiness through science and law. When they fail, this only justifies the need for more of the same" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 196).

more plausible intellectual history and political philosophy of the gains and losses of our modern democratic experiments.<sup>50</sup>

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