

Intellectual Origins of our Post-truth Age

Ethics in a Time of Polarization

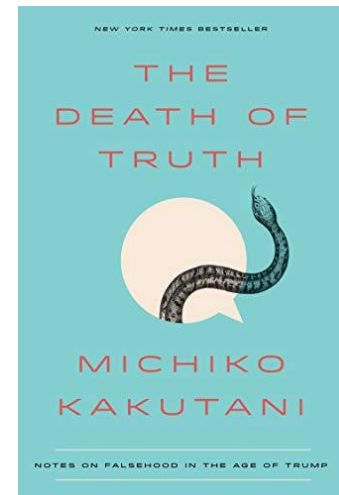
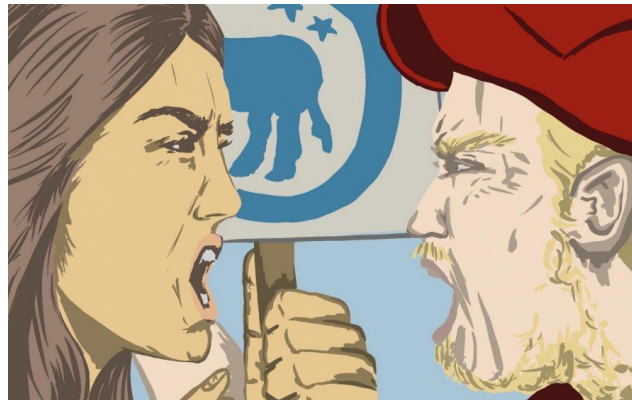
Osher Course

John Hooker, study leader

September-October 2021

A Post-truth Age

- **When there is no truth...**
 - ...there can be no meeting of the minds.
 - The result is **polarization**.



Ethics and Truth Decay

- What does this have to do with **ethics**?
 - Ethics was the **first victim** of truth decay.
 - *Collapse of rational ethics takes everything else with it.*



Ethics and Truth Decay

- Skepticism of ethics had a legitimate origin.
 - It raised a question that must be answered:
 - **How is ethical reasoning possible?**
 - Our primary aim is to **answer this question.**

Ethics and Truth Decay

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 - It raised a question that must be answered:
 - **How is ethical reasoning possible?**
 - Our primary aim is to **answer this question.**
- We take a brief excursion through intellectual history.
 - To see how we got here.

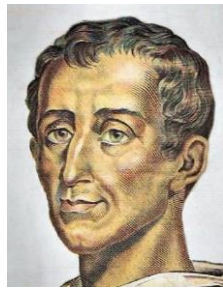


Age of Enlightenment

- **17th-18th century Europe shaped our society and approach to life...**
 - Belief in authority of reason, especially science.



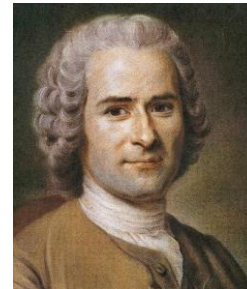
Newton



Montesquieu



Diderot



Rousseau



Mozart



Leibniz



Locke



Smith



Hume



Kant

Early Warnings

- **Nietzsche: We are moving beyond good and evil.**
 - Three prophetic books.
 - *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883)
 - *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)
 - *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887)



Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)

Early Warnings

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- The *Übermensch* has outgrown morality.

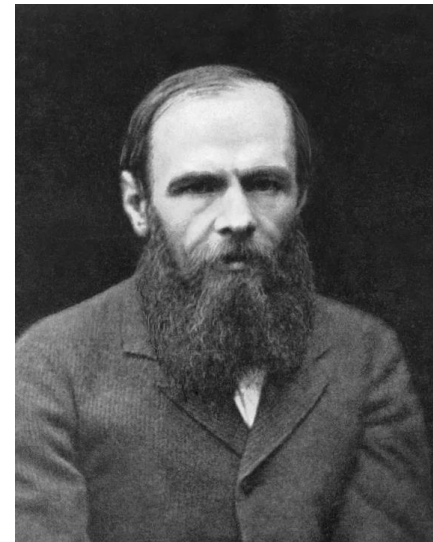
- *The **next stage of human consciousness** rejects religion and conventional morals.*
- *Death of God, master morality, nobility, self-defined values, self-actualization through the **will to power**.*
- *Masters will dominate the “herd” (less evolved humans).*



Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844-1900)

Early Warnings

- **Dostoevsky: A nonbelieving church concocts “morality” for the masses.**
 - View expressed by the Grand Inquisitor to the returned Jesus.
 - *In The Brothers Karamazov (1880)*
 - *Nietzsche admired Dostoevsky’s ideas.*
 - Concocted morality is necessary to maintain social order.
 - *Only a few are capable of adhering to the true Christian message.*



Fyodor Dostoevsky
(1821-1881)

Crisis of Western Civilization

- **Adorno and Horkheimer: How could this happen?**
 - Products of the Frankfurt School.
 - *“Western leftists.”*
 - *Influenced by Marx, Freud, Hegel.*
 - Fans of the enlightenment.

Max Horkheimer
(1895-1973)



Theodor Adorno
(1903-1969)

Crisis of Western Civilization

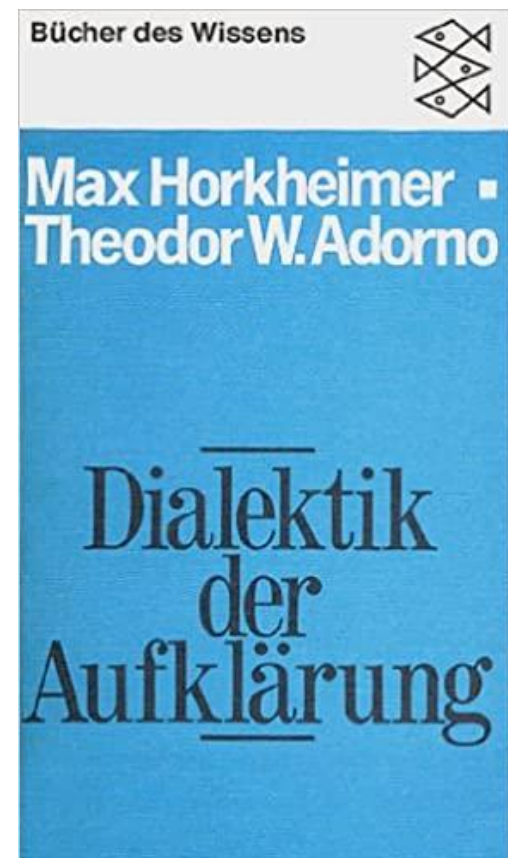
- **Adorno and Horkheimer: How could this happen?**
 - Western civilization, at the pinnacle of its success and achievements, give rise to the **greatest crisis** of the modern age.
 - *Total breakdown of morality into **cruelty** and **genocide**.*



Crisis of Western Civilization

- **Roots in the Enlightenment**

- It carries the seeds of its own destruction.
- Its emphasis on **scientific rationality** destroyed the legitimacy of values, religion, metaphysics.
 - *Adorno and Horkheimer developed this view while exiled in Los Angeles during the Nazi era.*
 - *... in their book Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944)*



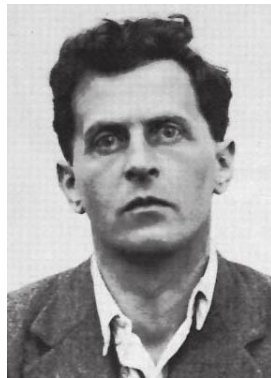
Crisis of Western Civilization

- **Logical positivism**

- Their reading of scientific rationality was already articulated by logical positivists in the Vienna Circle.
 - *Only statements that can be **tested by empirical observation** have meaning.*
 - *Ethical statements are **literally meaningless**.*



Ernst Mach
(1838-1916)



Ludwig
Wittgenstein
(1889-1951)



Rudolf Carnap
(1891-1970)



Karl Popper
(1902-1994)

Crisis of Western Civilization

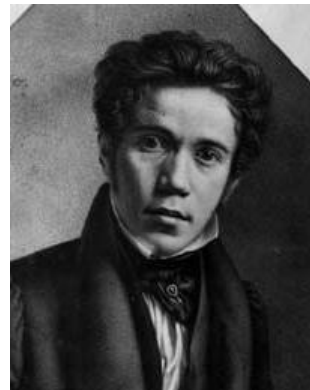
- **Ruins of the Enlightenment**
 - With rational ethics destroyed...
 - *There is nothing else to do but **seek power** through **technical rationality**.*
 - *While viewing less enlightened peoples as **inferior**.*



Existentialism

- **We must invent our own values**
 - We are **free** to chart our course but have no ethical roadmap.
 - We want to **deny our freedom** (because it creates **anxiety**) and take our marching orders from others (recall the Grand Inquisitor).
 - To be **authentic**, we must resolutely adopt our own values.
 - Ideas in Heidegger's Being and Time, presaged by Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling.

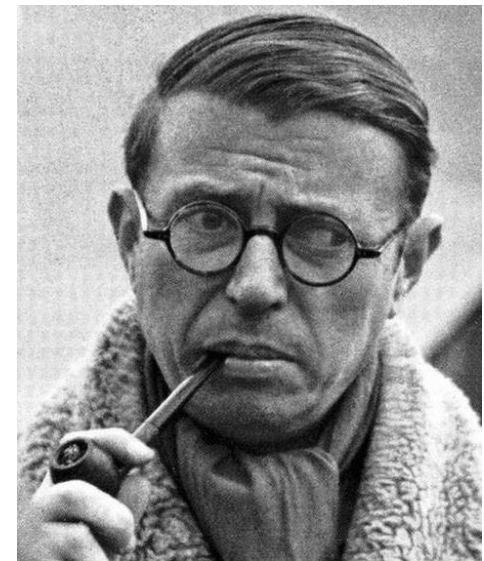
Søren Kierkegaard
(1813-1855)



Martin Heidegger
(1889-1976)

Existentialism

- **Sartre and bad faith**
 - Sartre was the most famous and dramatic exponent of existentialism.

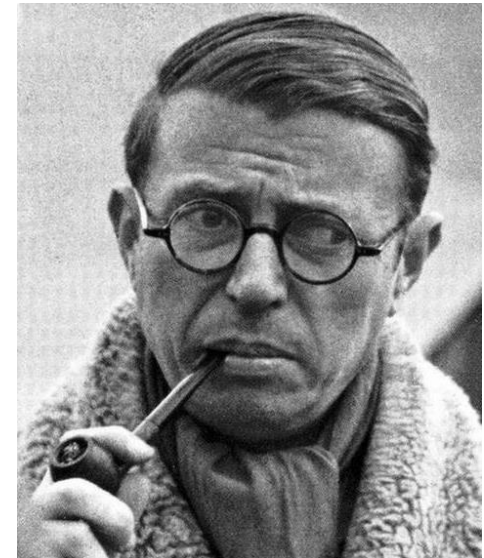


Jean-Paul Sartre
(1905-1980)

Existentialism

- **Sartre and bad faith**

- Sartre was the most famous and dramatic exponent of existentialism.
 - *You see Nazi soldiers in the street during the Nazi occupation of France.*
 - **Choice 1:** *Ignore them and go about your business, even while they destroy civilization*
 - **Choice 2:** *Kill them, even though the Nazis will retaliate against your friends.*



Jean-Paul Sartre
(1905-1980)

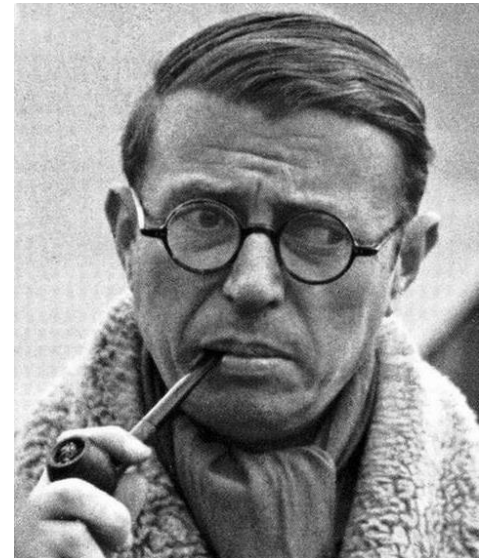
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- **Choice 1:** *Ignore them and go about your business, even while they destroy civilization*
- **Choice 2:** *Kill them, even though the Nazis will retaliate against your friends.*
- **Not to choose is to choose.**
- *It is “bad faith” (inauthenticity).*
- *Yet there is **no rational guidance** for the choice.*

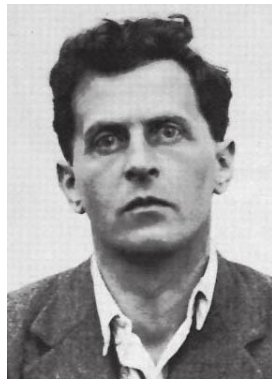
Jean-Paul Sartre
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Postmodernism

- **Demise of all truth and rationality?**
 - Scientific rationality doesn't immediately imply the death of all truth...
 - *But postmodernism went further.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein
(1889-1951)
...misinterpreted



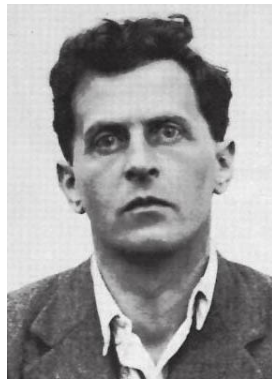
Jean-Francois
Lyotard
(1924-1998)



Postmodernism

- **Demise of all truth and rationality?**
 - Scientific rationality doesn't immediately imply the death of all truth...
 - *But postmodernism went further.*
 - A complex movement...
 - *Semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, hermeneutics, deconstructionism, etc.*
 - *But we can identify **2 major themes** (by oversimplifying):*

Ludwig Wittgenstein
(1889-1951)
...misinterpreted



Jean-Francois
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Postmodernism

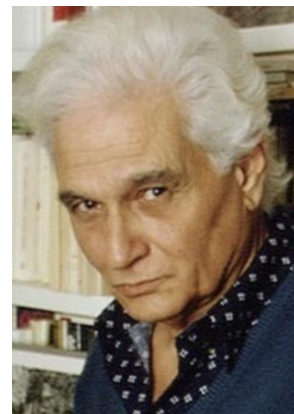
- **Text is neither true nor false.**
 - It only serves to push the agenda of the writer.
 - Known as **subtext** (a term picked up by journalists).
 - **Deconstruction** reveals the subtext.



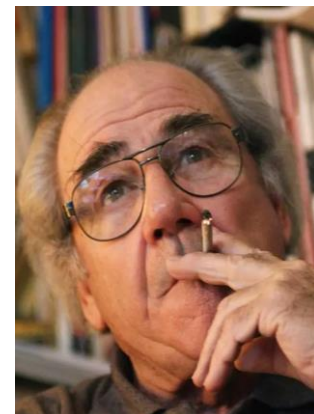
Simone
de Beauvoir
(1908-1986)
Final stage of
existentialist ethics



Michel Foucault
(1926-1984)
Social reality
is constructed.



Jacques Derrida
(1930-2004)
High priest of
deconstruction



Jean
Baudrillard
(1929-2007)
We no longer
interact with reality.

Postmodernism

- **Rationality is only a tool of oppression.**
 - ...used by European white males to subjugate women and other cultures.
 - *It is therefore illegitimate.*



Sandra Harding
(1935-)



Gayatri
Chakravorty
Spivak
(1942-)



Iris Marion
Young
(1949-2006)



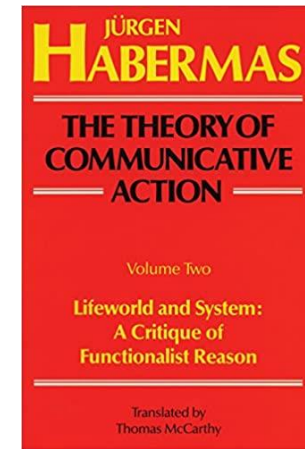
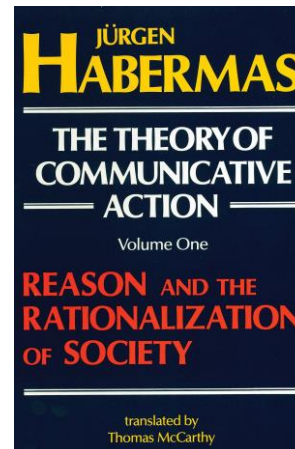
Cornel West
(1953-)

Postmodernism

- **One response to postmodern nihilism**
 - It contains a “performative inconsistency.”
 - *If there is no truth, is this, itself, true?*
 - *If there is no rationality, why should we believe this?*

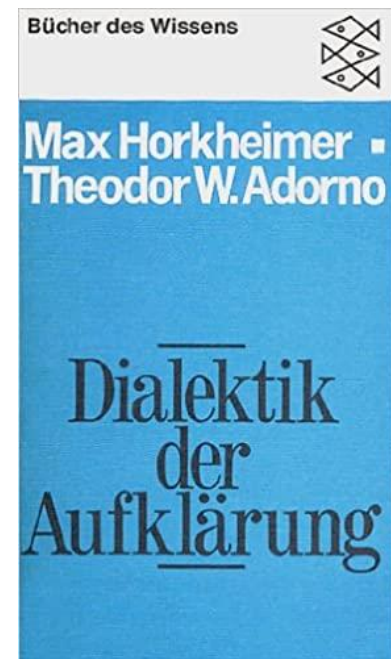
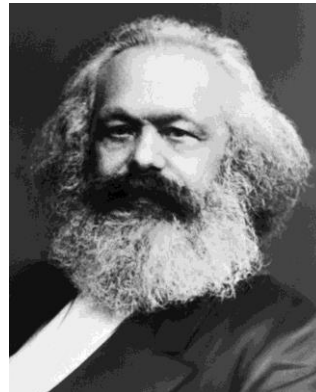


Jürgen Habermas
1929-



Now what?

- **Restoring rational ethics**
 - If the Enlightenment contains the seeds of its own destruction, it contains the seeds of **its resurrection**.
 - *Maybe Adorno and Horkheimer should look back at their own inspiration: Hegelian and Marxian **dialectic**.*
 - *Civilizations advance by **working through their own contradictions**.*



Now what?

- **Restoring rational ethics**
 - There are resources in Enlightenment thought for grounding ethics in reason.
 - *It is time we take advantage of this.*
 - *In fact, people have been working on it.*
 - **Our goal:**
 - *Build a rational framework for thinking about ethics.*

