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The Modern Self in the Labyrinth: Politics and the Entrapment Imagination
by Eyal Chowers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. 250
pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique by David
Couzens Hoy. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004. 274 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" is American literature's paradigmatic allegory of entrapment and resistance. Set in the "everlasting shade" of a law office fit with "an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall," the story depicts Bartleby's strangely muted struggle against the overlapping alienations of the modern world: that of the artist from the market, the worker from labor, the citizen from law, the self from social institutions. In Melville's words, this bleakly entropic world is "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'."

Bartleby's resistance is famously enacted through the formula: "I would *prefer* not to." At once negation and affirmation, the phrase replaces the reliable "doctrine of assumptions" through which social institutions reproduce themselves with a "doctrine of preferences" which uncannily reveals the contingency underlying seemingly natural institutions. The power of Bartleby's resistance resides in its totality and in the inscrutability of its motivation. It is ultimately not one or another institution that is challenged, but the viability of any and all determinations. The "wondrous ascendancy" Bartleby attains over his employer is a function of this strange unintelligibility, this spectral indeterminacy. "Why do you refuse?" the lawyer asks. "I would prefer not to," Bartleby responds. "You *will* not?" "I *prefer* not." Were Bartleby to provide an answer to *why* he resists, the explanation could be easily combated, co-opted within the given field of intelligibility. Of course, Bartleby's resistance comes at high cost. He begins preferring not to copy mortgages and title deeds in the figurative prison of the law office, and ends preferring not to accept food in the literal prison of New York's "Hall of Justice," facing the insurmountable "high wall" of mortality itself. Bartleby's "wondrous ascent" is also a "cadaverous triumph."

The vivid and mutually reinforcing portraits of contemporary political theory provided by Eyal Chowers and David Couzens Hoy suggest that Melville's fascination with the implacability of the limit and the paradoxes of resistance still resonates. Chowers' study of "entrapment theory" and Hoy's explorations of "critical resistance" are two sides of the same theoretical coin. Though Chowers is more historical and Hoy more conceptual in approach, both explore theorists who in different ways have abandoned the rubric of modern alienation and its overcoming. While much is to be learned from their richly detailed accounts of individual thinkers, the cumulative effect of reading these works side by side is not unlike the effect of reading "Bartleby": it is to feel strangely trapped, trapped by the tropes of entrapment.

In *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth*, Chowers combines broad historical interpretation with penetrating analyses of Weber, Freud, and Foucault and their "shared interpretive grid." The narrative begins in the eighteenth century as Natural Law and Deism begin to lose their hold on the theoretical imagination in the West, and faith in a pre-given rational order gives way to an understanding of order as a product of (largely unintentional) human construction. As some Enlightenment thinkers celebrated the workings of an "invisible hand" organizing the immanent laws of social life, others identified these law-like regularities with entirely new confinements. In the critical etiologies of modernity provided by Smith, Herder, and Rousseau, Chowers locates the early origins of the "entrapment imagination." If Bernard Yack's *The Longing for Total Revolution* (1986)¹ catalogued how theoretical accounts of modernity's confinements resulted in longings for its total overcoming, Chowers emphasizes the more chastened political visions of a group of thinkers who abandoned this project of "total revolution."

A number of recent studies of eighteenth-century political thought would challenge the smooth linearity of both accounts—I think of Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* (2001) or Ian Hunter's *Rival Enlightenments* (2001).² But the provocation of Chowers' study lies not in his historical narrative but in its inventive theorization of entrapment as "the dehumanizing sameness that springs from the duplication of the social—the menace of homogenized sameness in a world conceived of as self-made" (p. 2). This equation of entrapment with sameness, subjection with homogenization is at the center of Chowers' account, but its centrality could use additional justification. It is unclear, for example, whether human cloning is today the paradigmatic instance of the entrapment problematic, and not the logic of nuclear proliferation or economic globalization. At times Chowers' Romantic

fear of lost singularity seems to overwhelm his analysis, and uncomfortably fits his theorists (particularly Foucault). Despite his occasional testaments to the contrary, Chowers' emphasis on the "menacing sameness" of entrapment is haunted by a quasi-autonomous self that is entrapped, and also by the tendency to locate domination exclusively within the rubric of dehumanization.

That said, Chowers' framework allows him to explore some insightful continuities in the work of his chosen theorists. His discussion of the Weberian background to Foucault's work on discipline is richly illuminating, as is his triangulation of these two thinkers with the more unexpectedly continuous concerns of Freud. Chowers situates Freud alongside Weber and Foucault as a preeminent theorist of modernity, but in contrast to the more familiar accounts of Freud offered by Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, Chowers' Nietzschean Freud affirms the irreducible homelessness of modern experience: "the modern self's plight," he writes, is "especially dire because it experiences an uncanny (*unheimlich*) mode of being" (p. 96). Refusing to place *Civilization and Its Discontents* or *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*³ as the center of Freud's political thought, Chowers focuses on Freud's essay on Hoffman's "The Sandman" and its analysis of the uncanny. While the resulting characterization of Freud's political thought as "a unique type of communitarianism" seems belabored at times, Chowers' provocative interpretation suggests interesting avenues for further exploration.

There is a normative argument (or at least a disposition) underwriting Chowers' work of theoretical redescription. He clearly admires the "spirit of realism" and the chastened politics he finds in entrapment theorists, qualities that most clearly distinguish them from their "proto-entrapment" predecessors. Avoiding the hubristic optimism of final emancipation, but also avoiding fatalism, these theorists share a salutary tragic sensibility. They "replace a politics aimed at transcending historical circumstances with one aimed at teaching us how to cope with dignity while enmeshed within these circumstances" (p. 5). The theoretical horizon depicted by Chowers is marked by a chastening of emancipatory potential tied to a similarly chastened conception of the self. "The death of radical politics," Chowers suggestively writes, "may be intertwined with the decline of cognitive man" (p. 189). This endorsement of lowered political vision does not lead to mere repetition, but to strategies of coping and incremental resignification. In David Hoy's work these transformative practices are pursued more actively and subversively through an analysis of "critical resistance." Hoy's separate chapters on Nietzsche, Foucault, Bourdieu, Levinas and

Derrida, and post-Marxist theory are remarkable for their conceptual clarity and fluency of presentation; this is one of the best books I know for introducing students to the central ethical and political debates of post-structuralist theory. While sharing Chowder's emphasis on the horizons established by critical etiologies of modernity, Hoy expresses a marked dissatisfaction with the entrapment imagination. Hoy's approach is relentlessly self-critical yet unapologetic about its normative commitments. As such, *Critical Resistance* is part of a broader "ethical turn" in contemporary political theory.

The ethical reorientation Hoy seeks comes about primarily through his attempt to distinguish between resistance and critical resistance. In response to Habermasian claims that resistance can become blind destruction in the absence of prior normative orientation, Hoy tries to absorb the critical insights of poststructuralist theory while avoiding the vertigo of a politics of "sheer proliferation." In a study characterized by interpretive care and generosity, Hoy has less patience with proponents of the "new" Nietzsche who endorse a theory of pure difference. It is here that Hoy takes the Habermasian warning to heart, while not fully acceding to the demands of normative foundationalism. He concedes that theory itself cannot provide the criteria to distinguish resistance from critical resistance, but suggests that normative orientation and ethical possibilities can emerge through practices of resistance themselves, thereby invoking a revitalized account of *phronesis*.

Hoy's careful attempt to address these normative concerns makes for illuminating reading. Occasionally, however, I wondered what was lost by Hoy's decision to address these theorists' work according to the questions and criticisms of their neo-Kantian critics. Reading Foucault in terms of general theory of power, for example, or Derrida in terms of the aporetic coils of deconstruction and constitutive otherness, risks obscuring the important differences in their *styles* of theoretical practice. The question is whether differences in style reflect ethical and political differences, and I think they do. Hoy's own work occasionally suggests as much, as when noting the importance of beginning with "the concrete universality of an actual social group" rather than the prerequisite of the general principles of a command morality. Reducing the differences between these approaches to conceptual differences misses some of the most poignant insights of the thinkers he most admires. Hoy's approach does not allow readers to examine the value of ethical and political orientation achieved through the singularity of examples, examples irreducible to the expression of a general rule or a concept.

Hoy's faith in the power of the concept is also reflected in the project as a whole, which seems to assume that the reconceptualization of contemporary theoretical work will itself be "productive of new ways of thinking." Hoy's theoretical contribution comes largely through his understanding of "post-critique" and "deconstructive genealogy." Post-critique is an "original form" of critical theory that retains entrapment theory's acceptance of finitude but pursues a more affirmative political program. On this point, Hoy's understanding of post-critique may overlap with Stephen White's recent conception of "weak ontology" in *Sustaining Affirmation* (2000).⁴ However, in *Critical Resistance* there is a good deal of ambiguity as to what theoretical work this reconceptualization is supposed to perform. At times "post-critique" seems less a theoretical reconceptualization with a new normative animation than a broad term of intellectual periodization, one "flexible enough to cover a wide range of work in Continental philosophy since 1984 [Foucault's death], and even since 1962 [Deleuze's book on Nietzsche]" (p. 17). At other times, post-critique appears as a particular theoretical project that "transcends" poststructuralism, as a "label not only for what comes after poststructuralism, but also as a substitute *for* poststructuralism" (p. 17; my emphasis). At yet another point, he wryly notes that *Critical Resistance* itself may turn out to be the only example of a post-critical social theory (p. 18). The fact that each of the chapters concludes with a section on "post-critique"—covering topics such as Judith Butler's work on critical virtue, Derrida's account of the messianic, and Žižek's influential theory of ideology—does not aid much in clearing up these ambiguities. If Hoy's work does not exactly spell out why the term *poststructuralism* has "worn out its usefulness," he is even less clear as to how *post-critique* would rectify this (unspecified) weakness.

Of course, it is not the ambiguity of the concept itself that is the problem, but that this ambiguity seems unproductive, too flexible to have any theoretical purchase. This is less true of Hoy's concluding discussion of "deconstructive genealogy," which he views as a particularly promising version of the post-critical program. Placing more emphasis on the deconstructive than the genealogical, Hoy characterizes his program as "a philosophical attitude" that disrupts "methodological smugness by calling into question the very grounds of critique" (p. 229). The example Hoy emphasizes is Derrida's work on the undeconstructability of justice, but another example, which would give equal weight to the genealogical aspect, would be Foucault's late research on the historical emergence of critical speech. Hoy's emphasis on theory's account of the limits of its own critical position

can at times seem like obsessive self-concern rather than “a heightened sense of responsibility and of the obligation to act” (p. 238).

The Modern Self in the Labyrinth and *Critical Resistance* both provide rich portraits of the contemporary theoretical imagination and suggest directions for further research. For Chowers, political theory

is likely to continue to dwell in the maze it has established since Kant . . . alternating between the expanding and ever-more penetrating social institutions of modernity . . . and the growing demands of the self to fully author its identity. (p. 196)

Like *Bartleby*, Chowers’ political theorists seem inexorably drawn to the question of the limit, to the conditions of their own possibility. Hoy tries to point practitioners beyond this diagnosis, and is more attuned to Melville’s warning that such pursuits risk resulting in “dead-wall reveries”—triumphs, yes, but quite cadaverous.

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Notes

1. Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

2. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*, Ideas in Context Series no. 60 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

3. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930; trans. and ed. James Strachey, New York: Norton, 1961); and Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921; trans. James Strachey, London: International Psychoanalytical Press, 1922).

4. Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Jason Frank is an assistant professor of government at Cornell University. He is co-editor of *Vocations of Political Theory* (2000) and is currently writing a book on constituent power and democratic sensibility provisionally titled *Democratic Enactment: Passion and Improvisation in Postrevolutionary America*.