

THE WORLD THAT HAS LOST ITSELF

H. S. Harris

Values Education and Technology: The Ideology of Dispossession

by Peter C. Emberley

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[This review essay was published in *The Literary Review of Canada*, Vol. 4, No. 11, December 1995: 13-14. Original pagination has been provided within brackets. No one familiar with Harris will be surprised of his interest in the topic discussed and how he relates his own scholarship to it, He was asked by the editor of the *LRC* to write further reviews and Harris had expressed interest in reviewing other books for this publication. However no further articles were written. We wish to thank the *LRC* and its editor for permission to make this article available again in this format.]

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I set my sights upon becoming a schoolteacher when I was about eight. Since my education was in England (not in France, Germany or Italy) I did not encounter ‘philosophy’ in secondary school. I went to Oxford, where I was one of the minority (already quite tiny) who were in pursuit of a classical education. When I began to study philosophy, I became alienated by the philosophical culture of my teachers. Even as I listened to the inaugural lecture [1945] of the new Professor Ryle, and the first lectures of Richard Hare on the logic of moral discourse, I was personally discovering and falling in love with the idealism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile.

With no prospect of a philosophical teaching career in England when I graduated, I came to the more pluralistic academic world of the United States in 1950; and now I am reaching (in Canada) the end of a career spent mainly upon the study of Hegel, and upon purveying to my students as well as I can the philosophical and literary treasures of a Western tradition that remains enigmatic to most of them, and a total bore to very many. I know very well (from objective observation) what ‘cultural dispossession’ is; but my own experience has been one of

ever-increasing *estrangement*. Thanks very largely to Hegel I have never been personally *dispossessed*. (It seems only fair to make this initial declaration as I approach a book which regards Hegel as one of the important agents in bringing about our presently ‘dispossessed’ cultural condition.)

I learned from Franco Lombardi over thirty years ago to think of Hegel as having a very large family of ‘ungrateful children’. Here now is a book about how much one branch of his family thinks they have to be ungrateful about. In view of what I have already said, it will be no surprise that the critical part of my review suggests that our common father has been greatly traduced and misunderstood. But I shall also argue (incidentally) that some who do not think of themselves as part of the family at all, have used and built upon Hegel’s legacy better than *this* branch of the ungrateful children have done.

Peter Emberly teaches Political Science at Carleton University, and he has a strong interest in the philosophy of education. His book seeks to show that three different programmes of ‘values education’ in our schools are seriously defective because they are too ‘subjective’; they do not attend to the basic task of the educator, which is to preserve the common substance of our cultural tradition. According to Emberley’s analysis of our cultural history, this is a peculiarly disastrous mistake, because the cultural substance that used to be purveyed from one generation to the next by the ‘traditional curriculum’, has turned into a enormous hot-air balloon under the impact of rational criticism. In his view, the educators who want to carry out their task properly should now direct the attention of their pupils to those aspects of their world, and of their life functions and activities, that can restore to them the sense of ‘belonging’ to a human community happily reconciled with its finite situation in nature.

We must distinguish between Emberley’s diagnosis of the sickness of our culture, and his proposals for its cure. The diagnosis is in general excellent — although I shall disagree in some important ways with this physician’s account of the middle phases in the genesis of the disease. But his proposed course of treatment is tantamount to whistling in the dark.

II

The book is subtitled ‘The Ideology of Dispossession’; and this shows good judgment, because what we can learn from it and is how we have become ‘dispossessed’. We have lost our home. The world we live in is not a home; and although we have achieved an astounding degree of technological control over our world — so that there is almost nothing in Nature that we have to accept simply the way that it is naturally — we are only becoming ever more aware that we are ‘lost souls’. Indeed, we are now starting to wonder whether we have souls at all, and to experience ourselves as momentary constructs of feeling and language, without any stable identity (or ‘self’ with at least some measure of guiding power).

We are what the omnipresent media of universal communication make us; and because our bodies provide the only stably abiding identities that we have, the great universal system of technology (which is the only self-maintaining substance in our human world) has processed us all into ‘consumers’. Our natural needs have become the plastic raw material of an infinitely expanding cloud of subjective and insubstantial desires; and the frustration attendant upon life in this cloud produces only dark Hobbesian shadows of hostility and terror. It makes little difference whether our desires are ‘fulfilled’ in actual consumption or not, because the cloud of desires only grows more rapidly for those who are ‘successful’; and the universal media of communication make everyone (whether partially successful or not) equally aware of the cloud as a whole. So it is only the general sense of frustration that is perpetually increased everywhere.

According to my understanding, this is the meaning of ‘dispossession’. Emberley does not give us a concrete picture of it, but it is this situation whose genesis he wants to explain; and I believe that if we start with this concrete picture, we shall find his explanation generally convincing. The story of this cultural disaster starts with Francis Bacon, the great prophet of ‘technology’. Bacon thought that the great ideological construction built out of Platonic myths and Aristotelian metaphysics by the Catholic Church, must be dismantled and replaced by the

concept of Nature as a machine created by God for exploration, use and transformation by us, his rational images. God did not give us a natural home. We must built it ourselves; and if only the princes to whom God had given political authority and economic control, could be made to see this, the experimental scientists could become social engineers and we would be able to live in the world as God meant us to, instead of regarding it as a pilgrim's hostelry on the road to our proper home in the world beyond death.

The princes refused to be impressed by this gospel; but the Baconian vision passed down to the French Encyclopaedist critics of the unholy alliance of Throne and Altar; and through them, as Hegel saw, it produced the ideology of 1789. Emberley ignores this part of the story, because serious attention to Hegel's analysis of the Terror of 1793 would largely invalidate the view that he takes of Hegel contributed to the crisis that followed in the next century. Hegel shared Bacon's faith that the world could be, and ought to be, our *home* (not a way-station on the journey to the World Beyond); but he did not share the view of Bacon and his French disciples that human rationality was finally comprehended in the 'Truth of Enlightenment' — i.e., in the concept of *economic utility* that now dominates our life-world. He thought that the substantial structures of social life that had been swept away by the French Revolution must be replaced by new ones founded on the Protestant reform of religion, and the Kantian reform of philosophy. Alexander Kojève rightly understood that Hegel was the philosopher not of the Revolution, but of Napoleon — 'this world soul on a horse' as Hegel himself said. According to Emberley, Kojève is 'Hegel's most incisive twentieth-century interpreter'; but, like Kojève, he blandly ignores the crucially important fact of Waterloo. Napoleon died, not in Paris, but on St. Helena. The Napoleonic order that Hegel was looking for did not come into being. We can argue that the eventual unification of Italy was a genuine part of it; and we can claim that both the unification of Germany by Bismarck and the establishment of the Third Republic in France fitted into Hegel's vision of the new order, because they were modern 'constitutional' Nation-States brought into being by the operation of war in exactly the way that Hegel envisaged it. So the nineteenth century did belong, politically, to Hegel.

Just what Kojève meant by the 'universal homogeneous State' I have never been able to decide. One has only to consider Hegel's conception of the two sexes, to see that *he* did not think that

the modern State is *internally* homogeneous; Italy, Germany and France from 1870 to 1914 suffice to show that the modern States of Hegel's prophecy are not 'constitutionally' homogeneous with one another. The Hegelian State is (more or less) 'homogeneous' with respect to the recognition of certain legal, natural and moral 'rights'. These constitute the 'autonomy' of the individual *conscience*; and the absolute commitment of every citizen (when called upon) to defend and maintain this complex of rights and duties (as more precisely defined by her own individual State) makes the modern national State into an ethical *return* of 'true' Spirit as it was originally achieved in the Hellenic Cities (*poleis*). Political control of the national economy was an essential element in Hegel's vision of the human community in which we can be *at home* (as we ought to be). Hence, his youthful adherence to the mercantilism of Sir James Steuart, rather than to the gospel of the universal free trade found in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, was no accident. He recognized the economic dialectic of capitalism almost as clearly as Marx. But he reacted to it in the manner of Plato: the emergence of a homeless 'rabble' should be politically prevented.

This prescription turned out to be a vain hope. As the authors of the Communist Manifesto claimed, the working of civil society 'homogenized' the working class *family* out of existence, and this dissolution of the *foundation* of the Hegelian State was followed by the abolition of the State's conceptually necessary autonomy in two *universal* wars. The World wars were not the kind of international conflict that Hegel envisaged; and they brought to light a truly post-Hegelian political and social situation. It is the dominance of the world-market, and the transformation of the whole world into a 'global village' as far as information and culture is concerned, that have made volatile the 'social substance' upon which the traditional educational curriculum was founded. Marx saw what was happening in the economic world as the opportunity for a great advance in the realm of what we Hegelians call 'objective spirit' (i.e. legal, economic, social, and political institutions). But the Marxist revival of the enlightened dream of Heaven on Earth only came to grief once more. It was Nietzsche who rightly understood what the technological revolution had done to our consciousness of 'absolute values'.

Emberley is very good on Nietzsche. Hegel thought of his own world as a ‘Christian philosophical’ one. In his philosophical interpretation of our situation, God dies in and with each one of us; but we rise from the dead with God in the Spirit. Nietzsche understood the ‘death of God’ (and the transition from religious faith to philosophical understanding) more radically. “God is dead” meant for him, the final triumph of the Baconian gospel that “Knowledge is Power”, without any of the moral ideals or restraints of the traditional religion. He was fifteen when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published; and his grasp of all life as a ‘will to power’, scandalous as it appeared to most of his educated contemporaries, expressed perfectly both the logic of industrial technology and the ethics of Western capitalist imperialism.

The evolution of the institutional system through which our own technological achievement has taken control of our lives is best understood through the work of Marshall McLuhan; and on this, too, Emberley is very good. The first phase of technology is associated with the printing press. Those who can read, direct the energies of those who cannot. But everyone fills an assigned in the *machinery* of the world. In the second phase, the machinery is all linked together into a network (or *system*) which has a kind of ‘life’ of its own. Everything has to be ‘managed’ by those who understand the system, and its needs. Then, in the third phase, the system begins to exhibit an unmanageable aspect. Everyone can now know everything; but as a ‘consumer’ of what the system produces, everyone is reduced to a momentary self of desires and needs. McLuhan speaks of a ‘general cosmic consciousness’ that is also ‘a condition of speechlessness’. He looks forward to this prospect, quite optimistically. Technological ‘progress’ it certainly is; but then so is the atomic bomb: The boob is the final *technological* result of our aggressive impulses. It has transvalued the concept of war (which Hegel regarded as the ‘judgment of God’ by which social health is maintained) even at the level of a ‘general cosmic consciousness’ that does not need to be literate. The world in which everyone is necessarily conscious of frustration and deprivation — because we all know what is ‘possible’ — now has the ‘wrath of God’ at its command. It has turned out that what the ‘death of God’ *really* means is that ‘Death is God’. Our new globe is not a ‘village’, but a Hobbesian armed camp; and the freedom of the world-system is actually ‘Terror’, like the freedom of the first modern ‘Nation’ in 1789.

III.

Emberley does not draw attention to this *objective* truth about ‘the will that would rather will nothingness than not will’. I suppose he takes it as so obvious that it does not need to be remarked on. But it *does* need to be mentioned, because it is the proper context for the evaluation of all programmes for the inculcation of ‘values’ in our schools.

Emberley examines *three* of these. First, there is the essentially ‘Kantian’ programme of the ‘Association for Values Education and Research’. In this programme, the ‘moral point of view’ that is to be established and practiced is defined *formally* (as it was by Kant). The autonomously rational individual makes judgments and choices in terms of what would be right for every agent in a given situation, and just or fair for everyone else affected by it. Emberley cites Richard Hare: ‘if parents first, and then children, understood better the *formal* character of morality and of the moral concepts, there would be little need to bother, ultimately, about the content of our children’s moral principles; for if the form is really and clearly understood, the content will look itself’. In the light of the cultural analysis that we have sketched, it is not hard to see why Emberley does not share this confidence. The child is to be left to work out for herself what will make her happy, in a world where happiness is guaranteed; and Hare would certainly grant that a permanently unhappy person is under the kind of stress that produces immortality. Hare’s confidence belongs to the ‘Hegelian’ era, in which the educated individual was ‘at home’ in the world almost automatically.

But Emberley goes further. He objects to the training of students to discuss and reason about problems of population growth in terms of the desirability of individual happiness, or about war situations as producing a ‘breakdown of rationality’. Now it is certainly true that these young Kantians must learn that many of their human brothers and sisters do not structure their lives around the enlightened utilitarian ideal of personal ‘happiness’ (as morally rationalized by Kant). Since this is a fact of the total situation which will not change in their lifetime, as moral agents they must learn to regard it sympathetically, and deal with it

charitably. They are morally obligated to treat other humans as ‘ends in themselves’ (even if these others do not understand that concept clearly).

It is *this* moral obligation that makes it automatic that war is ‘morally unjustifiable’ (in an *absolute* sense). Emberley is quite sure about his own diagnosis of our world as in the grip of a technological system which has turned human existence into the momentary ‘cosmic consciousness’ of the consumer. But he calls the statement, ‘mankind is at the crossroads of life or death’, ‘distinctly apocalyptic’. So he apparently does not think that my thumbnail account of technological culture in terms of ‘objective spirit’ is equally valid. What impresses *me* is that whichever way I look at it I see the same doom impending. What can *possibly* be wrong with the claim that it is ‘implicit in the very form of reason, to actuate the ‘concept of brotherhood’ even if it leads to the use of ‘crisis-management techniques’? I agree that the ‘crisis-management’ that concerns itself only with ‘the bottom line’ will not save us from Armageddon (presumably because our technological ‘cosmic consciousness’ is not worth saving) I say roundly ‘a plague on both your houses’. The theory that Being transcends Reason altogether, coincides in its practical conclusion with the theory of the *simple* (or immediate) immanence of Reason. As a Hegelian this does not surprise me. But as a Kantian utilitarian myself, I want to escape from this impasse.

The ‘concept of brotherhood’ requires the recognition of states of human social consciousness that are not morally ‘mature’. Thus, the ‘Kantian’ programme passes into what Emberley characterizes as the ‘Hegelian’ programme of rational *development* associated with the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. I suspect that this characterization is more agreeable than it will be to Kohlberg. For when Kohlberg’s critics (including Emberley) complain that stage 6 of his developmental theory (which we can fairly identify as ‘Kantian social justice’) is not reliably found outside of our Western culture, Kohlberg offers empirical arguments that and explanations; and the rhetoric that he employs about Stage 7 (the sympathetic ‘charity’ that lies ‘beyond justice’) reminds one of what Kant says about ‘the crooked timber of humanity’. Kohlberg, unless I am mistaken, is a Kantian critical thinker who regards moral rationality as a ‘regulative ideal’ that cannot be *perfectly* realized. The Hegelian philosopher is at the ‘end of History’ *now*, in the sense that (s)he knows (and can show why) this ideal of rational freedom is

‘the Concept’, and as such, is the most real of all things — being the *real* thought-frame for the proper comprehension of all experience. I am a Hegelian in my own post-Hegelian time. We are faced with Emberley’s trenchant declaration that ‘Kohlberg’s theory of moral development is a totally arbitrary and parochial reading of privileged moments in time’. I respond with a defence that is not Kantian (because it is prudential) and not Hegelian (because he did not dream that it would be needed) but rationally pragmatic (and hence, I hope, acceptable to Kohlberg). Stages 6 and 7, I say, define the rationality that the ‘global village’ must have if it is to remain a village, and not to destroy itself. Without it, the question of whether we are going to overcome our technological condition of spiritual impoverishment will settle itself decisively in the negative.

Emberley dismisses Kohlberg’s ‘stage 7’ as a ‘shallow mysticism onto which has been grafted a messianic resoluteness’. A moral mystic will, of course, meet all such rhetoric with silent forgiveness. Being a critically enlightened liberal, Kohlberg himself says that ‘personal endorsement of the philosophical adequacy claims of higher stages is a matter of choice’. But it is not hard to find something *philosophical* (non-polemical) to say. Emberley ends his own attempt to prescribe for our cultural malaise with the following option: ‘either all is transience and an infinite number of intensities masquerading arbitrarily as signs of what is complete, final and perfect, or there is a durative structure which, while unknown, nevertheless allows us those rare experiences of the intimation of perfection which give us hope that the unity and beauty we form in our lives have some foundation’. What is this, but the same mysticism, without the moral component of interpersonal charity? I shall not ask whether it is ‘shallow’ or not (that is not a *philosophical* question but a moral insult). But is it conceptually richer or poorer?

When we come to his third educational experiment Emberley appears to be on firmer ground. He calls the “Values Clarification’ programme a ‘Nietzschean experiment’; and from what he tells us it may deserve the epithet. I have no acquaintance with the writings of the educational thinkers that he names; and I have no instinctive sympathy with a writer who says “Planning is a fear of living”. Students should be sent into the world, with at least the first sketch of a life-plan that they have constructed for themselves. But again, it is not difficult to produce an

appropriate defence for the programme itself — which does have a philosophical plan. These educators want children to become rationally autonomous agents who know themselves ‘authentically’. The quest for an ‘authentic’ self in the psychological impulses of any given moment is certainly doomed to fail. But it is always good to know what one spontaneously feels about what one is doing; and the basis of a happy existence is to be doing something about which one feels good. Hence Plato proposed that educators should begin by observing what children do for pleasure when they are at play and not under any social discipline; and Plato offered ‘playing for the Gods’ as a description of the ideal life. Emberley cites this passage from the *Laws* with approval. But what interests him (or rather Eric Voegelin before him) is the metaphor of humans as *puppets* of the Gods. The story of the Communist Revolution has taught us how appallingly dangers *that* metaphor is. Emberley should forget about Nietzsche and read Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education of Man*. If he does that he will be able to find more positive value in ‘Values Clarification’.

None of the ‘programmes’ can produce a positive plan for our recovery from the technological destiny of being reduced to consumers focused on the desire of the moment. But they do not stand in the way of a restoration of those aspects of the ‘traditional curriculum’ that offer any hope of recovery. What Emberley offers us (either directly or from his two mentors, Voegelin and Hannah Arendt) does not go beyond plain common sense (of the kind that working practitioners in the three programmes would hardly be likely either to lack, or to quarrel with). Thus, he speaks of ‘the value of using the lives of exemplary humans as models of excellence’. But who is a reliable exemplar? If we unanimously agree that Mother Teresa is one, must we accept her views on the abortion question with equal unanimity? What use is that example to most of us anyway? (We have seen what Emberley has to say about the moral ideal for which Kohlberg offers an exemplar.) Supposing we can agree on a college of canonical exemplars, must we not anticipate that some rebellious young reader of Nietzsche will put Hitler at the centre of her personal pantheon? We can all agree with Matthew Arnold about ‘getting to know ... the best which has been thought and said in the world’. But we cannot safely insist that *Huckleberry Finn* (or the *Merchant of Venice*) should be in our literary curriculum. Emberley would applaud the educational study of *Death of a Salesman* (I imagine); would he

approve equally of Thornton Wilder's *Heaven's My Destination* (the hero of which is a morally rational and happy salesman)? I hope so, but I do not feel sure of it.

Hegel said that philosophy always comes too late to tell the world how to be; and the relevance of that dictum to this work should be evident. But it is easy to find in the writings of those who are not so obviously Hegel's children — grateful or ungrateful — educational recipes for cultural recovery that are better worked out than anything we are offered here. One such (which came to my only recently) is Lawrence Haworth's *Decadence and Objectivity* [University of Toronto Press, 1977]. As a Hegelian who is fully conscious and very grateful, I am bound to say that Haworth's educational (or social-political) programme is 'utopian'. But I remember that Hegel also said 'the share in the total work of Spirit which falls to the individual can only be very small' (see *Phenomenology*, end of 'Preface'). At the worst, Haworth's programme will probably not increase the level of unhappy frustration in the world; and it may — slowly — do something to diminish it. One can not confidently say the same about a proposal that we must seek for, and return to, a God who did not commit the folly of becoming human. As far as I can see that is what Emberley's positive proposal amounts to; and it is very obvious that any such 'guide of life' can be transformed by cultural frustration into dogmatic bigotry. (There are some reactions in this book itself, which I can only call 'bigoted'.)

Altogether, Emberley has given us an exposition of our state of cultural 'disposition' that is very insightful; a criticism of our 'progressive' educators that is not constructive or well-balanced; and a proposal for the repossession of our world which is worth much less than a more sympathetically positive evaluation of his humanist opponents would have been.
