dictionary definitions); after all, such an old occupation or disposition of the human mind is rather likely to undergo great changes. The victories of hypothetical-deductive and experimental (natural) science have obliterated philosophy's role as the ultimate arbiter of validity and veracity; nowadays even the critical philosophy of science (a great success in the 1970s) has fallen into disrepute. What remains of philosophy, ironically faithful to its institutional tradition, is relegated to the wilder shores of unbridled imagination; instead of being "metaphysics," the "queen of the sciences," it is gradually becoming a literary genre like fiction or the essay. Spinoza's *Ethics,* Rousseau's *Social Contract,* and Hegel's *Phenomenology* are being read because they are beautiful (and they are, to be sure). Their understanding can be aided by a scholarship that is eminently respectable, but is quite undistinguishable from the subtle literary history despised by Hegel as mere "philology," and hence irrelevant.

It would appear that philosophy flourished in a world of "alternatives," a world where regimes were competing for the title "natural" (equated with "good"), understood as based on and deduced from a true knowledge of reality, especially human reality. Many philosophers did not hesitate to designate as "natural" regimes that had been unavailable to contemporary experience (these we call utopias). The contentious and "alternative" character of pre-1989 liberal capitalism offered a propitious milieu for such musings. But the tacit ban on any serious consideration of noncapitalist or antiliberal alternatives today has transformed this milieu into one in which attempts to "transcend" private property and the market have lost their respectability and therefore their previous social cachet. A new "radical chic" is unlikely to come into being.

Yet a social and cultural history of philosophy would show that philosophers were almost always struggling with censorship; modern philosophy was created outside the universities by gentlemen of independent **[End Page 107]** means and free-floating radical intellectuals, employed more often than not on Grub Street. Modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant was mostly published in something rather reminiscent of *samizdat* (this parallel has been noted by historian Robert Darnton as well [4]). "Philosophy" in eighteenth-century France and early nineteenth-century Germany meant a cultural reality people today would call "the radical fringe." It was marginal, subversive, even clandestine, frequently associated with masonic lodges and the *Illuminati.* The university was still dominated by the clergy. Most emblematic masterpieces of modern philosophy were banned and burned. To be radical and to be a philosopher were often one and the same thing. Radical philosophers became briefly established in the 1960s and 1970s when the European radical left, too, had become established. Louis Althusser was a professor at the rue d'Ulm (the seat of the Ecole Normale Supérieure) because he was a leading member of the French Communist Party—but Jean-Paul Sartre was an independent author who lived on his royalties; until Michel Foucault, philosophical radicals were members of café society. In West Germany (until the 1970s) there was only a single academic, Wolfgang Abendroth, who said openly that he was a Marxist. "Tenured radicals" appeared only when they became harmless and lost their "organic" connections with "The Movement."

In the Eastern bloc official "Marxism" was anything but radical; whoever took the doctrine seriously was fired immediately.

Philosophy could be a reasonable enterprise as long as the distinction between mere opinion *(doxa)* and true knowledge *(episteme)* was thought to be meaningful and relevant. Liberal capitalism now fills the horizon but, since its legitimacy is not in doubt any longer, no one bothers to justify it as the outcome of a progressive development, as the superior result of the historical process. In the new dispensation, opinion will coincide with true knowledge; liberty is a condition rather than an idea. *Agon,* that is, concurrence, contest, competition, is now at the heart of the free individual, but success has no direct relationship to the human good (except perhaps for a technical aptitude for fast adaptation and accommodation to rapidly changing circumstances).

There is no substantive criterion to decide which way of life is superior; philosophy "as a way of life," as it was traditionally conceived, becomes incomprehensible.

Depth and Discovery

Another traditional characteristic of serious philosophy, *depth,* is in crisis. *Depth* is a notion that describes the capacity of a theory to show, simply, that things are not what they seem. Good theory, according to this notion, is discovery. Discovery is a novel presentation of something previously unknown or misunderstood. A good—that is, deep or **[End Page 108]** profound—theory therefore must be difficult, even mysterious. Great philosophic theories were known by their admirers to be sometimes well-nigh impossible to grasp. Good students of philosophy were supposed to be able to put up with difficulty; to penetrate a thicket of apparently counterintuitive, at times absurd-sounding arguments; to chase hidden meanings—hidden because of censorship imposed by the powers-that-be or because of the inherent difficulty of talking about the highest things. The assumption of depth, too, is dependent on the hypothesis of a world of alternatives. If the only reality is the market and the consumerist mass culture, then deep analysis demonstrating the presence of layers of human nature irreducible to these is either nonsense or . . . poetry.

This is precisely how radical philosophy is read (or "received") now in North America. It may be called "French theory" or, more conventionally, "continental philosophy" (the presumption is that radical philosophy is characteristic of one or more given national traditions or cultures and thus cannot hope to aspire to universal validity and respectability; it does not travel very well). Or it may be classified as "cultural studies" or even, in some bookshops, "critical studies," again suggesting that philosophy has limited aspirations to universal validity or respectability but may be colorful and enjoyable, like Beaujolais nouveau, which one does not drink all year.

Critics of "continental philosophy" like Alan Sokal (and a host of others) pretend to be unaware that philosophy, like romantic poetry, seeks to pursue difficulty for its own sake, to express the inexpressible, to say the ineffable, to use concepts metaphorically. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were not the first thinkers who put twisted scientific concepts to poetic-cum-metaphysical use; their predecessors included Jacob Boehme and, later, the post-Kantians: Johann Georg Hamann, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Karl Solger, Franz von Baader, Schelling, and Hegel. The so-called romantic philosophy of nature is, if you wish, crazy. But it was committed to paper in the spirit of sacred madness, in the hope of finding an intuitive shortcut to essence. No doubt it is a perilous methodology, but it has nothing to do with an ignorant naïveté concerning "hard" science.

Contemporary critics would consider this simple madness or irresponsible verbiage (often adding the terms of abuse "postmodern," "deconstructivist," "radical," and the like, sometimes fully deserved, sometimes not), a rhetorical mania that has nothing sacred, a *Begriffs-dichtung* ("conceptual poetry") that is little more than sheer nonsense. More tolerant spirits might mention "the body" or "the Imaginary," so as to separate radical philosophy from philosophy proper, which juggles concepts, not daydreams.

But philosophy's ambition is different from this. Its depth, now viewed as wild, even stark, raving mad, is bound to lead it far beyond **[End Page 109]** what can be deduced from any consensus. It claims an authority that is not institutional. Its holy *mania,* aiming at the invisible, will always tend toward something that is not immediately accessible or available. Its view that people's unexamined agreement is no guarantee of truth, that desire is no guarantee of the good, that the prevailing forms of human coexistence are not necessarily according to nature, makes it rebellious. It is this rebellion against the surface that makes philosophy both seditious and profound. If the possibility of an introspective short-cut to nature (or "existence") is denied, if the radical "no" of utopia and critique is denied, then philosophy is of course quite impossible.

Our age denies these possibilities, showing how fragile philosophy was all along, how dependent it was on a perspective outside the given, and how easily it might perish if the plausibility of the grand refusal is not granted. It is, perhaps, not for happy nations. [5]

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Footnotes

1. In the most revolutionary book to appear between 1945 and 1989, Guy Debord discovered the spiritual-intellectual nature of the present order: "The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity [in Hegel's sense], out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances." Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 15.

2. Leo Strauss, *Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays,* Hilail Gildin, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 94–95.

3. See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993), Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), Daniel Bell *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). See also a popular tract on the missing utopian and critical function of philosophy and social theory: Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). On the necessary role of philosophy to disturb tranquility, see Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics,* Peter Snowdon, trans. (London: Verso, 1998), 1–24 and *passim.*

4. See Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal 1989–1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991); cf. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), and Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

5. On radically poetic philosophy, see the following works by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). On the role of madness in theory cf. three of Félix Guattari's books: *Chaosophy* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1995), *Chaosmosis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), and *Soft Subversions* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1996).