

Debates

PEDDLING POSTMODERNISM: A RESPONSE TO STROHMAYER AND HANNAH'S "DOMESTICATING POSTMODERNISM"

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1. At Home With Postmodernism

Ulf Strohmayer and Matthew Hannah (1992) discern in recent accounts of postmodernism in geography a resistance to serious engagement with the "potentially destructive" and "calamitous" effects that it might have upon established theoretical and philosophical protocols. "Postmodernism" has been tamed by pusillanimous materialists and the theoretically timid. They construct an account of the unavoidable consequences that it has for critically inclined scholarship – the giving up of all those Enlightenment dreams of scientifically objective and rationally justifiable knowledge. For them, this route into the future does not disable attempts for politically radical and critical action; it is the necessary condition of any "respectable" engagement.

I want to suggest that the effect of their position is in fact to foreclose even more drastically than before any critical encounter with the myriad and complex issues which arise from so-called "postmodernism." What is peculiar about Strohmayer and Hannah's contribution to the postmodernism debate in geography is that, while claiming that the cause they champion *destabilizes* established modes of disciplinary enquiry and engagement, their presentation of what is at stake succeeds only in further *stabilizing* the terms and understandings within which that debate has so far been carried on. It has become characteristic for critics of certain lines of thought to construct postmodernism as a homogenous

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entity, and to subsume a diversity of work beneath that label. Butler (1992:5) raises the question of the political effects of this maneuver:

What is postmodernism? What kind of existence does it have? . . . Do all those theories have the same structure (a comforting notion to the critic who would dispense with them all at once)? Is the effort to colonize and domesticate these theories under the sign of the same, to group them synthetically and masterfully under a single rubric, a simple refusal to grant the specificity of these positions, an excuse not to read, and not to read closely?

What is implied is that the kind of existence that postmodernism has can be properly characterized as being a discursive one – there are a series of practices and operations that systematically construct the object of which they speak or write (“postmodernism”) in the process of speaking and writing about it, so that that object appears to have existence independent of and prior to the modes of its expression. Butler sees this as a form of discourse with specifically repressive effects, which work to limit the impact of a diverse range of theories by reducing them all to a small number of simple predicates. Nowhere is there any evidence that Strohmayer and Hannah are willing to challenge this discursive construction of postmodernism. They are happy to reproduce precisely the same operations of conflation and identification, to state authoritatively the conclusions that different works imply, and to repeat, with a new twist, the same closing down of questions that critics of postmodernism regularly effect.

Strohmayer and Hannah’s (1992:35) discussion of the challenge posed by postmodernism to geography revolves around their account of “the question which remains dormant at the root of all postmodernisms, namely the question of representation” – which for them resolves into the “problem” of whether “language” can establish truthful statements about “reality.” They argue that language can’t establish any convincing relation with its outside, and we are mired in an infinite regress of words with no hope of knowing whether what we say about the world is true or false (36). I want to indicate how the very question they pose as regards the “problem of representation” is founded on a specific *misrepresentation* of the work of those whose authority they invoke.¹ What needs to be resisted is the construction of particular philosophical and theoretical work into the toothless beast we have come to know as postmodernism – the effect of this construction is to invite cavalier engagements with work whose complexity and openness in posing its problematizations demands a reciprocal degree of modesty and respect in drawing out its consequences.

Here, I shall focus on Derrida's work to give some impression of how a proper (*sic*) reading of it might lead to a different perspective on what is at stake, and a somewhat more sober approach to problems of representation than the one under discussion. The example of Derrida enables us to examine in detail how Strohmayer and Hannah systematically misrepresent the work of those who they rally in their favor, and to attend to the enabling device by which they do so – an unexamined binary opposition between language and reality.

Strohmayer and Hannah (1992:36) tell us that deconstruction is that act of questioning which “radically negates any possibility of extratextual stable reference.” They continue that this is the point made in Derrida's cryptic comment to the effect that there is nothing outside the text – that it is a denial of linguistic reference. Accordingly, “the very act of referentiality thus always secretly ‘deconstructs’ its own constitutive claims towards representivity.” Given the definition of deconstruction presented immediately before, this can only be taken as suggesting that reference is negated – language fails to do what it claims to do, tell us about the world. “In other words, whenever we speak *about* a reality, the language we use is *not* the reality to which it is supposed to refer,” a fact that Strohmayer and Hannah take as the basis for their quite unrelenting argument that language doesn't actually refer to that which it claims to in any verifiable fashion. The “vertical” relation between language and reality can never be absolutely secured, rendering all truth “undecidable”: “Descriptive language, no matter how precise and exhaustive, can never succeed in anchoring itself to a reality.” (36). Strohmayer and Hannah's argument concerning the futility of believing that we could have knowledge of an objective world rests on this repeated rhetoric of *linking*, *anchoring* and *securing* being impossible, presupposing an understanding of two external realms – language on one side, reality on the other. Their whole account of the problem of representation, both in their *Antipode* piece and in their recent putative “deconstruction” of structuration theory (Hannah and Strohmayer 1991), rests on the charge that all epistemologies can be reduced to the most naive form of foundationalism, positing a simple correspondence theory of knowledge and mimetic conception of language. Nowhere do they call into question the subject/object dualism that animates their presentation of language and reality as ontologically distinct realms.² Instead we see a leap from the *problematization* of certain ways of understanding the referential function of language (and therefore theory) to the unequivocal pronouncement of the *impossibility* of veridical knowledge and of language referring to anything at all. They remain bound to the caricature of foundationalist epistemology that they set up just to knock down – and true to the notion of subjects with language outside of an object, trying to gain some absolutely secure relation to it, only now they have decided upon the futility of any such attempt.

2. Questioning Postmodernism?

Derrida himself suggests (1985a:19) that while deconstruction questions received notions of reference, it is not an abandonment of reference altogether:

Not only is there reference for a text, but never was it proposed that we erase effects of reference or of referents. Merely that we rethink those effects of reference.

His position on questions of reference and representation bears little relation to that proposed by Strohmayr and Hannah. They argue that the "horizontal" movement of differentiation through which meaning is produced in signification renders the "vertical" link between word and thing impossible – yet their argument only carries force if one retains the very narrow notion of reference being essentially a matter of *naming*. Strohmayr and Hannah's apocalyptic reading of the "arbitrary nature of the sign" rests on setting the criterion of reference absurdly high, in a kind of inverted Cratylism where, if there is no natural, self-guaranteeing link between word and object, there can be no link at all. Far from reference being made impossible, language is only referential in so far as horizontal difference is a condition of possibility of its meaningfulness; only the differentially and relationally produced meaningfulness of signs allows them to be *used* referentially. The seemingly radical argument to the effect that language cannot tell the truth, because it is not that about which it talks, turns out to be utterly banal. It is only difference that does allow language to tell us about what is other than it: "*Difference* is a reference and vice versa" (Derrida 1988:137).

Are Strohmayr and Hannah being more canny than this? Remember that they have argued that "the very movement of referentiality thus always secretly 'deconstructs' its own constitutive claims towards referentiality." Doesn't this amount not to a denial of reference, but to an argument that we can never be sure or certain that reference works. Sadly, they have foreclosed such a charitable reading. They understand "deconstructing" to be a "radical negation" – so the sense of their comment, remaining true to the words of their own text, is that *reference negates itself*. Negating: denying, nullifying, destroying, rendering ineffective. Reference doesn't work.

Deconstruction is not a simple negation. The idea of reference deconstructing itself in its very moment does have some sense from a Derridean point of view. Processes of reference and representation are able to achieve certain effects only by remaining blind to their conditions of

possibility, and deconstruction is that activity by which these conditions of possibility are shown to act as constitutive limits; as simultaneously conditions of *impossibility*, not of those effects, but of those effects ever being able to be totalized – that is, of achieving absolute identity between things referred to and the mode of reference. Language does refer, it does represent, but only by virtue of constitutive relations of difference and by virtue of it not being able to identify thing said and said thing absolutely, which would be an end to representation, and a restoration of presence. That is the understanding of reference and representation (albeit, a potted version) that follows from Derrida's work; it couldn't be further from a negation.

So what of the distinction between language and reality? Might we not be rightly suspicious of any argument which relies so heavily on such a stark distinction, at no point calling it into question, while at the same time invoking the authority of Derrida, sworn enemy of all such unexamined binary oppositions. Strohmayr and Hannah (1992:34) in fact provide us in their own text with the means by which to measure the distance between their account of representation and that of Derrida. They quote him, from *Speech and Phenomena*, to the following effect:

. . . there is every reason to believe that representation and reality are not merely added together here and there in language, for the simple reason that it is impossible in principle to rigorously distinguish them. And it doesn't help to say that this happens *in* language; language in general – and language alone – *is* this.

A brief foray into the text from which this comes finds Derrida discussing Husserl's attempt to expel representation from the realm of pure consciousness, and insisting to the contrary that all communication and consciousness is always already entwined in representation. All language use rests on representation, and representation and reference are not something attached to language from the outside, as Strohmayr and Hannah would have it (1992:37). That is what one finds Derrida arguing in *Speech and Phenomena* – the exact reverse of Strohmayr and Hannah's presentation of the consequences of the postmodern "critique of representation." Derrida is not against representation, but is complicating our understanding of how it works.

Derrida writes that representation and reality cannot be rigorously distinguished in language, and that this situation of their being thoroughly interwoven is what constitutes language as such. Strohmayr and Hannah quote him saying this. It's there, in their own text. They then go on to insist that language and reality can't be securely linked (a statement that necessarily implies that they are distinguishable and

separable entities), and then list the dire consequences for anyone still foolish and stubborn enough to actually think we can know or say anything about the world. If one reads the passage they quote, one finds in it a position on the conceptual relations between reality, language and representation that is completely at odds with theirs. It problematizes conceptions of reference understood as the matching up of words and the world outside, on the grounds that it is impossible to draw a strict division between representation and reality (they presuppose one another, call forth each other), and not because the one is inadequate to the other. Language and reality are not two separate realms needing to be linked in some way. Reality is *in* language, *with* representation. Language is the place where reality and representation meet.

Strohmayr and Hannah construct the "problem of representation" in terms of whether or not language can successfully represent reality – whether the two realms can be securely *linked*. Having posed this as the central question, they then proceed to pronounce authoritatively their chosen answer. It is not the answer they give that is at issue – it is whether or not they have even grasped the types of questions which are thrown up by writing such as Derrida's. Their self-proclaimed "steadfast adherence to an attitude of questioning" (1992:48) has very specific limits. What remains unquestioned is the distinction between reality, and a separate activity by which we struggle to represent it with signs. The ontological distinction between a realm of reality and a realm of language is rigorously adhered to as the enabling opposition of their account of the postmodern crisis of representation. Critics of modernity, from Marx onwards, have taken as their focus the analysis of the production of what Mitchell (1991:xii) calls the "peculiar metaphysic of modernity," in which meaning in the world is experienced in the form of representations of a pre-given reality. Questions of the form "can language guarantee a secure link between words and reality?" find their place *within* this metaphysic, and do not contribute to the analysis of the production of this effect, an effect to which Strohmayr and Hannah remain in thrall. Their problem of representation is little more than the old philosophical problem of knowledge, which seeks guarantees of the possibility of knowledge. It is the ideological question *par excellence* – it is marked by the circularity whereby the terms of the question asked have been formulated by and predetermine the "answer" (Althusser & Balibar 1970:52). This sort of question repeats in its structure what is already known – the simple obviousness of distinctions between thought and object, mind and matter, representation and reality, etc. Strohmayr and Hannah merely answer the same old search for guarantees with a resoundingly negative answer, but their conclusion displays the same structure and the same unrelenting assertion of having

found a final, absolute solution to the "problem." The unequivocal force with which they pronounce their conclusion indicates how the problem they posed was indeed "closed in advance by its answer" (Ibid:55).

Open questions must endeavor to refashion the obviousness of *what is* into a new configuration which enables the problem of its production to be gleaned *as* a problem. Work such as Derrida's focuses not so much on the question of representation, as on the *question of the question* itself – how can we ask questions which do not, by presupposing certain ontological givens, predetermine their answers; how is the question maintained "[a]s a question" (Derrida 1978:80). To ask whether representation and reality can be securely linked is to presuppose the givenness of this ontological distinction. The view that language cannot represent reality because of its inherent opacity derives from the same taken-for-granted binary opposition that would determine language as merely the transparent reflection of a non-linguistic reality. Strohmayer and Hannah (1992:32–3) pose the question of whether the world is *taken* or *given* by language – whether language makes present a pre-existing world, or creates that world as an effect. For them, the rhetorical, metaphorical, figurative character of language, its capacity to predicate meaning, causes irreducible problems for the task of making language correspond to reality. Yet, either way, the same *fault* is ascribed to language – just as for logical positivism, it is linguistic ambiguity that produces the disparity between words and objects, so for these "post-modernists," vagueness and ambiguity are the source of "the inherent limitations of language" (53). The same characteristic is ascribed to language in both cases – it is understood as a *source of error*. Some hold that this characteristic can be eradicated, others hold that it is irreducible, and that consequently we are left with no secure guarantees for knowledge. What remains unquestioned is the historical production of the effect whereby experience is divided up and understood in terms of pre-given objects and signs which are allocated to them. The obviousness of the division of the world into objects, and of the function of language being to represent those objects, is what figures as diverse as Adorno, Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Marx and Wittgenstein take as problematic. They have attempted to slip the bounds of the ideological problem of the guarantees of knowledge, by focusing instead on the question of its *production*.

We must now return to the contention that deconstruction *negates* extra-textual reference, as the authors under discussion would have us believe. Deconstruction involves a "double gesture."³ First an inversion, an overturning of received oppositions; then a displacement by which the terms of the oppositions are re-inscribed in a new and unfamiliar economy of sense. This procedure is inscribed in the very textuality of those texts produced under the name "Derrida." It is writing that in-

volves a practice of *paleonymy*, of strategically retaining old names to establish new concepts (Derrida 1981:71). The re-inscription of old names liberates characteristics of concepts that are normally kept in check and subordinated. The stake is to demonstrate the systematic relations between concepts that are often subjected to a strict separation – such as, for example, language and reality. The operation of reversing and displacing terms is necessary for the strategic intervention that deconstruction makes in certain arenas, a maneuver that retains the terms of the old structure which it works upon and against because in so doing, it retains the power of intervention in that same field (Derrida 1982a:330).

The passage that Strohmayr and Hannah quote from *Speech and Phenomena* is an example of this practice. Language is not here opposed to an external reality; language is the tissue into and out of which representation and reality are woven. There is a wholly different sense of language's relation to reality and representation inscribed in this simple passage. Derrida writes that representation and reality cannot be rigorously distinguished. Strohmayr and Hannah read this as support for their contention that language cannot represent reality – a theoretical proposition which rests on assuming that very same distinction that Derrida questions. They produce a reading of Derrida from within the assumptions and relations of a theoretical problematic which his writing disrupts and displaces. The re-inscription of old terms into new relations constructs new problematics, *new questions*, about language, representation, reality, texts, insides and outsides, etc.⁴ By constructing postmodernism as anti-representational, and by invoking deconstruction as a process of negation in so doing, Strohmayr and Hannah register how far they remain caught within an old problematic and its sterile structure of binary oppositions.⁵ Derrida is invoked by them to help give an answer to a form of question which, in its enabling structure of predicates and propositions, is what is contested by deconstruction from the very start. That their "postmodernism" gives prematurely conclusive answers to the questions they raise, is in no small part made possible because they have not even identified the right sort of questions animating the problematic of the work to which they lay claim.

3. Questioning What?

Having raced through myriad philosophical traditions in their discussion of the problem of representation in language and theory, Strohmayr and Hannah move on to conflate, without a moment's hesitation, the philosophical critique of representation with issues of representation

in politics. They thereby ignore an explicit warning given by Derrida (1982b:304) concerning the difficulty of approaching issues of representation in a responsible manner:

But to determine language as representation is not the effect of an accidental prejudice, a theoretical fault or a manner of thinking, a limit or a closure among others, a form of representation, precisely, which came about one day and of which we could rid ourselves by a decision when the time comes. Today there is a great deal of thought against representation. In a more or less articulated or rigorous way, this judgement is easily arrived at: representation is bad. And this without being able to assign, in the final analysis, the place and the necessity of that evaluation. We should ask ourselves what is this place and above all what may be the curious risks (in particular political ones) of such a prevalent evaluation . . . And yet, whatever the strength and the obscurity of this dominant current, the authority of representation constrains us, imposing itself on our thought through a whole dense, enigmatic, and heavily stratified history. It programs us and precedes us and warns us too severely for us to make a mere object of it, a representation, an object of representation confronting us, before us like a theme. It is even difficult enough to pose a systematic and historical question on the topic (a question of the type: "What is the system and the history of representation") now that our concepts of system and of history are essentially marked by structure and the closure of representation.

Derrida points to the necessity of what we might call a "symptomatic" reading of those sorts of arguments that would have us think that the problem of representation can be reduced to the simple proposition that, as he puts it, "representation is bad." It follows that Strohmayer and Hannah's reading of not only Derrida, but of other philosophical work which they invoke in support of their vision of postmodernism, can and must be read as a specifically determined intervention, and that we might strive to identify the "place" from which their reading departs.

Strohmayer and Hannah display none of the sense of caution that Derrida insists is necessary when trying to ask questions about representation. They have heavily invested in the "representation is bad" school of postmodernism, and their account is marked by a lack of attention to the problems that he suggests attend this issue. They exhibit instead all those traits which follow from thinking that one can, by a

simple act of will, escape the constraints of representation. This presumption is what Derrida warns will lead inevitably to the restoration of all those values of unity, immediacy, identity, transparency, and presence that it is the task of a careful and modest questioning of representation to problematize. Such a questioning, to be a proper and rigorous *questioning*, would not lead to the premature rejection of certain practices and values which, by simply negating them and valorizing their traditional opposites, leaves established structures of thought thoroughly intact:

. . . a criticism or a deconstruction of representation would remain feeble, vain, and irrelevant if it were to lead to some rehabilitation of immediacy, of original simplicity, of presence without repetition or delegation, if it were to induce a criticism of calculable objectivity, of criticism, of science, of technique, or of political representation. The worst regressions can put themselves at the service of this antirepresentative prejudice. (Derrida 1982b:311)

This is a precise description of, and warning against, the course pursued by Strohmayer and Hannah – in their haste to escape from caricatures of their own making, they appeal to the value of unmediated sensuous experience as the alternative to all that speculative theorization, empirical testing, and political justification, and thereby reproduce the most consistent ruse of those who think they can simply go beyond representation, restoring to centrality the privileged figures of unbridled subjectivity and unmediated experience. These are the most stubborn figures of thought that remains representational while claiming to be otherwise (Derrida 1982b:310). If they can do without theory or reason in justifying their radical political inclinations, nonetheless an account of where these same inclinations comes from is provided. This is how they conclude their discussion of the irrelevance of theory for critical and political endeavor:

Prior to any interpretative effort, our sensibilities drive us to disgust, offense and objection. It is this radicalizing experience that earns us respectability, not the (illusory) rigor of the mode in which we express it. (Strohmayer and Hannah 1992:53)

They posit a transparent, immediate intuition which, in a moment of self-sustained and authentic communion that is wholly subjective, can transcend the dualisms that structure their argument; and present this as the means to a critical consciousness that can do without recourse to

mediating and duplicitous modes of linguistic expression. With their aestheticizing view of language as referring to nothing but itself, and of scientifically objective knowledge as nothing but a ruse of language, what we have here are motifs that repeat, under a new name, the Romanticist rejection of the Enlightenment project. In repeating them, they ignore the degree to which deconstruction has set out to reveal the continued duplicities of this type of rhetoric of immediacy and synthesis, which characterizes Romanticism, with the frameworks against which it reacts (e.g., de Man 1983). This rallying call to invest in some prelinguistic, pre-conceptual, "radicalizing experience" as the privileged source of critique, marks in their text a characteristic tendency to establish emotively subjective, voluntaristic *foundations* for postmodernist narratives of resistance.⁶

Their radical rhetoric dissimulates a hollow and barren vision of contemporary political reality. The conflation of the philosophical and political notions of representation that are "related but irreducibly discontinuous" (Spivak 1988:275), tends to this type of restoration of the value of pure immediacy in the political realm, and as Spivak's development of this Derridean theme suggests, to the restitution of an "essentialised, utopian politics." Strohmayr and Hannah reach precisely the opposite conclusion from that implied by the deconstructive perspective on these matters, for which a rhetoric of directness, immediacy, and self-presence is every bit as misleading in political interventions as it is in theory and philosophy. The hollowness of the "representation is bad" theme is made most explicit in those extraordinary two pages which Strohmayr and Hannah (1992:48-9) give to discussing the political implications of their critique of representation. All politics based on notions of representation, justification and reasoning are tantamount to fascism. This much at least they seem to have learnt from Adorno – to call just about everything they do not like "fascist." They manage to ignore the fact that many oppressed groups are still struggling *for* representation, thus effectively delegitimizing such struggles for being after the wrong goal. More concretely, one might wonder just what is the political "respectability" today of complacently identifying any and all forms of representative politics as potentially, if not actually, fascist, without making any effort to specify their understanding of that term. We urgently need to develop an analysis of fascism as an historical phenomenon, past and present. Given its contemporary manifestations across Europe, we might want to be a little more discriminating about just what we do and do not want to label as fascist. Strohmayr and Hannah offer instead only the empty bravado of a very comfortable form of absolute epistemological skepticism.

What Strohmayr and Hannah's piece seems to confirm is that there are advantages to *both sides* of the putative divide thrown up over that

object we call postmodernism, to reproduce the forms of understanding and terms of reference that have established it as an object of discussion in the first place. The resulting circularity and confusion is evident in recent debates (for example, see Graham (1990,1992), Peet (1992), and Resnick and Woolf (1992); and Curry (1991,1992), Pred (1992), Hannah and Strohmayer (1992)). For the critics happy to caricature and homogenize diverse works as postmodern, as well as for those happy to buy into and defend that same representation, what is being effected by this mode of discourse is an avoidance, an exclusion, and a repression of the *types of questions* which might be much more "radical" and "critical" in their implications for what we understand to be problematic, when compared to the mirror-image answers which provide the easy satisfactions that the *stabilized* discourse of postmodernism encourages.

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Notes

1. The most notable example of this comes in their appeal to Adorno to head off the charge of relativism (Strohmayer and Hannah 1992: 47–48). They present his discussion of the matter (Adorno 1973: 35–37) as if he is accepting the inevitability of the "relativist" attitude, and demonstrating the "shabbiness" of any critique of it. In fact, what Adorno finds not only shabby but more importantly *inadequate* is the standard criticism of relativism, to the effect that all relativists believe in at least one absolute, which is the validity of their own position. For him, there is a much more effective way of doing away with this form of "bourgeois scepticism," and that is by squarely locating the grounds of this attitude in "the objective laws of social production under private ownership of the means of production" (Adorno 1979: 37). Since Strohmayer and Hannah (1992: 29) start their paper by disqualifying any attempt to give a socio-historical account of the production of different ideas and knowledges, it is perhaps not surprising that they manage to miss that this is precisely the point of Adorno's discussion of relativism, and can even take him to be the "supreme example of the fact that *no amount of belief in the existence of an extra-textual reality can produce the slightest iota of certainty for whatever we say about 'it'.*" (48). Note that the authors here make it quite clear that they consider it completely impossible to have verifiable knowledge of the world – "not the slightest iota of certainty" – and are not making the more circumspect, but hardly original argument, that all knowledge is open to degrees of doubt, uncertainty and error, which is the very reason why and means by which sciences exist.
2. In their piece on structuration theory, the same authors go so far as to dismiss out of hand the idea that language and reality might be *inseparable* as nothing more than an "elegant method" for making the inevitable tautologies of speculative theory palatable (Hannah and Strohmayer 1991: 325).

3. See Derrida (1985a: 7) for a discussion of this "double gesture" as "a kind of affirmation" rather than a mere negation.
4. Strohmayer and Hannah (1992: 53) conclude their *Antipode* piece by insisting that deconstruction should not be asked to provide a constructive substitution of what it "destroys," a characteristic demand which they regard as one sign of the reappropriation of "postmodernist" thought by what it renders redundant. They make the same point in their reply to Curry (1991), where they insist that the effort to "turn inherently destructive" concepts and theories "into a constructive source of expanded possibility" must be resisted (Hannah and Strohmayer 1992: 309). As the summary I have given suggests, deconstruction is not simply "destructive" in the first place precisely because it is the operation of working upon established structures in order to open up new possibilities of understanding.
5. This is nowhere more evident than in their account of Saussure, in which the distinction between *signifier* and *signified* is taken as corresponding to that between language and reality (Strohmayer and Hannah 1992: 32; 36), and they argue that his was a "conceptualization of language as a transparent vehicle of meaning" in which the unity of signifier and signified in the *sign* is presented as an attempt to establish "the necessary nexus between world and language" (32). They then charge that Saussure failed to rigorously guarantee the certainty of this connection. This presentation indicates the extent to which an investment in an *a priori* ontological opposition determines their arguments. Saussure's account of the arbitrariness of the sign starts from the proposition that there is *no* natural link between either signifiers (the material substance of language) and signifieds (the *ideal* content), or between signs and the reality to which they refer. When it comes to accounting for the relation between language and reality, the novelty lies in suggesting that this relation is wholly conventional, that is, socially determined. In failing to recognize that Saussure is not concerned with analyzing representation in terms of words and reality, Strohmayer and Hannah also manage to miss how he rendered the strictly philosophical problem of absolute guarantees of this connection redundant – by opening the way for an analysis of language as a social system and social practice.
6. See Negri (1989: 200–207) for an account of postmodernism as a new and specifically determined form of romanticism. Hannah and Strohmayer (1992: 309) accuse Curry (1991) of remaining silent on the issue of the subject, and suggest that it is this issue that is crucial to a full understanding of postmodernism. Their own account not only ignores this question but rests squarely on the valorized ground of subjectivity, suggesting at the very least a certain confusion.

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