

ENDING RESISTANCE OR RESISTING ENDING? POLITICS ACROSS THE FINS DE SIÈCLE

Introduction

This is an essay on the relations between modes of modern historicizing and politics. More precisely, it is a study of the political end points arrived at in different methods of envisioning the past, and a sketch offering outsider historiographies as potentially liberating tools for political theory. In describing how particular brands of historicizing generate particular means of framing politics, I will seek to link and interrogate late-nineteenth century and late-twentieth century senses of ending and resistance.¹ The essay will consider three modes of historicizing - modern progressivism, the posthistorical, and ahistorical pasts - before offering a reading of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle as a text which makes available a potential recuperation of a politics of resistance from the French fin de siècle.² The essay has two foci: firstly, a description of modes of history which have their origins in nineteenth century thought, and which are still used in the generation of history and politics in our fin de siècle. And secondly, a suggestion that although most of these methods of reading the past are antithetical to poststructuralist critique, that Zola's *histoire naturelle et sociale* shares many of the concerns of poststructuralist criticism and may make available a poststructuralist historiography traced back to the nineteenth century fin de siècle.

Detailing the ideas of history implicit in political ends is part of the essay's aim of troubling the notion that uncomplicated and transparent borrowings can be made from the late-nineteenth century to the late-twentieth century in the generation of political description and prescription. My suggestion will be that certain modes of late-twentieth century politics, such as *posthistoire*, achieve a transfer of nineteenth-century ideas to contemporary situations as a means of evading or eliding this twentieth century and the political debates its history has generated.³ My general position on the possibility of meaningful exchange of political ideas from one fin de

1. I use the term 'resistance' primarily in a political sense (resistance to a given political system) and the term 'ending' mainly in a historiographical fashion, to refer to teleological conceptions of the past. In entitling the essay 'Ending Resistance or Resisting Ending?' I am seeking to link the historiographical and the political; pointing out, for example, that while Marxists and posthistorians may believe that they hold radically different political worldviews (forms of resistance) their common reliance on teleologically-driven notions of progressive history marks out common ends that link this form of theorizing the past with the content of their politics. In this essay my suggestion will be that genuinely radical forms of politics are linked by a common resistance to the telos; that a definable resistance to historical ending can be traced as the key to the radical politics of Zola, post-structuralist thought, and Indian writers such as Ashis Nandy.

2. Émile Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, 5 vols (Paris: Pléiade Gallimard, 1960-1967).

3. For critical accounts of western teleologies see: Lutz Niethammer (in collaboration with Dirk Van Laak), *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* (London: Verso, 1992); and: Perry Anderson, 'The Ends of History', in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992).

siècle to the next will be a sceptical one; questioning the impulse to maintain the centring of theory on a Franco-German axis, and wary of the sweeping over of methodological and epistemological difficulties involved in such work.

Reading across the fins de siècle

For the purposes of this essay I will use Shearer West's broad notion of the fin de siècle as being 'a generation roughly 1870-1914, rather than simply the last decade of the nineteenth century', since my theme is linked more to a late-nineteenth century/early-twentieth century experience of scientised and progressively regulated capitalism and mass politics, than it is to elite metropolitan aesthetics from a particular decade.⁴ I do not treat the late-twentieth century as a situation akin to the late-nineteenth century in a comparative study of the politics of irrationality, of anarchy, play and surface, but implicitly read a single, continuous moment of western modernity and capitalism across these two times.

In work on the fin de siècle there is a tendency to make rather glib, speculative comparisons between two periods of time without asking how these identified similarities might have operated between two periods, and with a blindness to the exclusions from politics and history that are enforced in an unsighted leap from the 1890s to the 1990s. In prefaces critics often conceive of this jump as the political and moral worth of their work:

If through reading this book, anyone feels that their understanding of the 1990s is enhanced by an exploration of the 1890s, I will think that my work was worthwhile.⁵

This is what caught my eye about the circumstances: the discrepancy between material progress and spiritual dejection reminded me of our own time. So much was going right, even in France as the nineteenth century ended; so much was being said to make one think that all was going wrong.⁶

The coming fin de siècle will be understood as an imperfect, ambiguous, confused and contradictory effort to replicate this genuine rebellion from the previous century.⁷

The historiography of convenience which imaginatively reconstructs links between

4. Shearer West, *Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. vii.

5. Shearer West, p. vii.

6. Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 1986), pp. 2-3.

7. Stjepan G. Meštrovic, *The Coming Fin de Siècle: An application of Durkheim's sociology to modernity and postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. x.

two centuries also represents a shift from the centring of this century's political and historical debates around modernity, capitalism, experiences of war and the Holocaust.⁸ These experiences, and understandings and memories of these experiences, have framed the manner in which the political is theorised. The danger in fin de siècle writing which links the 1890s to the 1990s is that it simply plays facile games of comparison whilst evading engagement with the debates of twentieth century politics.

A second, and perhaps more crucial, objection to fin de siècle linking is this brand of theorising's frequent blindness to its western situation, to its particular impositions and exclusions. If late-nineteenth century social theory's lack of self-consciousness as to its theorising on modernity and progress's particular western situation was framed in a focus on the nation and the European continent as primary sites of interest, then the late-twentieth century equivalent is a stress on the global, with especial reference to communications and the environment. In the linking of the modern fin de siècle to our postmodern end of century there is some danger that nineteenth century biases and exclusions are replicated in contemporary criticism which fails to acknowledge the challenges posed to the academy, and to this kind of historicizing in particular, by poststructuralism and post-colonialism.

A conclusion of this essay will be that the persistently blinkered moving down the narrow trails of western critical theories invites the suggestion that understandings of the past, the west and of modernity which come from outside its critical establishment could be of more use than political positions which have become locked into western debates and dialectics that have operated as exclusionary narratives. Tracing the links between centuries' ends may be a process best theorised and understood outside the western canon of historiographies.

The sights of this essay, though, are still on a nineteenth/twentieth century fin de siècle problematic. Theorists as varied as Arnold Toynbee, Frederic Jameson and Scott Lash have pointed to the last decades of the nineteenth century as a key moment in the fixing of a brand of regulated national capitalisms, mass politics, culture and consumption, 'a process of cultural differentiation and social atomization' [Lash], and the political and economic institutionalisation of a global order of capital [Jameson].⁹

My suggestion is that Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle offers a descriptive critique of such processes which suggests both the limits of modes of historical and political theory which seek to rationalise such changes as inevitable modern progression or as the resolution of historical and social contradictions. Zola also offers description

8. I use the term 'historiography of convenience' to refer to that mode of historicizing which privileges the making of imaginative leaps across time, rather than attempting to trace forces as processes *between* times. This might be represented as an opposition between 'traditional' history and 'structural' history.

9. For Toynbee, see: Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 19. Lash cited in: Bryan S. Turner, 'Periodization and the Postmodern', in Bryan S. Turner (ed), *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Sage, 1990), p. 3. For Jameson's rigid postmodern periodization see: Fredric Jameson, 'The Ideology of the Text', in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Vol. 1 - Situations of Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 67.

which criticises those radical political theories and movements of that nineteenth-century fin de siècle moment which emerge as holistic shadow critiques or inversions of capitalism and modernity; modes which have continued as styles of political theory and practice. My claim is that it is Zola's descriptive mode of critique which complicates conventional epistemologies of modernity and may make available alternative or clearer modes of historical and political understanding.

Progressive History and its opponents

The classic progressive notion of History implicates not only those like Eugen Weber who believe that 'a lot took place during these two decades [1890-1910] that made life better for a lot of people', but also the Marxist science of history and those accounts of modernity which operate with fairly untroubled notions of a singular, linear notion of the past.¹⁰ For Octavio Paz modernity and progressive, linear history are irrevocably linked, for 'The idea of modernity is a by-product of the conception of history as a progressive, linear and irrepeatable process.'¹¹ 'Modernity is the leading edge of the movement of history, the incarnation of evolution or revolution, the two faces of progress.'¹² The violence that rides with progress, be it political, religious or racial, is well documented, but it is against this dualistic offer of evolution or revolution as means of modern progress that I read the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. If the desire to complete the project of modernity, linked to conceptions of rationality and progress from the western enlightenment, as evinced in Habermas's work and his battles with forces cast as anti-progressive conservatives, is the mark of modern history, then the aim of postmodern historiography is to cast uncertainty over the progressive project. It attempts to trouble the notion that the past can be envisioned and unified as a single entity fit for grounding political theory, and the notion that a narrative of progress is a useful means of obtaining just societies and a better world.

However, because postmodernism is emphatically not a single theoretical entity or political project, it is helpful to distinguish between the variety of impulses collected under this banner. For as a brand of thought postmodernism does not necessarily abandon the progressive notion of history. As a means of critiquing grand narratives of the past that have meshed with totalising political and economic systems in the twentieth century, and as a means of more adequately describing contemporary societies, postmoderns may throw off the notion of progressive history only to hope for its re-emergence in a more plural, contingent and acceptable form. This might be one criticism of western, and particularly neo-Marxist, postmodernism, from a postmodern position which comprehends postmodernism as a set of understandings of the west that comes from outside Europe, which originated 'probably not [in] May

10. Eugen Weber, p. 2.

11. Octavio Paz, 'La Búsqueda del Presente', in Rico, Francisco (ed), *Historia y crítica de la literatura española*, vol 9: *Los nuevos nombres: 1975-1990* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1992) p. 41. My translation.

12. Octavio Paz, p. 42.

1968 but rather [in] the Algerian War of Independence.¹³ To paraphrase Fanon this is a style of thinking that sees 'Europe as a product of the Third World'; which turns the tables on the west in order to see both the west's oppressive nature and the repression it endures in its oppression of 'the non-west', and to see the complicity of theory like Fanon's which self-consciously acknowledges its inability to completely escape western modes of thinking (and even the celebration of this duality or ambiguity).¹⁴

The claim that western modes of thought, of philosophy and history, are bound to the political practices of western imperialism is the offer of a brand of post-colonial and post-structural postmodernism which I will refer to as radical postmodernism. This style of thought is at some remove from much western postmodernism which behind its concerns with describing the social meaning of advanced electronic technologies and 'the death of art', is still committed to the recuperation of progressive history. These two ways of thinking and seeing often fail to communicate because many moderns and postmoderns do not see that the offer of radical postmodernism is not progress or advancement but deeper understanding; or perhaps conventional postmoderns do not value this offer. The radical postmodern project is similar to that of Wittgenstein in that its prime concerns are epistemological rather than programmatic: for such critiques theory has reached an impasse that only deep meditation on the warped roots of its original conceptions and its organisation will perhaps later facilitate means of writing of new pasts and new politics. This project suggests that unless we re-envision our pasts and presents; unless we come to deeper understandings of the way powers are organised in our world and in our means of conceptualising the world, then futures of greater justice, futures outside of the western mode of progress, will not be imaginable. Radical postmoderns trouble the grounds of enlightened, progressive modern history in the name of a politics of understanding.¹⁵

13. Robert Young, p. vii. A postmodern project which has been of crucial importance in the theorisation of the complicit nature of west/non-west relations and in an exploration of engagements with 'the other' has been Jacques Derrida's work, yet recent texts such as *L'Autre Cap* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) and *Specires de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993) have suggested that Derrida ultimately conceives of poststructuralism as a means of re-inventing a sharper, less western brand of Marxist critique which is more attendant to difference and its own capacity to exclude.

14. For a study of such complicity and the binds of repressive-oppressive relations see: Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

15. Perhaps the most articulate radical postmodern critic, who accepts the political consequence of poststructuralism, is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Her suggestion is that 'First of all that the Western theoretical establishment should take a moratorium on producing a global solution... I think in the language of the commercials, one would say:

Try it, you might like it. Try to behave as though you are part of the margin, try to unlearn your privilege'. From: 'The Postmodern Condition: The End of Politics?', in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 30.

The End of History?

The institutional power of the progressive mode of history comes not simply from the strength of its own logic or its engagement with radical postmodernism, but in the vital dialectic it is locked into with Hegelians and posthistorians. At times, as in Marxist debate, this battle between ending and progression is internalised in a particular field where progressives and Endists speak the same language and marshal the same theorists in seeking to show that History has or has not ended. Perversely, it is this dichotomous relationship between progress and ending which reinforces stultified, untroubled linear western notions of the past. Habermas's critique of those who seek to delay or prematurely end the project of modernity, and his fear for that project in the face of Endism, even when it is unjustified in his grouping postmoderns together under the title of 'neo-conservatives', is typical of the narrow path that debates in western history tread, for both endists and progressives are so virulently committed to the heroic rightness of their eventual vision of just worlds that a complication of the grounds of debate cannot be afforded.¹⁶

This centring of western modes of historicizing around a conflict between continuing progress and final resolution has been intensified in recent years by the entry of Francis Fukuyama and his critics into debates on the politics of history.¹⁷ Fukuyama's project to End History around a model of western scientific capitalism and liberal democracy has served as a focus for groups across the academy and the political spectrum. Endist debates have allowed them to re-orient their political positions, which, while they generally oppose Fukuyama's thesis, tend to co-opt his progressively teleological modelling of the past. The speed with which the End of History thesis has become an accepted norm and frame across the west is suggestive of the strength of the progress-resolution dialectic.¹⁸

Both progressive and Endist modes of History derive much of their philosophies from Hegel, and it is my suggestion, after Foucault, that the sterility of the politics of modern history derives from this bind to Hegel in the form of battles between Left

16. For Habermas's setting up of modernity as a progressive project in opposition to postmoderns and other 'conservatives', see: Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project?', in Charles Jencks (ed), *The Post-Modern Reader* (London: Academy, 1992). For a radical postmodern feminist reading of Habermas see: Diana Coole, 'Habermas and the Question of Alterity', in Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (eds), *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

17. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992). For a set of Marxist responses to Fukuyama see: Christopher Bertram and Andrew Chitty (eds), *Has History Ended? Fukuyama, Marx, Modernity* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994). For a more varied collection see: Andrew Burns (ed), *After History? Francis Fukuyama and his Critics* (Lanham: Littlefield Adams Quality Paperbacks, 1994).

18. For examples of the integration of Fukuyama's thesis into political discourses across the globe see: Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History, Five Years Later' in *History and Theory - Studies in the Philosophy of History*, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics, pp. 27-29. For a British version see: Hugo Young, 'The end of history beckons Blair', *The Guardian*, May 2 1997. For a French setting-up of the progress-resolution dialectic see an interview with Robert Hue in *L'Événement du Jeudi*, 24-30 April 1997, esp. p. 16: 'Le Parti Communiste, parce qu'il garde plus que jamais sa radicalité, entend être porteur d'un message qui montre que le capitalisme n'est pas la fin de l'Histoire'.

Hegelians and Right Hegelians, with both groups intentionally blind to their common point of origin in their debates with each other.

Beyond History

I have suggested that an alternative to such modes of reading the past is a certain postmodern 'radical acceptance of vulnerability' [Spivak]; an acceptance that means to justice may not necessarily come from western orderings and theorisations of 'the world', but may be available in other conceptions of the past and of politics from outside the west.¹⁹ Such a possibility is outlined in Ashis Nandy's essay on ahistorical and mythical Indian notions of the past, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', in which he links a resistance to the notion that history is a project, or a resolvable project, to Indian politics of resistance to imperialism where an understanding of political action and time outside of western, trinitarian [past-present-future], linear temporality was crucial in Gandhi's politics which re-invented, re-spoke Indian pasts in presents.²⁰ This was a form of politics that did not attack the English with an inverted mode of their oppression, but which came to understand English repression and a means of non-violent protest in an Indian fashion which linked past and present in a dynamic flux, rather than in the closed western division between temporal spheres. Indian mythical, cyclical, ahistorical notions of the past are not the only alternative mode of constructing politics but it is this style which I wish to focus on in its links to Zola's project.²¹

Ending resistance

I am going to offer three readings from Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle which I will suggest offer a nineteenth-century means of coming closer to understanding how we have framed debates between century's ends, and which perhaps offer the means to a deeper understanding of our present. My first reading concentrates on the motif of collapse traced in description and practice across the cycle. In opposition to much of Zola's journalism and theoretical writing such as *Le Roman Expérimental*, the cycle offers a radical critique of nineteenth century holism. Political utopias, such as the Marxism of *L'Argent* and Souvarine's anarchism in *Germinal*, which envision whole worlds and total social transformations, are revealed as enterprises destined to fail because of the unworldly totalising nature of their projects.²² Realism as a mode of

19. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, p. 18.

20. Ashis Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', in *History and Theory*, Vol. 34 *Op. Cit.*

21. Other modes of history do not necessarily need to come from outside the west. The experience of history as remembrance, found in many cultures but especially in Jewish history and politics, is crucially different to Endist and progressive histories in its concern for collective and group justice.

22. Compare Sigismund's idealist Marxism (*L'Argent*, *Les Rougon-Macquart* V, p. 42) with Souvarine's totalising anarchism in *Germinal* (*Les Rougon-Macquart* III, p. 1255). The political failure of both ideologies is linked to their common dream-like conception of absolute world-change, as opposed to the texts relentless description of humanly-created and evolving modern French capitalism.

complete description is rejected and parodied by Sandoz in *L'Œuvre* and its drive to resolution is linked to a misapprehension of the *mêlé* nature of modernity in the figure of Claude Lantier.²³ The idea of the nation, of France, is elided in the relentless description of situations across France, whilst avoiding naming the nation, as meaning is devolved to more local levels. The ability of modern science to classify and categorise the natural universe, and for this to serve as an organising motif for all human endeavour, is critiqued in *Le Docteur Pascal* when Pascal's doctrinaire scientism is humanised through its and his union with Clotilde's mystical Christianity.²⁴ The cycle itself is a monumental work which stresses its own incompleteness rather than its claims to narrative resolution.²⁵ Zola's modernity is a place of mergers and interactions: a description of change as both scientific and Christian, capitalist and mythical, innovative and traditional, metropolitan and local. There is no overarching theory of modernity, no key to its understanding other than a narration of its parts and a description of their relations. Here I return to the idea present in both poststructuralism and Wittgenstein that a deeper understanding of the present is perhaps a theoretical limit; a positive recognition of a situation of politics outside of desired futures.

Across the cycle Zola's suggestion is that what are conceived of as radical politics - holist and utopian movements - fail to comprehend modernity and capitalism; and particularly fail to see these processes as human creations, and therefore are unable to see the way in which such radical politics are complicit with the forces they attempt to overthrow in their replication of capitalist or Christian modes of organisation and framing the world. Zola's utopians are dreamers who conceive of their faiths as new religions which are founded on the logic that the whole world must be destroyed or transformed in order to effect social justice. Florent's republicanism in *Le Ventre de Paris*, Jeanbernat's philosophies in *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, Lazare's idealistic projects in *La Joie de Vivre*, the varieties of leftism in *Germinal*, Claude's absolute and pure modernity in *L'Œuvre*, Jacques's complete association with mechanised culture in *La Bête Humaine*, Maurice's support for the Commune in *La Débâcle*, Saccard's dreams of absolute control of the Parisian Bourse and Sigismond's Marxist inversion of Saccard's capitalist dreams in *L'Argent*, are all cast as brands of idealist politics which operate with a notion of History which clearly contradicts the incomplete, impure strength of modern change which Zola narrates and makes the central motif of his work.²⁶ The complicity and similarity in style of thought between

23. The falsity of the grand promises of realism as a complete mode of description and social understanding are realised by Sandoz at the end of the novel when he remarks, 'On a trop promis, on a trop espéré, on a attendu la conquête et l'explication de tout... Nous ne sommes pas une fin, mais une transition, un commencement d'autre chose' (*L'Œuvre, Les Rougon-Macquart* IV, p. 360).

24. See pp. 1048-1060 for details of the union of Pascal and Clotilde, described as an affirmation of a realistic, inclusive and human bond, and in opposition to the rejected doctrinaire positions of Pascal's former absolute scientism and Clotilde's romantic faith (*Le Docteur Pascal, Les Rougon-Macquart* V).

25. See the final pages of *Le Docteur Pascal* where the newborn child of Clotilde and the now-deceased Pascal is figured as a symbol of the continuance of human life, of nature, beyond the complex organisation of the cycle and its family tree.

26. Across the cycle radical forms of politics are commonly described as dream-like or as (civil) religions, often in biblical or eschatological language. It is their founding themselves on conceptions of

Marxism and capitalism is ironised and made plain in *L'Argent*. For Sigismond, Saccard's ambitions to control the Parisian bourse represent an enterprise that replicates the organisation of Marxist thought:

Vous nous donnez une leçon pratique, de même que les grandes propriétés absorbant les lopins de terre, les grands producteurs dévorant les ouvriers en chambre, les grandes maisons de crédit et les grands magasins tuant toute concurrence, s'engraissant de la ruine des petites banques et des petites boutiques, sont un acheminement lent, mais certain, vers le nouvel état social... Nous attendons que tout craque, que le mode de production actuel ait abouti au malaise intolérable de ses dernières conséquences.²⁷

Across the text Zola establishes binds between Marxism and capitalism as modes of action and critique; crucially linking both to Christian models of organising holistic History. This critique of Marxism is remarkably similar to that proposed by radical postmoderns such as Robert Young and Gayatri Spivak who highlight Marxism's complicity with capitalism in its theoretical organisation, in the content of its form.²⁸ It is in this connection that I am invoking Zola as the kind of fin de siècle theorist whose observations could add to radical postmoderns' critique of western modernity and western theorising.

religion which are at some variance with the reality of local Christianities in the cycle, which leads Zola to ironically critique them as doomed to political failure. Compare Zola's description of two failures: the republican Florent (*Le Ventre de Paris*, *Les Rougon-Macquart* I, p. 732) and the isolated philosophe, Jeanbernat (*La Faute de L'Abbé Mouret*, *Les Rougon-Macquart* I, pp. 1249-1251). Their idealism can be linked to the failed grandiose schemes of Lazare in *La Joie de Vivre* (*Les Rougon-Macquart* III), and the varieties of leftism adhered to by Étienne, Rasseneur, Pluchart and Souvarine in *Germinal* (*Les Rougon-Macquart* III). The artist Claude Lantier, doomed to commercial and moral failure in *L'Œuvre* is revealed as a misguided utopian dreamer in *Le Ventre de Paris* when he describes the market at Les Halles as a manifesto for a complete modernity (*Les Rougon-Macquart* I, p. 799), failing to comprehend the meaning of its conjunction with the continuing power of the neighbouring church of Saint-Eustache. In *L'Argent* the über-capitalist, Saccard, and the Marxist, Sigismond, are revealed as being two sides of the same coin, and it is the linking of their belief systems to an absolute notion of Christianity that binds them. Sigismond has 'Sa religion... le socialisme' (*Les Rougon-Macquart* V, p. 41) while Saccard's financial master-plan is founded on the exploitation of a popular fever for a non-existent silver mine in the Holy Land. The potency of this mix of get-rich-quick financial speculation and religious imperialism is made still more plain in Maurice's communal dream in *La Débâcle*: 'Que Paris s'effondrât, qu'il brûlât comme un immense bûcher d'holocauste, plutôt que d'être rendu à ses vices, et à ses misères à cette vieille société gâtée d'abominable injustice! Et il faisait un autre grand rêve [pour] une catastrophe sans nom... d'où sortirait un peuple nouveau' (*Les Rougon-Macquart* V, p. 875).

27. Émile Zola, *L'Argent*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart* V, p. 44.

28. The notion of the politics of form is best explored in: Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

Resisting Ending?

As well as offering deep descriptions of modernity and modes of political organisation and theorising the past in modernity, the *Rougon-Macquart* also offers two valuable forms of resistance which I am suggesting could be of use across the *fin de siècle*. The first is a western style of historicizing which is modern and cyclical; where meaning is devolved to local situations. The second is a set of observations on Christianity and capitalism/modernity which offer a means of critiquing modes of resistance that rely on nineteenth century models of modernity conceived after Marx, Durkheim and Weber with their particular accounts of religion. It is Zola's description of a plural set of practices, of local Christianities, and of the continuing hold of Christian practice and thought as modes of understanding and revealing the world, which is perhaps of most use in the recuperation of his work for theoretical purposes.

When Marx, Durkheim and other classic social theorists, many under the influence of the militant atheism of writers like Feuerbach, conceptualised the place of Christianity in western history and modernity they saw a situation in which Christianity was dying and where new forms of social thought and organisation would replace the roles it fulfilled (in such theory religion is invariably seen as representing some more profound aspects of society, and rarely treated as an object of study *in and as itself*). For Marx such a shift would advance the Marxist science of history, while for Durkheim such an inevitability meant that the young French Republic had to quickly formulate its own civic morals which it could use in schools as substitutes for Christian values.²⁹ Nineteenth century theorisations of religion generally take place on an intellectual plane of absolute victories and losses where Christianity's defeat was generally considered a desired state.

Zola's theorisation comes from his local descriptions. Across the cycle, from the rural world of *La Terre*, to the cathedral town of *Le Rêve* and the metropolis of *Le Ventre de Paris*, the *Rougon-Macquart* does not narrate the disappearance of Christianity.³⁰ Zola sees it transforming and changing in a manner which denies the conventional nineteenth-century theoretical position which had treated Christianity as a single, coherent belief system, set of doctrines, symbology and moral codes that could potentially disappear.

In *Le Ventre de Paris* the market of Les Halles is described in sacred language while its equally new neighbour, the church of Saint-Eustache is described as being built in the style of the 'modern cathedrals' of commerce and leisure. The market-place becomes a site of meaning and ritual while the church is transformed into the home of

29. See: Émile Durkheim, *L'Éducation Morale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), esp. pp. 7-8.

30. The complexity and variety of understandings of Christianity in *Le Rêve* affords the best example of the plural strength of religion narrated in the cycle. Compare the initial descriptions of the easily-understood cathedral town (*Les Rougon-Macquart* IV, pp. 825-826) with the novel's later explorations of the complexity of characters' faiths and the variety of meanings of Christianity in the town.

commercial and financial advice. Zola deploys his characteristic technique of double inversion to mark mutual similarities and binds. For Zola modernity and capitalism in France are Christian processes, or processes which human experiences of Christianity are implicated in.

Zola's position is more reminiscent of recent rethinkings of the place of religion in sociological theory. In the face of a world of sects, the rise of Islam and burgeoning new faiths and spiritualities, as well as the continued strength of Christianity and the place of Christian rhetoric and values across public and private lives and institutions, sociologists of religion have been forced to confront the 'unexpected continuing force of Christianity in modernity'. They have also been forced to confront the inadequacy of conventional understandings of modernity which rely heavily on descriptions of nineteenth century societies which contemporary societies show to be inadequate descriptions of modern social worlds.³¹ What is more, these self-reflexive uncertainties in the sociology of religion have become linked to wider critiques of secularisation theory, and of the west's place in theorising world modernity.

Critics like David Martin who, in 1969, could operate with a version of European secularisation which was a presumed model for world development, linked into the progressive model of History, have since moved out of the west and come to new conclusions. Having engaged with Latin American Christianities Martin now concedes that in secularising the way it did [and this is a partial notion of secularisation akin to Zola's model I have outlined] 'Europe may well be exceptional', for 'Just as analysts once spoke of American exceptionalism, so it may now be appropriate, at least in the context of religion, to speak of European exceptionalism.'³² The challenge for the sociology of religion is to now re-theorise the presence of Christianity in modernity and to use writers like Zola to trace the Christian nature of modernity.

The wider point that this disciplinary example shows is that an untroubled theoretical reliance on nineteenth century modes of theory and description, a mode of theory which insufficiently adapts in its tracking across time, and a mode of theory that is locked into particular western European critiques, can be revealed as inadequate once it is confronted with the realities of the twentieth century fin de siècle, and more particularly, with social realities from outside the west. Zola offers a narrative model of contingent, self-conscious descriptive social and political theorising which can be linked to radical postmodern and ahistorical criticism when reading the west.

Aspects of Zola's descriptions of social and group relationships in capitalism and modernity remain unrecuperated; the political thought of the *Rougon-Macquart* has yet

31. For a collection of second thoughts on the sociology of religion see: Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp (eds), *Postmodernity, Sociology and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

32. David Martin, 'Religion, Secularization and Post-Modernity: Lessons from the Latin American case', in Pål Repstad (ed), *Religion and Modernity: Modes of Co-existence* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), p. 35. See also: David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

to be redescribed. My suggestion here has been that Zola's cycle lies outside conventional nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of historiography which are undermined by radical postmodern criticism. This politics from the French fin de siècle can be usefully reinscribed into contemporary debates but care needs to be taken in the theoretical link between century's ends. Zola's ambiguous, cyclical, local conception of time operates outside of the progressive, endist or eschatological modes of historiography I have grouped together as 'white mythologies' and acts as an 'other logic' which can mesh with poststructural troublings of linear, coherent, resolvable politics and histories. Both radical postmoderns and the *Rougon-Macquart* seek to end resistance through utopian politics and to resist teleological endings, while locating resistances in particular situations, in the description of individual actions and local modes of conceptualising the past.

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