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MINIMAL STATISM AND METAMODERNISM: REPLY TO FRIEDMAN

Friedman misunderstands postmodernism-or, as it could better be called, metamodernism. Metamodernism is the common sense beyond the lunatic formulas of the Vienna Circle and conventional statistics. It has little to do with the anxieties of Continental intellectuals. It therefore is necessary for serious empirical work on the role of the state.

Jeffrey Friedman, in a recent issue of CRITICAL REVIEW to which I contributed, rejects what he imagines to be postmodernism. I sympathize with his call for empirical studies of the consequences of statism and nonstatism. And I agree that philosophical libestarianism has reached a dead end (in The Review of Austrian Economics, for example). But with such a program Friedman should embrace rather than reject postmodernism, correctly defined.

Whatever you think you have learned about it from The New York Times, postmodernism is mainly not from France. It is mainly not leftwing. It is mainly not deconstruction. It is mainly not about The Crisis of Reason or The Exhaustion of the Enlightenment Project or other

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Franco-German anxieties. On the contrary, it is plain old American pragmatism, (Kenneth) Burkean criticism, (Wayne) Boothian pluralism. It is what its name says: a suggestion that we go beyond the formulas of rigid modernism. Perhaps "metamodernism" would better convey what people like Richard Rorty or Stanley Fish or Gary Madison, Calvin Schrag, and me are talking about in the same issue of CRITICAL REVIEW. (My Iowa colleague and friend David Roochnik is an intermediate case.)

Friedman is unwise to try to hitch his minimal statism to the rigidities of modernism in the style of the Vienna Circle, the modernist movement in architecture, and anglophone analytic philosophy circa 1955. Minimal statism rests easier, I would suggest, with Madison's "small-t truth," Schrag's "transversal rationality," and my "conjective." These are metamodern attempts to get away from the  $3'' \times 5''$  card epistemology that has run the world since 1920. They are not rejections of reason. On the contrary, they ask that after learning what we can from modernism we now go back to examining all the reasons.

Friedman in his introduction, and Carl Rapp in what Friedman describes as the "climactic essay in this issue," miss the point of metamodernism because they are caught in the modernist dichotomy of the rational vs. the irrational.<sup>2</sup> They believe that whatever does not fit the formulas of French rationalism or British empiricism must be irrational, and easy therefore to convict of self-contradiction.

Rapp, with Friedman cheering him on, believes for instance that he has made a knock-down argument when he shows that anti-philosophy must entail a philosophy, too. (Roochnik also seems to take this line.) As we kids used to say in the 1950s, biiiiig deal. The argument is the oldest of philosophy against rhetoric. Right from the beginning it has had the problem that it can be matched by a rhetorical reply: Do you not see, oh philosopher, that your philosophy entails a rhetoric, too? That rhetoric entails a commitment to a working epistemology is no more knock-down than that philosophy entails a commitment to a working rhetoric of persuasion. The score in the game of blackboard logic, as always, is fifteen

Friedman asks, "Without the discipline imposed by a putatively objective, non-metaphorical reality, is not each interpretive community licensed to convert its instincts into sacred cows on the ground that there is no higher standard of truth than whatever is arbitrarily selfimposed?"

Briefly, No: to admit that our only standard is our interpretive community is not to surrender to arbitrary standards, but to standards. There are no timeless standards outside those of an interpretive community. As Aristotle put the point, "Since the persuasive is persuasive to someone . . . rhetoric theorize[s] . . . about what seems true to people of a certain sort, as is also true with dialectic."<sup>3</sup>

In my article I mentioned the attack on Critical Legal Studies by Stanley Fish in his book *Doing What Comes Naturally*. Fish is well known for his relativism and postmodernism and trendy leftism. Why then does he not thrill to the late-1960s tactics of Critical Legal Studies? Because the Crits do not reach the standards of the interpretive community. Fish, the notorious constructivist, complains that for the Crits, "all of a sudden 'constructed' means 'fabricated' or 'made up'" (Fish 227). Fish is consistent and Fish is correct. "Rational debate," he says, "is always possible; not, however, because it is anchored in a reality outside it, but because it occurs in a history" (196). Yes. That a speech community must be addressed is a tighter, not a looser, constraint on what arguments are sustainable than the formula of modernism. Fish and I believe that modernism, whether rationalist or irrationalist, has some screws loose. Metamodernists propose to tighten them up. The conservatives want to carry, screwily, on.

Friedman says that "the fusion of postmodernism with minimal statism is . . . counterproductive." On the contrary, without metamodernism it is next to impossible to assemble the consequentialist, empirical studies about statism that Friedman wants—and that I as a historical economist desire and have on occasion provided.

One empirical problem is that modernism is an excuse to ignore evidence, that is, to ignore a part of the interpretive community. Take the issue of whether capitalism in the form of mining towns was beneficent. If not, then the State's interventions during the twentieth century might be justified, consequentially speaking. In a recent history of soft-coal mining early this century, the historical economist Price Fishback finds reason to think that company towns worked well.<sup>5</sup> Fishback uses all the evidence, regardless of its standing in the modernist handbooks on method: he uses the direct testimony of the miners and the statistics from surveys; he uses what people said they thought and what they can be ascertained to have done. He finds the consequences because he allows himself to use all the evidence.

The other empirical problem with Friedman's modernism is that the "discipline" he mentions of "non-metaphoric reality" is phony. Since Mary Hesse's Models and Analogies in Science (1963), or Kant, it has been impossible anyway to claim that we can get along without metaphors. But the main point is that the "discipline" doesn't bite in practice. Modernists talk a lot about "discipline" and "rigor" and "compelling proof," in a vocabulary approaching the sado-masochistic, but when it gets down to the whips and chains they don't carry through. Better to have a real discipline of relativist practice than a phony discipline of absolutist theory.

The phoniness has been exposed repeatedly in metamodernist literature. I have shown, for example, that the alleged "standards" of modernist economics are phony, concealing ideology or careerism behind an appeal to objectivity. Statistical significance, to take a ripe case, which runs the quantitative side of economics, is no standard at all. It can be shown mathematically that statistical significance is in most cases no better than, say, drawing up a horoscope for the time and date at which the computer ran the regression. It would be better if economists recognized that the question of how large is large must be decided by discussion in the speech community. It would be better, in other words, if they realized that all science is "conjective," not either objective or subjective. The rhetoric of objectivity stops the discussion and leaves economists, practically speaking, with no standards at all.

For example, an economist allowed to pretend that statistical regression is objective cannot understand homelessness. She will exhibit statistically significant coefficients attached to the price of low-income housing, and conclude hastily that state subsidies are what is needed. Since she is not being asked to face the arguments of a speech community, and writes instead for God's objectivity, she can walk past the next question: why then is the price of low-income housing high? She can therefore write a long book on homelessness, filled with interesting modernist evidence, yet not mention the cause, namely, the zoning and building codes and slum clearances that have eliminated low-income housing in favor of the middle class. It is a consequentialist argument against statism in housing, overlooked by modernism.

Friedman asserts that interpretive communities must in practice act as though their standards were "transcendent." As do other philosophical conservatives, such as Rapp, he thinks he can pin a charge of selfcontradiction on non-transcendent thinking. As usual the pin does not hold. Only children (and Platonists) need transcendence. The children in The Lord of the Flies must worship absolutely the pig's, and Piggy's, head. But communities of adults have in practice no difficulty recognizing that their standards are not God's own, not transcendent and not ahistorical, while affirming that the standards are nonetheless worth enforcing. It is not the case empirically, as philosophical conservatives fear, that adults will descend into a war of all against all if they lose their faith in God or in the synthetic a priori or in some other principle of transcendence. The engineering standard for the height of road crowns is nowhere inscribed by the finger of God, and yet a contractor who fails to abide by it accepts that he needs to rebuild the road. The standard of replicability in biological experiment is not absolute, and cannot in principle be so. And yet the community of biologists can

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recognize conjectively, well enough, when an experiment on oxidative phosphorylation has gone wrong.<sup>8</sup>

Friedman thinks that without a belief in transcendence we "would have no criteria of what counts as persuasive." Huh? Come again? Why exactly is that? He does not say. The argument he sketches is philosophical rather than empirical (for someone who advocates "hard thinking and empirical research" Friedman, with Rapp, puts a suprising amount of weight on sketchy blackboard arguments). But his assertion is self-contradictory even as philosophical argument. You can see it is by noting that it damages his own position as much as the position he is attacking. His words can be turned against himself: "By trying to achieve non-conjective Truth in God's eyes one tends to overlook one's own unarticulated, relative truths. To try to do away with theory is a recipe for bad theory." The anti-rhetoric of philosophy is, as I say, no more knock-down than the anti-philosophy of rhetoric.

Gary Madison is quoted by Friedman saying that modernism subscribes to a "Promethean illusion that by means of theory we can manipulate and control human affairs however we desire." Friedman calls this a "dubious reading of modern history," but again does not pause to say why. Madison's description would satisfy empirically most members of a speech community who have lived through communism and anti-communism, Vietnam and the expansion of the modern state. I think it was Eric Hoffer who described the illusion of modernism as the notion that we can in fact accomplish everything we rationally propose to do. With such rationalism who needs irrationalism? And what else would you call it but a "Promethean illusion"? "All their doings were indeed without intelligent calculation until I showed them the rising of the stars, and the settings, hard to observe. And further I discovered to them numbering, pre-eminent among subtle devices. . . . It was I who arranged all the ways of seercraft, and I first adjudged what things come verily true from dreams."

The argument in favor of appropriating metamodernism for the tasks of minimal statism is simple. It is that metamodernism deals with more of the data and speaks to a wider audience than the crabbed and useless rules of modernism—witness the vacuity of general equilibrium theory in neoclassical economics and the inconclusiveness of mainstream econometrics. Friedman's assertion that metamodernism is somehow inimical to minimal statism is the reverse of the truth. A discussion that keeps speaking in the false rhetoric of modernism will not be able to do the job. If economists actually followed modernism they would long ago have fallen silent on the empirical questions that Friedman and I want answered. Instead they have adopted metamodernism without knowing it, by silently dropping the phony "standards" thought up by philosophers shooting the breeze in

warm rooms. It would be a shame if the job of dismantling the modern state where it deserves to be dismantled were made more difficult by a comfortable conservativism in method. Actually, it already has.

## NOTES

I. Jeffrey Friedman, "Postmodernism vs. Postlibertarianism," CRITICAL REVIEW 5, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 145-58.

2. Carl Rapp, "The Crisis of Reason in Contemporary Thought: Some Reflections on the Arguments of Postmodernism," CRITICAL REVIEW 5, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 261-90. Interpreting postmodernism as a belief in "the terminal incapacity of reason" (290) is going to make it easy to view it as irrationalist in the modernist sense.

3. Aristotle, Rhetoric, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), I, ii, II; 1356b.

4. Stanley Fish, Doing What Comes Naturally (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989).

5. Price Fishback, Soft Coal, Hard Choices: The Economic Welfare of Bituminous Coal Miners, 1890-1930 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

6. D. N. McCloskey, The Rhetoric of Economics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), esp. chs. 1 and 9; and D. N. McCloskey, Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. chs. 8-10.

7. Martha R. Bort, Over the Edge: The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992).

8. Michael Mulkay, The Word and the World: Explorations in the Form of Sociological Analysis (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985).

9. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. David Greene, in David Greene and Richard Lattimore, eds., *Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942 [1960]), lines 452-61, 478.