

# Intellectual Origins of our Post-truth Age

*Ethics in a Time of Polarization*

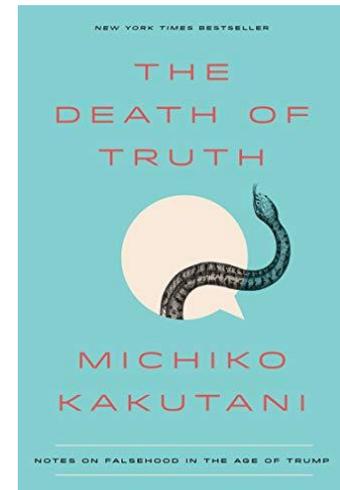
Osher Course

*John Hooker, study leader*

September-October 2021

# A Post-truth Age

- **When there is no truth...**
  - ...there can be no meeting of the minds.
  - The result is **polarization**.



# Ethics and Truth Decay

- What does this have to do with **ethics**?
  - Ethics was the **first victim** of truth decay.
    - *Collapse of rational ethics takes everything else with it.*



# Ethics and Truth Decay

- Skepticism of ethics had a legitimate origin.
  - It raised a question that must be answered:
  - **How is ethical reasoning possible?**
  - Our primary aim is to **answer this question.**

# Ethics and Truth Decay

- Skepticism of ethics had a legitimate origin.
  - It raised a question that must be answered:
  - **How is ethical reasoning possible?**
  - Our primary aim is to **answer this question.**
- We take a brief excursion through intellectual history.
  - To see how we got here.

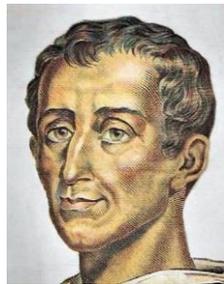


# Age of Enlightenment

- **17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe shaped our society and approach to life...**
  - Belief in authority of reason, especially science.



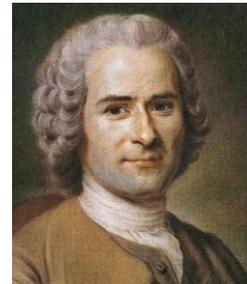
Newton



Montesquieu



Diderot



Rousseau



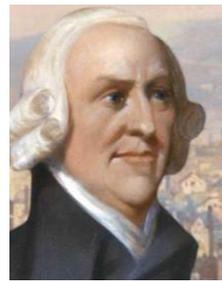
Mozart



Leibniz



Locke



Smith



Hume



Kant

# Early Warnings

- **Nietzsche: We are moving beyond good and evil.**
  - Three prophetic books.
    - *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883)
    - *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)
    - *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887)



Friedrich Nietzsche  
(1844-1900)

# Early Warnings

- **Nietzsche: We are moving beyond good and evil.**

- Three prophetic books.

- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883)*
- *Beyond Good and Evil (1886)*
- *On the Genealogy of Morals (1887)*

- The *Übermensch* has outgrown morality.

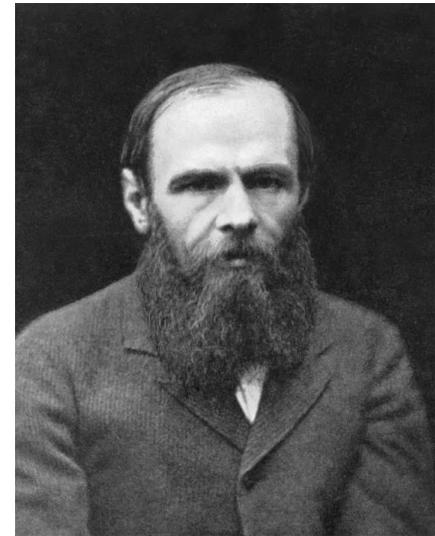
- *The **next stage of human consciousness** rejects religion and conventional morals.*
- *Death of God, master morality, nobility, self-defined values, self-actualization through the **will to power**.*
- *Masters will dominate the “herd” (less evolved humans).*



Friedrich Nietzsche  
(1844-1900)

# Early Warnings

- **Dostoevsky: A nonbelieving church concocts “morality” for the masses.**
  - View expressed by the Grand Inquisitor to the returned Jesus.
    - *In The Brothers Karamazov (1880)*
    - *Nietzsche admired Dostoevsky’s ideas.*
  - Concocted morality is necessary to maintain social order.
    - *Only a few are capable of adhering to the true Christian message.*



Fyodor Dostoevsky  
(1821-1881)

# Crisis of Western Civilization

- **Adorno and Horkheimer: How could this happen?**
  - Products of the Frankfurt School.
    - *“Western leftists.”*
    - *Influenced by Marx, Freud, Hegel.*
  - Fans of the enlightenment.

Max Horkheimer  
(1895-1973)



Theodor Adorno  
(1903-1969)

# Crisis of Western Civilization

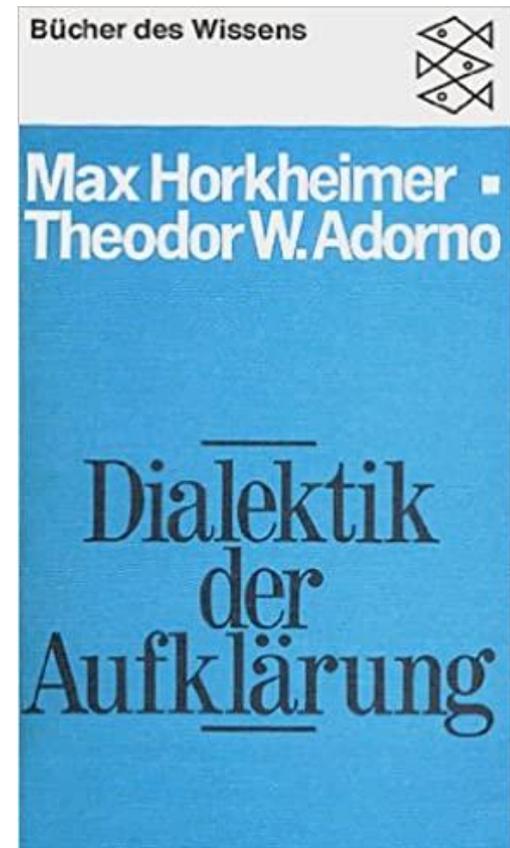
- **Adorno and Horkheimer: How could this happen?**
  - Western civilization, at the pinnacle of its success and achievements, give rise to the **greatest crisis** of the modern age.
    - *Total breakdown of morality into cruelty and genocide.*



# Crisis of Western Civilization

- **Roots in the Enlightenment**

- It carries the seeds of its own destruction.
- Its emphasis on **scientific rationality** destroyed the legitimacy of values, religion, metaphysics.
  - *Adorno and Horkheimer developed this view while exiled in Los Angeles during the Nazi era.*
  - *... in their book Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944)*



# Crisis of Western Civilization

- **Logical positivism**

- Their reading of scientific rationality was already articulated by logical positivists in the Vienna Circle.
  - *Only statements that can be **tested by empirical observation** have meaning.*
  - *Ethical statements are **literally meaningless**.*



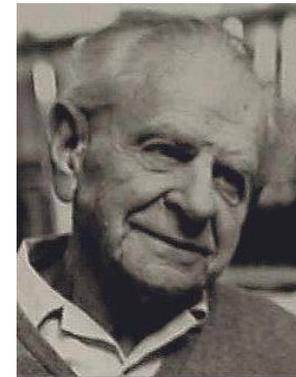
Ernst Mach  
(1838-1916)



Ludwig  
Wittgenstein  
(1889-1951)



Rudolf Carnap  
(1891-1970)



Karl Popper  
(1902-1994)

# Crisis of Western Civilization

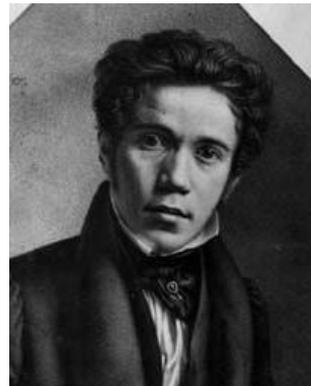
- **Ruins of the Enlightenment**
  - With rational ethics destroyed...
    - *There is nothing else to do but **seek power** through **technical rationality**.*
    - *While viewing less enlightened peoples as **inferior**.*



# Existentialism

- **We must invent our own values**
  - We are **free** to chart our course but have no ethical roadmap.
    - We want to **deny our freedom** (because it creates **anxiety**) and take our marching orders from others (recall the Grand Inquisitor).
    - To be **authentic**, we must resolutely adopt our own values.
    - Ideas in Heidegger's Being and Time, presaged by Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling.

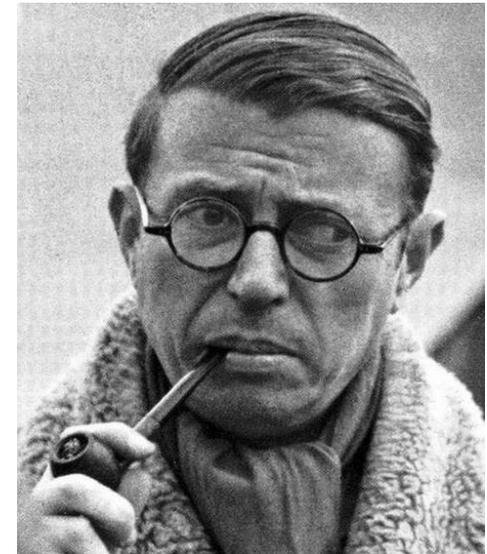
Søren Kierkegaard  
(1813-1855)



Martin Heidegger  
(1889-1976)

# Existentialism

- **Sartre and bad faith**
  - Sartre was the most famous and dramatic exponent of existentialism.

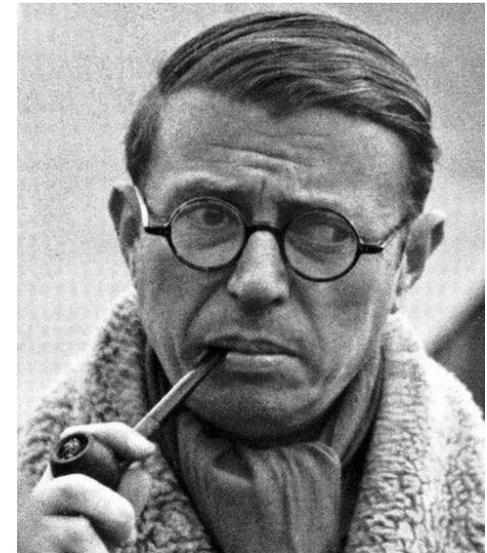


Jean-Paul Sartre  
(1905-1980)

# Existentialism

- **Sartre and bad faith**

- Sartre was the most famous and dramatic exponent of existentialism.
  - *You see Nazi soldiers in the street during the Nazi occupation of France.*
  - **Choice 1:** *Ignore them and go about your business, even while they destroy civilization*
  - **Choice 2:** *Kill them, even though the Nazis will retaliate against your friends.*



Jean-Paul Sartre  
(1905-1980)

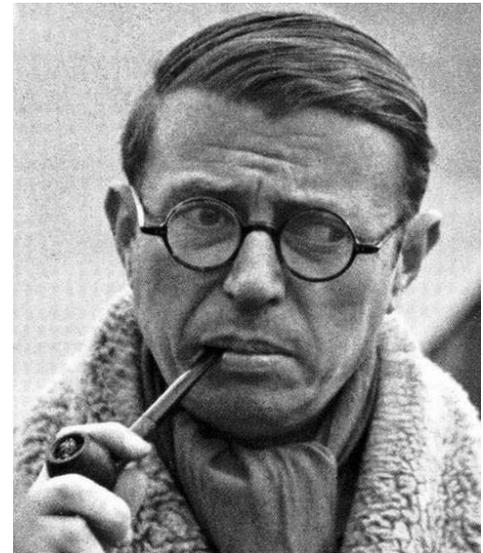
# Existentialism

- **Sartre and bad faith**

- Sartre was the most famous and dramatic exponent of existentialism.

- *You see Nazi soldiers in the street during the Nazi occupation of France.*
- **Choice 1:** *Ignore them and go about your business, even while they destroy civilization*
- **Choice 2:** *Kill them, even though the Nazis will retaliate against your friends.*
- **Not to choose is to choose.**
- *It is “bad faith” (inauthenticity).*
- *Yet there is **no rational guidance** for the choice.*

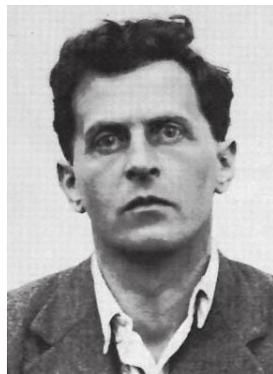
Jean-Paul Sartre  
(1905-1980)



# Postmodernism

- **Demise of all truth and rationality?**
  - Scientific rationality doesn't immediately imply the death of all truth...
    - *But postmodernism went further.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein  
(1889-1951)  
...misinterpreted



Jean-Francois  
Lyotard  
(1924-1998)



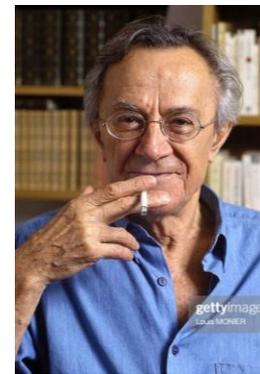
# Postmodernism

- **Demise of all truth and rationality?**
  - Scientific rationality doesn't immediately imply the death of all truth...
    - *But postmodernism went further.*
  - A complex movement...
    - *Semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, hermeneutics, deconstructionism, etc.*
    - *But we can identify **2 major themes** (by oversimplifying):*

Ludwig Wittgenstein  
(1889-1951)  
...misinterpreted



Jean-Francois  
Lyotard  
(1924-1998)



# Postmodernism

- **Text is neither true nor false.**
  - It only serves to push the agenda of the writer.
    - Known as **subtext** (a term picked up by journalists).
    - **Deconstruction** reveals the subtext.



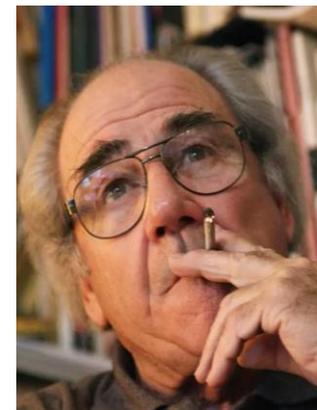
Simone  
de Beauvoir  
(1908-1986)  
Final stage of  
existentialist ethics



Michel Foucault  
(1926-1984)  
Social reality  
is constructed.



Jacques Derrida  
(1930-2004)  
High priest of  
deconstruction



Jean  
Baudrillard  
(1929-2007)  
We no longer  
interact with reality.

# Postmodernism

- **Rationality is only a tool of oppression.**
  - ...used by European white males to subjugate women and other cultures.
    - *It is therefore illegitimate.*



Sandra Harding  
(1935-)



Gayatri  
Chakravorty  
Spivak  
(1942-)



Iris Marion  
Young  
(1949-2006)



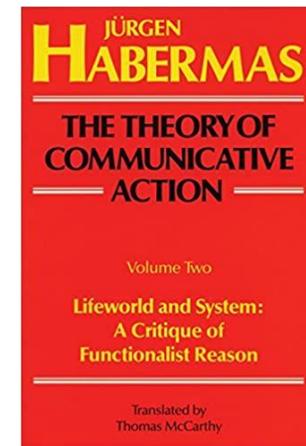
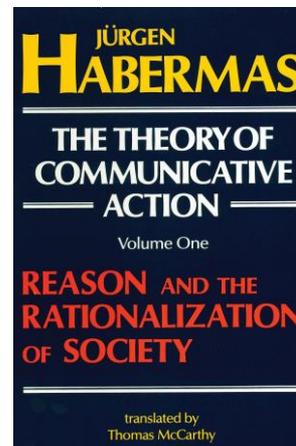
Cornel West  
(1953-)

# Postmodernism

- **One response to postmodern nihilism**
  - It contains a “performative inconsistency.”
    - *If there is no truth, is this, itself, true?*
    - *If there is no rationality, why should we believe this?*

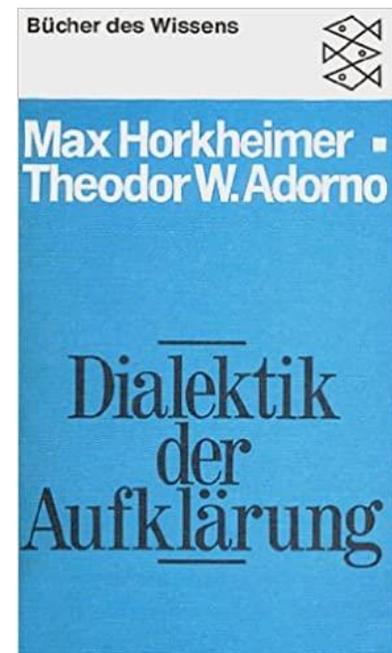
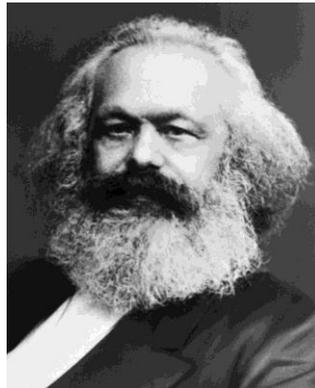


Jürgen Habermas  
1929-



# Now what?

- **Restoring rational ethics**
  - If the Enlightenment contains the seeds of its own destruction, it contains the seeds of **its resurrection**.
    - *Maybe Adorno and Horkheimer should look back at their own inspiration: Hegelian and Marxian **dialectic**.*
    - *Civilizations advance by **working through their own contradictions**.*



# Now what?

- **Restoring rational ethics**
  - There are resources in Enlightenment thought for grounding ethics in reason.
    - *It is time we take advantage of this.*
    - *In fact, people have been working on it.*
  - **Our goal:**
    - *Build a rational framework for thinking about ethics.*

