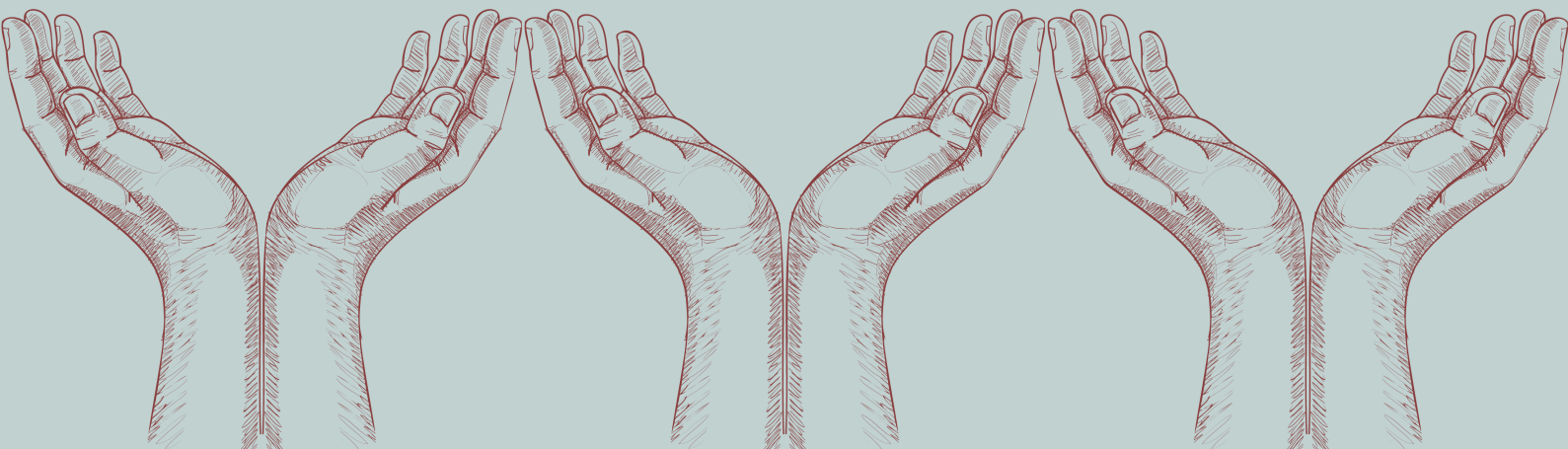# Enlightenment and Colonialism: Evaluating the Emancipatory Potential of Modern Rationality in the Face of Postmodern Critique

Rivers Lenholt is an undergraduate senior majoring in Philosophy at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. They are also a Division II student-athlete and member of the Rollins Men's Basketball Team.

Since its inception, the philosophical project of postmodernism has been deeply rooted in political activism, aiming to deconstruct the notions of reason, truth, and reality which have served to justify and at times facilitate rampant forms of oppression in modern societies. Coming to constitute an "activist strategy against the coalition of reason and power" in this way, postmodern thinkers have been highly critical of the emancipatory promises of the Enlightenment, often illuminating the ways in which modernity has condoned, exacerbated, or created conditions of injustice and challenging the notion of modernization as progress.[1] A cursory examination of the legacy of modern colonialism lends considerable credence to these critiques, as modernity has seen numerous European states pilfer foreign lands, exploit and desecrate native populations, and establish rigid systems of white supremacy around the world despite staking claim to ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. This miserable failure in realizing the liberation heralded by rationality, which has tended to validate rather than eliminate subjugation, substantiates the postmodern assessment that Enlightenment ideals are irreparably poisoned by Eurocentrism and must be dismantled in order to undo modern systems of oppression. However, taking a broader look at history reveals that societies have attempted to expand their borders and impose their cultures on others throughout the course of human civilization for a variety of political, economic, ideological, and religious reasons.[2] This perspective begs the question of whether European colonialism developed directly out of the Enlightenment or merely misappropriated its ideals as justification, the answer to which has implications for the merit of a modernist approach to political activism in addressing current and future injustices. In deconstructing the notion of colonialism as a uniquely modern phenomenon and adjudicating postmodern criticism of the political consequences of modern ideals, this paper will demonstrate how the discourse between Habermas and

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[1] Stephen R. C. Hicks. "What Postmodernism Is." In *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Roscoe: Ockham's Razor, 2004), 3.
[2] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

Foucault challenges the location of postmodernism outside the inner dialectic of Enlightenment, and in doing so defends the emancipatory potential of reason as a tool to confront and upend oppression.

Although particularly rampant in the age of modernity, the practice of colonialism greatly predates the modern period and transcends the boundaries of the European subcontinent, representing a "transhistorical and unspecific" phenomenon in the context of world history.[3] In scholarship on the subject, the term colonialism has largely come to be associated solely with the modern European colonial project, despite referring to affairs which are "global in scope" and "of relevance to human societies everywhere."[4] In contrast, the term imperialism has primarily been used to refer to instances of societal expansion by non-European cultural groups such as the Manchu, Zulus, or Sikhs and ancient societies such as the Romans. There is an etymological basis for the distinction between these two terms which indicates the presence or absence of settlers on acquired land, but use in the literature tends to obfuscate this definitional divergence by presenting colonialism as a uniquely European phenomenon and imperialism as a uniquely non-European phenomenon.[5] This arbitrary connotational distinction in the use of these concepts obscures the extent to which modern and pre-modern as well as European and non-European instances of sociocultural expansion have been similar.

Comparison of the modern European colonial project with cases of both non-European and ancient imperialism reveals certain differences in scale and technique, but does not uncover dissimilarities which warrant the terminological distinction often employed, ultimately serving to deconstruct the conception of colonialism as a modern phenomenon. Modern improvements in

[3] Rhys Jones and Richard Phillips, "Unsettling Geographical Horizons: Exploring Premodern and Non-European Imperialism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 1 (2005): 143.

[4] Michael Adas, "Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective," *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (1998): 371.

[5] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

navigational technology enlarged the scope of colonial and imperialist initiatives, increasing the average degree of cultural difference between colonizer and colonized, but methods of asserting power and establishing domination were largely sustained.[6] In examining the Manchu dynasty as a powerful metropole which exercised colonial power over a plethora of cultural groups in China for centuries, Adas characterizes the exploitation of political, ethnic, and religious differences in conquest as a universal technique of territorial expansion employed in both premodern and non-European contexts.[7] Furthermore, in evaluating the dynamics of the ancient Roman Empire and premodern colonial expansion in medieval Europe, Jones and Phillips advance the contention that the categories of premodern and modern colonialism vary as much within as between each other in regard to both scale and technique, rendering a distinction between the two unwarranted.[8] They especially challenge the notion that modern colonialism uniquely involves the deployment of difference to solidify power structures, while still acknowledging the novel ways in which Europeans constructed difference through the employment of concepts like race. The purpose of these arguments is not to excuse the rigid forms of oppression implemented by European colonial powers or make light of the extent to which native populations were ravaged by modern expansionist initiatives, but merely to locate these horrors in the broader historical context of imperialist domination. This frame of reference weakens the connection between Enlightenment ideals and colonial initiatives by demonstrating the existence of varied expansionist techniques of power both prior to modernity and outside of Western civilization.

With the significance of premodern and non-European colonialism established, Enlightenment ideals can further be

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[6] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy. "Colonialism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

[7] Michael Adas, "Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective," *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (1998).

[8] Rhys Jones and Richard Phillips, "Unsettling Geographical Horizons: Exploring Premodern and Non-European Imperialism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 1 (2005).

vindicated from their purported oppressive colonial consequences by examining the role of modern philosophical thought in the European colonial project. To start, the onset of modern European expansionist practice predates the development of Enlightenment thought and originally operated under the pretense of religious conversion, rather than the more secular mission of "civilizing" foreign peoples which would become a prominent justificatory narrative throughout the modern period.[9] In the early 16th century, Spanish colonization of the Americas was explicitly rationalized by the imperative of spreading Christianity, nearly two centuries before the development of Enlightenment thought. These religious origins provide further evidence against the claim that expansionist policy developed directly out of Enlightenment thought, supporting again the idea that modern ideals were misappropriated as a justification for activities which they inherently contradicted. The stadial theory of historical development did, however, eventually replace religious fervor as the primary rationale of colonialism, employing the modern ideal of progress facilitated by rationality to perniciously frame political domination and economic exploitation as humanitarian assistance. This ideology led to conflations of conquest with the progress of civilization and the growth of European power with the growth of reason, freedom, and humanitarianism.[10] Although this utilization undoubtedly implicates Enlightenment thought in the injustices of European colonialism to some degree, criticism of colonialism continued as modern philosophy developed. Thinkers like Kant and Diderot heavily criticized the inherent contradiction of colonial enslavement and exploitation under the banner of ideals such as freedom and equality.

Postmodern critiques of Enlightenment thought tend to highlight the ways in which its ideals justify or conceal oppression but ignore the ways in which the same ideals were used to construct

[9] Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

[10] Larry L. Langford, "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, or, Why Not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992).

resistance to power structures and means of liberation. Jonathan Israel levels the critique that postmodern deconstructions often attack a limited conception of the Enlightenment which focuses on politically conservative thinkers such as Locke, Newton, and Hume but ignore more radical thinkers such as Spinoza, Diderot, and Bayle.[11] This characterization is presented as an incomplete evaluation of the intellectual arena of Enlightenment which obscures its true merit in facilitating emancipation from autocracy, intolerance, and prejudice through the promotion of equality, democracy, liberty, and secular morality. Within this Radical Enlightenment, constituted of thinkers who have been relegated to margins of the retrospective characterization of modern philosophy, lies the foundation of anti-colonialism and racial, sexual, and ethnic egalitarianism. Taking this broader scope of the character of Enlightenment thought substantiates the possibility of a progressive politics rooted in modern rationality, demonstrating its capacity to be utilized for programs of both emancipation and domination.[12] This dichotomous use supports a characterization of reason as a tool that can be applied toward different ends, rather than an inherently oppressive notion that relies on a Eurocentric subject.

In analyzing the relationship of Enlightenment thought to the broader historical phenomenon of colonialism, the consequential link between modern ideals and colonial oppression heralded by postmodern deconstructions has been sufficiently addressed, making room for an evaluation of the political merit of modern rationality in addressing colonialism and its aftereffects. With Enlightenment ideals exonerated to some degree from the accusation of directly giving rise to the colonial project, the philosophical discourse on the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment moving forward can now be examined. In dialogue with prominent postmodern thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, Habermas emerges as a staunch defender of the sustained utility of

[11] Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 3 (2006).

[12] Larry L. Langford, "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, or, Why Not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992).

modernism in facilitating equality and freedom in human society. In works such as Modernity: An Unfinished Project and The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity, he considers seriously postmodern critiques of rationality and acknowledges the many failings and contradictions of modernity, but ultimately affirms that the emancipatory potential of the modern project has yet to be realized and therefore should not be abandoned.[13]

Habermas locates the failures of modernity, which would include European colonial domination, in the uneven development of the realms of science, law, and art which became differentiated as a result of modernization, with advancement in the scientific-technological sphere outpacing that of the moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive spheres due to the employment of instrumental reason by capitalism.[14] Distortion in the balance of progress across these areas has allowed for the utilization of reason in the service of the repressive initiatives which have abounded in the modern period and been heavily criticized by the postmodern camp. Habermas asserts that prioritizing the development of communicative rationality and limiting the relative power of instrumental rationality can salvage the promise of modernity by bringing the domains of morality, legality, and art up to speed with science and technology. This development can shorten the gap between expert cultures and the public domain which has resulted from the stunted growth of the moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive spheres, creating

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[13] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997. See also Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988).

[14] Thomas L. Dumm, "The Politics of Post-Modern Aesthetics: Habermas Contra Foucault," *Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (1988). See also Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997.

circumstances in which the "expert culture is appropriated from the perspective of the lifeworld."[15]

The conception of reason that Habermas emphasizes in this assessment concedes to the postmodern deconstruction of the metaphysical status of rationality in a universal autonomous subject, but still proclaims the universality of rational standards as central and necessary to any meaningful intersubjective discourse.[16] In this way, he redeems the merits of reason by characterizing the a-rationality of philosophical postmodernism as a non sequitur from the deconstruction of classical-modernist rationality, modifying reason to be more accommodating of material circumstances. He aligns with the postmodern consensus in rejecting the existence of an a priori rationality grounded in the Cartesian philosophy of the subject, acknowledging the effect which the "contingencies of language, embodiment, and history" have on reason, but denies the sentiment that there are no "criteria by which to judge propositional truth, normative rightness, subjective truthfulness, and aesthetic harmony."[17] To this extent, his general theory of communicative rationality incorporates the critical insights of postmodern deconstructions of reason while simultaneously attempting to reclaim its integral significance in constructing any sort of discursive knowledge. By increasing awareness of the ways in which socio-political forces can shape reason into an instrument of oppression yet maintaining the ability of rational discourse to address these issues and formulate truth through communicative action, this position constitutes a solid argument in favor of the utility of reason in facilitating freedom and combating oppression.

Despite the strength of this formulation, Shaswati Mazumdar attempts to expose undercurrents of naivete and Eurocentrism in Habermas's unrelenting assertion that the development of

[15] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997, 52.

[16] Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988).

[17] James Schmidt. "Habermas and the Discourse of Modernity," *Political Theory* 17, no. 2 (1989), 317.

communicative reason will realize the emancipatory potential of modernity.[18] In examining the alleged potential of both modern and postmodern thought to justify systems of domination, the criticism is leveled against Habermas that his tunnel vision on the emancipation promised by Enlightenment excludes a consideration of difference and relies on a universal autonomous subject for which there is no practical conception, ignoring the social, economic, and political conditions that constrain the realm of communication. In this way, Habermas's metacritique of postmodern deconstructions of reason and history are portrayed to be redundant reformulations of the ideals being challenged. This criticism seems to ignore the nuanced rejection of subjective reason within Habermas's theory of communicative rationality as a standard of intersubjectivity, underestimating the extent to which this conception modifies the concept of a priori rationality to account for social construction. While the insights of postmodernism certainly warrant a vigilant watch for the pernicious influence of Eurocentric bias in rational endeavors, Habermas's modified conception of reason seems to allow for this awareness without sacrificing the utility of employing rationality in pursuit of improving human circumstance.

Within his general defense of the unrealized liberatory possibilities of rational modernism, Habermas constructs a salient argument against postmodern attacks on rationality by revealing the reliance of these assessments on the very notion which they deconstruct. In this way, thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault "commit a performative contradiction in their critiques of modernism by employing concepts and methods that only modern reason can provide."[19] This metacritique builds on the necessity of reason in intersubjective communication by alluding to the logical pitfalls of a relativism that lacks any standard of adjudication, pointing out "the precarious status of a position that totally rejects privileging any position and therefore cannot account for the

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[18] Shaswati Mazumdar, "Habermas and the Post Modernist Critique of the Enlightenment," *Social Scientist* 20, no. 12 (1992).

[19] Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta.

validity of itself."[20] To a certain extent, this line of argumentation locates philosophical postmodernism within the lineage of modernity itself, which via Enlightenment thought has always contained a perpetual clash with itself in the pursuit of eliminating dogma and misunderstanding.[21]

Rather than a static set of abiding principles, the primary characteristic of Enlightenment thought has been portrayed as an internal dialectic which "continually attempts to recreate the conditions of freedom and emancipation."[22] Recognition of this empirical spirit and critical orientation in many ways blurs the antagonistic distinction between modernism and postmodernism, which is "predicated on a reduced and inadequate understanding of philosophical modernism's self-critical potential."[23] Rather than rejecting the merit of postmodern critiques of Enlightenment, there is a case to be made for the incorporation of such critical works into this internal dialectic, preserving optimism toward progress and freedom without falling victim to the naïveté that has allowed the contradictory injustices of modernity to be condoned and facilitated by instrumental reason. Habermas's defense of modernity by means of communicative rationality seems to effectively heed the warning of postmodern insights in a way that recognizes both the dangers and advantages of modern ideals and attempts to limit the former while multiplying the latter.

While Foucault was a direct opponent of Habermas in argumentative exchanges over the merits of Enlightenment throughout the late 20th century, certain Foucauldian positions lend credence to this deconstruction of the characterization of postmodernism as a distinct philosophical approach that succeeds in discarding the tenets of modernity. Despite his position as one of the most prominent thinkers of the philosophical movement

[20] Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988), 154.
[21] Larry L. Langford, "Postmodernism and Enlightenment, or, Why Not a Fascist Aesthetics?" *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992).
[22] Langford, "Postmodernism," *SubStance* 21, no. 1 (1992), 26.
[23] Gunter Zoeller, "Habermas on Modernity and Postmodernism," *The Iowa Review* 18, no. 3 (1988), 151.

towards postmodernism, as his genealogical works succeed in deconstructing modern metanarratives of progress and notions of the subject, Foucault actively rejected the postmodern label during his lifetime.[24] While this sentiment could merely be indicative of a distaste for constraints of labeling, Foucault's commentary on modernity in the later years of his life exposes a homage to the spirit of Enlightenment thought which tracks with his refusal of the postmodern title. In these later works, such as his 1984 analysis of the seminal Kantian essay on Enlightenment, Foucault advances a conception of modernity as an attitude which entails a permanent criticism of the current historical epoch, representing a state never truly attained but always to be achieved.[25] In this way, the critical lens Foucault applies to the narrative of historical progress facilitated by rationality can be seen as operating within the internal dialectic of Enlightenment.

This blurring of the boundaries between the modern and postmodern can be made to support the unrealized emancipatory potential of Enlightenment thought which Habermas so vehemently defends, allowing for the incorporation of postmodern arguments as a critical component of rational progress. The deployment of rationality in modern societies, despite being intended at least explicitly to facilitate freedom, equality, and justice, has undoubtedly contributed to Western civilization's commitment of atrocities around the world, a reality which one has to look no farther than the extent of European colonial domination to observe. However, while the scale of these exploitative endeavors may have increased with the modern development of instrumental reason, the expansionist subjugation of foreign peoples was not an invention of modernity, and modern reason has been employed as much to criticize these brutalities as to justify them. These realizations serve to frame modernity's relationship with colonial domination within Foucault's conception of Enlightenment as a perpetually critical

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[24] Jonathan Simon, "Between Power and Knowledge: Habermas, Foucault, and the Future of Legal Studies," *Law and Society Review* 28, no. 4 (1994).

[25] Ehrhard Bahr, "In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas," *German Studies Review* 11, (1988).

attitude whose end is always yet to be realized.[26] The emancipatory promise of Enlightenment was never to rationally construct conditions of freedom, justice, and equality out of thin air, but to apply the tool of reason to bettering the human condition in the direction of these ideals, which may never fully come to fruition. As such, recognition of the ways in which reason has created or exacerbated injustice only aids the Enlightenment project in correcting errors in application.

Habermas defines the modernity born from Enlightenment thought in terms of its opposition to dogmatic tradition and subscription to the ideal of infinite human progress.[27] The combination of these components does not necessarily entail a rational linear progression to utopia, but rather suggests a continual process of criticizing the established practices of the past in order to improve upon or deconstruct them going forward. Under this definition, critical postmodern analyses, such as Foucault's observations of the inevitable structuring of knowledge by power, present themselves as the oppositive mechanism of this characterization.[28] Foucault's examinations of power are critical but never proscriptive and he has claimed to raise "the question of power by grasping it where it is exercised and manifested, without trying to find general or fundamental formulations."[29] As such, his deconstruction does not necessarily condemn the possibility of developing a freer knowledge, but only locates and describes the plethora of ways in which power has shaped and employed truth and reason throughout the modern age. By raising awareness of the pernicious social forces which prevent rational discourse from living up to the ideal of neutrality, this historical critique complements the

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[26] Ehrhard Bahr, "In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas," *German Studies Review* 11, (1988).

[27] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project." In *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1997.

[28] Ehrhard Bahr, "In Defense of Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas," *German Studies Review* 11, (1988).

[29] Jonathan Simon, "Between Power and Knowledge: Habermas, Foucault, and the Future of Legal Studies," *Law and Society Review* 28, no. 4 (1994), 954.

positions of more traditionally modern perspectives on reason, allowing for recognition and confrontation of the intrusion of power on rational discourse. With value-free knowledge as an end always to be attained but never truly achieved, just as the state of Enlightenment, the postmodern constructivist approach can help to eliminate contradictions in the employment of reason and ultimately contribute to the rational improvement of society. In this way, the philosophical commitments of Habermas and Foucault can be seen as interacting counterbalances which drive forward the perpetual struggle inherent to the internal dialectic of Enlightenment.

In conclusion, the incorporation of both modern ideals and postmodern critiques into the internal dialectic of Enlightenment creates a strong foundation from which to construct a progressive politics aimed at eliminating systems of domination such as colonialism. The unification of the "hyper- and pessimistic activism" bred by Foucault's vigilance in detecting the pernicious influence of power and the normative optimism inherent in Habermas's theory of communicative reason combines the utility of both approaches in this respect, avoiding a crisis of motivation without fostering ignorance of the perils which unchecked rationality can create.[30] This formulation affirms the characterization of modernity as an unfinished project and asserts the continued emancipatory potential of Enlightenment reason.

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[30] Thomas L. Dumm, "The Politics of Post-Modern Aesthetics: Habermas Contra Foucault," *Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (1988), 218.

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