

**From Hermeneutics of
the Ancient Text to the
Text of Emancipatory Politics**

Dieter Misgeld

Translated by Hossein Mesbahian

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The Distinctiveness of Europe, the Geisteswissenschaften and a Global Society: Reflections on Some Recent Writings by Hans-Georg Gadamer

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Dialogue? Which Dialogue between Civilizations?: Lessons to be learned from the Situation in the Americas, North and South

Zarathustra's Land Beyond Good and Evil

Synopsis of this Collection

This book consists of four articles and a very short paper containing Dieter Misgeld's reflections on an academic visit to Iran. The first section is an article entitled "The Distinctiveness of Europe, the Geisteswissenschaften and a Global Society: Reflections on Some Recent Writings by Hans-Georg Gadamer," examining Europe's distinctiveness from both eternal and external point of view. Indeed, Misgeld takes Gadamer's reflections on the distinctiveness of Europe to prepare the ground for a new and unprecedented perspective on the issue, that "the subtle 'Eurocentrism' of Gadamer's reflections on Europe has to be put aside, in order to open the way for a questioning [of] European traditions on the basis of experiences made in the Third World." From this perspective, "the history of genocide, enslavement and subjection accompanying the rise of European civilization and of the humanities originating in it, have to be made the center-piece of pan-European reflection. The philosopher who engages history in this manner will remove the vestiges of cultural pride and pride in culture still enveloping an emerging pan-European consciousness. The philosopher responding to this condition will be a healer of culture only by demanding the harshness of a self-encounter heavily invested with fear: he or she has to insist, that well meaning openness to the other (i.e. to none European, non-North American societies) cannot be achieved prior to this self-critical encounter."

In the second article, "Modernity, Democracy, and Social Engineering," Misgeld investigated the old debate between Habermas and Gadamer regarding critical social theory and hermeneutics in the new light of Rorty's and Bernstein's contribution to the debate. Misgeld introduced American pragmatism as a key participant in this debate.

According to Misgeld, "two features of American pragmatism surface "a) American pragmatism at its core is a theory of democracy, and b) the world of pragmatism or neopragmatism is a world in which technology is not feared. Rather, technology is often seen as a plausible means for solving or redressing human and social problems." Taking into consideration these features of pragmatism, and the "often forgotten" fact that "critical social theory and hermeneutics share some common cultural background," Misgeld almost reaches his final conclusion in the middle of his discussion: "the lesson to be learned from these criss-crossing observations weaving together different cultural histories and philosophies, different societies in the abstract, is that we need to ask broad and far reaching questions about modern civilization and its practices, without being certain that our theories can provide answers to these questions. Nevertheless, keeping these questions alive is important. It may help us develop the social visions required for the future."

The third section article, written exclusively for this collection in April 2004, is entitled "Human Rights, Past and Future: The Need for a Serious, Global Justice Perspective." Misgeld develops his argument in two interrelated directions: criticizing the philosophical and historical limitations of the UDHR, and providing some suggestions for a possible agenda for the world. By citing the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi's statement that "a human being gripped by starvation, a human being beaten by famine, war and illness, a humiliated human being and a plundered human being, have been deprived of their dignity, including their capacity to claim their rights for themselves," Misgeld enters into the discussion of the history of human rights leading up to the Universal Declaration.

According to Misgeld, while the crucial role of the Nazi-holocaust in provoking the "conscience of mankind" toward drafting international agreements has been rightly highlighted in all discussions on Human Rights, "other horrible events are rarely noted, such as the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the fire bombings of Tokyo...and civilian deaths left behind in South East Asia by the French in Vietnam and Algeria, at a time when the UDHR had already been approved. The process of the expulsion of the Palestinians from the region to be claimed for the state of Israel also had already begun... Thus it is hard to maintain the view that the UDHR and related documents were rooted in a full awareness of global humanitarian catastrophes and injustices." In addition to this historical investigation of the UDHR, Misgeld has also argued about the philosophical shortcoming of the UDHR, saying that "the individualist and personalist assumptions of the Western philosophy of natural rights became the decisive background for the drafting of the Universal Declaration", and that therefore the current version of UDHR is not truly universal, since "the worldwide dialogue about the basic entitlements of all human beings in all cultures and in all societies has not been formed."

Accordingly, human rights "need to be transcended toward conceptions of human wellbeing and universal social justice." To provide some proposals in this direction in the second section of his article Misgeld draws upon "suggestions and ideas from many quarters, including several outstanding contemporary philosophers and social analysts whose thoughts have helped him see clearly." These thinkers and analysts are important for Misgeld "because they avoid a dogmatic approach to human rights. They are not interested in justifying the entire catalogue of human rights contained in official Human Rights Documents, but are instead concerned with points of principle. Misgeld accordingly, "wishes to keep socialist and radical movements in view, which were and are concerned with social justice, equity, and equality around the world."

The fourth article, originally presented at an international seminar on "Centre and Periphery", May 1, 2002, in Isfahan, Iran, is titled "Dialogue? Which Dialogue between Civilizations?: Lessons to be learned from the situation in the Americas, North and South." In this piece Misgeld describes the obstacles to dialogue which must be overcome as follows: "I claim that real communication between societies, cultures and civilizations is impeded by the practice and the imperative of accessibility fostered by the media culture of the West, by the global reach of business, and of course, also by the global reach of military technology." Equality is presented as a fundamental condition to dialogue between and among civilizations, countries, societies, and religions. "It will not do, for example, to mention Islamic fundamentalism, without mentioning the fundamentalism of Orthodox Judaism, or even more important, the growing Christian fundamentalism of protestant denominations in North America." The most impressive section of this article is its concluding remarks in which Misgeld emphasizes that "it is imperative that the dominant groups in the North-Atlantic countries acknowledge and recognize the evil that slavery and colonialism have been. They need to take measures against the now emerging new forms of colonialism and imperial control."

The last section of this book is a very short paper containing Misgeld's reflections on an academic visit to Iran, published in "TPS Quarterly" as "Zarathustra's Land Beyond Good and Evil." Observing that 70 per cent of Iranians are younger than thirty and sixty percent of its university students are women, Misgeld comments that "[D]uring the conference we were constantly confronted with the substantial changes happening in the country, the dynamism of its very young population, including its women, on the one hand, [and] the menacing stance adopted by Washington, on the other hand." He concluded that "I believe I have learned that we in the 'West' must make every effort to understand that there is more than one path into a global future none of us can ultimately know or control, and that communication and exchange between peoples and countries around the world, on the basis of full equality and complete mutual respect, with full recognition of the relevant differences, are indispensable. Once this has been established, we can then work at our reciprocal shortcomings and inhumanities. They will never be found on one side only. That is why dialogue and encounter are so important."

Hossein Mesbahian
August 2005