

Political theory and the great gatsby

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In his article "'A New World, Material Without Being Real': Fitzgerald's Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*," Ross Posnock establishes Fitzgerald's interest in Marxism by placing him as a Nietzschean Marxist and contemporizing him with Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, printed in 1923, and with Marx's theories by extension, attempting to "demonstrate how deeply Marx's critique is assimilated into the novel's imaginative life," although he is careful to point out that Fitzgerald "does not share their abhorrence of capitalism" [201].

Posnock offers a close reading of material objects and Gatsby's subsequent mystification with them to analyze the conflict between the individual and society, Nietzsche and Marx. I would suggest a revision to Posnock's analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, reidentifying the material world Posnock places as "Gatsby's" as that of the Buchanans, with Gatsby an implicit imposter.

As Habermas summarizes, Nietzsche's theory of knowledge is replaced by a perspectival theory of the affects whose highest principle is "that every belief, every taking-for-true, is necessarily false because there is no true world" [Habermas 122]. In analyzing the material acquisitions of Gatsby, Posnock seems to demonstrate how Gatsby attempts to create himself, to make his world real, through the material values of the Buchanans.

Yet his past and his characteristics, his "old sport" catchphrase, are all a smokescreen diverting us from knowing the true character of Gatsby.

Nietzsche would seem to offer the explanation that there is no real Gatsby.

Coppola similarly provides a material reading of Gatsby in the opening sequence of his screenplay, as he moves the audience from Gatsby's cars to

his concert Steinway, crystal decanters, a toilet set of pure dull gold, rows and rows of fine suits (plus one military uniform), and an emerald ring [Coppola 1-3].

Posnock and Coppola seem to see a system of material enclosure created by the Tom Buchanans of the world, the American aristocracy, complete with moral values. The system has created the parameters by which Gatsby may define himself, by his possessions. Reexaminations of Marxism, such as the thought of Jurgen Habermas, investigates the social and cultural implications about which Marx wrote, allowing for deeper analysis than Posnock's superficial offering.

If my understanding is correct, in Legitimation Crisis, Habermas looks at socio-cultural crisis tendencies and how they reflect political and economic systems crises, saying that input crises of the socio-cultural system are output crises of economic and political systems, or that the crises of the political and economic systems manifest themselves through the socio-cultural system. Thus, the crisis of an impostor illegally climbing the class hierarchy, acquiring power and influence, manifests itself socially, in the conflict between Tom and Gatsby for Daisy's love.

But this social crisis has political and economic consequences as well, reflected through our narrator. According to Habermas, " In advanced capitalism, [changes in the socio-cultural system] are becoming apparent at the level of cultural tradition (moral systems, world views) as well as at the level of structural change ... and core components of the bourgeois ideology become questionable (endangering civil and familial-professional privatism)"

[48-49]. The socio-cultural system lagged behind while the economic system moved from traditional to liberal capitalism (laissez-faire capitalism).

As the economic system moved into advanced capitalism with the power of the Progressives (beginning with Theodore Roosevelt), the socio-cultural system caught up as well, forcing changes in input from the political system. Consequently, the political system has interfered more with civic privatism, including the New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs, in a search to build new, satisfactory normative structures while older but imperative normative structures, like education, have lagged behind, jeopardizing the economic system.

The Great Gatsby is set at the socio-cultural junction that Habermas describes. Essentially, our nation was coming of age, and the booming period of the 1920s could be interpreted as a dysfunctional attempt to enjoy the newly-available economic riches. In terms of Gatsby, the conflict between Gatsby and Buchanan really focuses on Nick Carraway, our narrator. In the same way that Gatsby has already chosen to define himself via the social norms established, Nick must now also decide how to define himself as he claims his voice as narrator.

According to Judith Butler, who is interpreting Lacan, "Entrance into language comes at a price: the norms that govern the inception of the speaking subject differentiate the subject from the unspeakable, that is, produce an unspeakability as the condition of subject formation" [Butler 135]. We encounter Nick after his coming of age, marked by his 30th birthday on the evening of Tom and Gatsby's confrontation, a day when "the

transition from libertine to prig was so complete" [Fitzgerald 137], after he is allowed a voice.

In fact, Carraway is only offered the opportunity to speak by his laissez-faire reaction to the moral dilemma. According to Butler: Although psychoanalysis refers to this inception of the subject as taking place in infancy, this primary relation to speech, the subject's entry into language by way of the originary 'bar' is reinvoked in political life when the question of being able to speak is once again a condition of the subject's survival.

The question of the 'cost' of this survival is not simply that an unconscious is produced that cannot be fully assimilated to the ego, or that a 'real' is produced that can never be presented within language. The condition for the subject's survival is precisely the foreclosure of what threatens the subject most fundamentally; thus, the 'bar' produces the threat and defends against it at the same time [135]. The conflict of *The Great Gatsby*, if we apply Butler, focuses on Nick Carraway through the threat of Jay Gatsby's impediment on social hierarchy.

The foreclosure of the threat, the execution of Gatsby, presents the 'bar', the moral dilemma to which Nick must react. According to Saussure, "The social uses of language owe their specifically social value to the fact that they tend to be organized in systems of difference ... which reproduce ... the system of social difference. ... To speak is to appropriate one or another of the expressive styles already constituted in and through usage and objectively marked by their position in a hierarchy of styles which expresses the hierarchy of corresponding social groups" [Butler 157].

As Butler points out, Saussure is rehabilitating the base/superstructure model through the relationship of language and the social system [Butler 157]. The fight of Gatsby is really over cultural norms, and how Nick reacts in the last chapter is essential to the American future, in terms of Habermas, but also presents the threat of Nick being cast into the realm of the unspeakable. In his final encounter with Jordan Baker, Nick learns that turning 30, with the "portentous menacing road of a new decade" before him [Fitzgerald 143], comes final responsibility in speaking.

When he says to her, "I'm thirty. ... I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor" [Fitzgerald 186], Nick realizes he insults Jordan, casting her into the unspeakable by citing their age difference: "She didn't answer. Angry, and half in love with her, and tremendously sorry, I turned away" [Fitzgerald 186]. Not knowing exactly how he feels about Jordan and speaking without knowing, Nick comes to understanding the importance of speech through the guilt and shame he feels.

That his ambivalent feelings toward Jordan, being half in love with her, mirror his feelings toward Gatsby, the contradictions that Donaldson points out would indicate that Nick comes to an informed decision about Gatsby before telling the story. At some point between Nick telling Gatsby "They're a rotten crowd. ... You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" [Fitzgerald 162] and telling the reader, "I disapproved of him from beginning to end" [Fitzgerald 162], one sentence later, Nick came to a moral understanding with socio-cultural and political implications.