treatment of topics such as the civilizing process, human violence, the alleged clash of civilizations, changes in cities over time, and the urbanization of knowledge. Suffice it to say that Allen has created an impressive armature (in the sculptural sense) for a concept of civilization which the author and his readers can add to and fill out and thus make progress toward a philosophy of knowledge and civilization, and at the same time a substantive philosophy of history, adequate to the pressing needs of our time.

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An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy
EWA PŁONOWSKA ZIAREK

An Ethics of Dissensus is written in response to an impasse frustrating contemporary feminism and postmodern political theory: the conceptual dissociation between ethics and politics. Ziarek attempts to fuse ethics and politics in a way that moves beyond the failures of the two prevailing trends in recent theory: on the one hand, a politics of difference that avoids confrontation with the ethical structures of difference and, on the other, theories of normative obligation that fail to address the political contexts that create the need for ethics in the first place. Ziarek’s procedure for synthesizing ethics and politics is to recontextualize both at the level of embodied practice. Considered at this level, ethical-political practice is clearly marked by sexual and racial differences that make problematic any attempt to separate ethical and political elements. Understanding that racial and sexual difference is constructed through political antagonism helps us recognize the value of an ethical investiture in politics. In Ziarek’s view, the political sites where embodied differences gain their significance will be the field for an ethics that finally addresses embodiment without essentializing it. The advantage of this view for contemporary feminism is clear: traditional political models that neutralize and disembodied citizens can be opposed without lapsing into essentialist demands for the “recognition” of difference.

One signal strength of Ziarek’s book is her ability to develop a conversation with a multiplicity of voices. The book proceeds through critical exposures of Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, Mouffe, Laclau, Kristeva, Irigaray, and others. Her skillful engagement with such a diverse range is grounded in a familiarity with the broad spectrum of Continental philosophy. The index attests to the fact that no major Continental thinker goes unconsidered. Such breadth is also apparent in Ziarek’s first and only other offering, The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism (1996), where the fusion includes Derrida, Benjamin, Cavell, and Kafka. Ziarek engages with the work of Foucault and Levinas to situate ethical practice between an “ethos of becoming” and an “ethos of alterity.” She states the value of Foucault’s work in terms of his conceptualization of an agency that both resists the disciplinary mechanics pervading modernity
and creates itself through an aesthetics of existence. She employs Levinas to articulate an ethical responsibility that commands the self prior to its willful and rational presence. Ziarek holds together these seemingly opposed views in order to conceive an ethics that resides in the interstices of this unlikely combination. Articulating freedom and responsibility as embodied practices, she argues that these two ethical paradigms are not opposed, but are in fact contexts for one another. Responsibility is not passive obedience to command, but is the free creation of embodied subjects. In turn, this freedom is never absolutely individual, but is always created with others.

Some may wonder why the third main trajectory in postmodern ethics—discourse ethics—is not blended with these other two. Ziarek’s attempt to situate politically the ethics of dissensus clarifies this lacuna. By employing Lyotard’s concept of the differend, Ziarek acknowledges the political importance of nonsignifiable wrongs—the possibility of which is theoretically denied in most versions of discourse ethics. Ziarek uses Lyotard to develop the notion of an “indeterminate ethical judgment that proceeds without a concept” (86). In this view, normative judgments are not a structural possibility inherent in either communication or political antagonism; rather, normative judgments are an artifact of actual political antagonism. In directing her attention in this way, Ziarek is able to address the very embodied subjects who formulate normative judgments. Thus we can recognize that the moment at which embodied differences become political is also the moment of normative judgment. Politics and ethics, in other words, are indistinguishable wherever practice is marked by embodied differences.

To describe the effects that follow from recognizing the embodied conditions of ethical-political practice, Ziarek enters into dialogue with Kristeva, Irigaray, and bell hooks. Readers will especially appreciate the fresh approach of Ziarek’s discussion of hooks. She moves beyond the familiar nods to hooks’s criticisms of the racial and sexual essentialisms still lingering in postmodernism to take up hooks’s own positive contributions to postmodern ethical and political theory. Through hooks she explicated the political timeliness of “an unapologetic commitment to ethical vision” (184). Such a commitment enables us to theorize politics without familiar liberal paradigms (such as consensus) that predictably subtract ethical considerations from the domain of the political. Instead, Ziarek argues, we can invoke a more inclusive ethical paradigm that manifests a combined commitment to experimental freedom and responsibility to others.

Although Ziarek claims that feminist theory is the central context for the book, its relevance clearly extends to postmodern political theory in general. One example of this is Ziarek’s repeated criticisms of the traditional liberal call to dissociate ethics from politics. Some may find these criticisms misdirected insofar as Ziarek’s tendency is to describe liberalism as relying on and extending an individualist social ontology. The problems with contemporary liberalism can hardly be addressed by looking back to the individualism of its early formulations. Most contemporary liberals (e.g., Rawls, Rorty, and Hayek) acknowledge the ontological priority of the social over the individual. Dropping the assumption that liberalism relies on an outdated individualism would enable Ziarek to convey more effectively her crucial insight that democratic politics needs the ethical investiture she calls for. In this spirit, I would suggest that liberalism be regarded as a complex
network of institutions for social government. This would be consistent with Ziarek’s attention to Foucault’s genealogy of discipline. Seeing liberalism in this way clarifies how antessentialists like Rorty can defend versions of liberal theory that explicitly dissociate ethical practice from political governance: contemporary liberals are comfortable privatizing ethics because they bet that liberal social institutions can reliably pick up the slack. This, I take it, is the bluff that Ziarek wishes to call. By addressing antessentialist forms of liberalism, Ziarek could further underscore the value of negotiating ethics and politics in terms that acknowledge their constitutive embodiment. It would also help clarify the way in which Ziarek’s democratic political vision is (as the book’s subtitle indicates) radical. Merely abandoning an individualist social ontology is, at this point in time, more predictable than radical.

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The Philosophy of Gadamer
JEAN GRONDIN

Gadamer’s Truth and Method is an intensely profound read, but one that is often made especially difficult by his frequent reference to figures and traditions that remain unfamiliar to most North American-trained students. Knowledge of these figures and traditions—for example, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Droysen, German romanticism, and humanism—is clearly integral to understanding not only the particular ideas that Gadamer conveys or critiques at any given point in his study, but also for understanding the history of the hermeneutical tradition as a whole. There are also numerous key themes interwoven throughout Truth and Method that can be easily overlooked or misunderstood, and Grondin consistently takes on the task of calling to our attention and explaining these themes. With the publication of Grondin’s The Philosophy of Gadamer, the student now has a guidebook that not only provides a good deal of the historical information but also untangles Gadamer’s intricate themes through careful explication and analysis. The book’s table of contents is set up to correspond to the respective sections of Truth and Method, which makes it easy for readers to refer to specific sections for closer analysis. With Grondin’s book, the student can devote less time to searching and more time to the study of Truth and Method.

The pervading idea informing Grondin’s approach throughout The Philosophy of Gadamer is “that Truth and Method represents a privileged access to Gadamer’s thought” (15). What Grondin proposes to accomplish with the text is a critical and detailed reading that takes into account the entirety of Gadamer’s completed work. Grondin is well suited to this task, for not only was he personally well acquainted with Gadamer but he has also published numerous books and papers on his thought, including a recent, monumental, biography (Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography[New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003]). Grondin also includes in the Introduction to this book a brief biography of Gadamer, and gives a helpful