

GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY (/)

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20

Barbarism and Social Media



Attila the Hun and his horde attack while on horseback
by Eugene Delacroix.

Philosophers have not entirely caught up with social media. To be sure, many philosophers use it, but this is not the same thing as philosophizing about it. This is lamentable, since the ubiquity of social media is one of the most obvious changes to society in the last twenty years. While some philosophers of technology

have addressed it (George Myerson and Justin E.H. Smith come to mind), much of this discussion is about social media ethics. Although this is important, it is superficial compared to the sort of discussion we need. For if the French philosopher Michel Henry (1922–2002) (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/michel-henry/>) is right, the advent of social media further exacerbates the alienation of modern people from their own inner lives, with profound social and spiritual consequences.

GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY

Michel Henry developed a complex and increasingly influential version of phenomenology that argued for the primacy of affectivity in our experience of the world. Phenomenology famously promises a return to the “things themselves,” per Edmund Husserl’s (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/>) slogan, and phenomenological philosophers have spent more than a century trying to articulate precisely how the things themselves are given to us in experience. Husserl’s analysis focused on consciousness’ knowing the world, Heidegger’s on one’s practical engagements with the things of the world, and so on. Henry’s, on the other hand, claims that the things themselves are not given primarily as consciousness’ intentional objects or as handy items to serve our projects but through the affective tonalities of life. What it “feels like” to experience an object—called *qualia* by some philosophers—is not an epiphenomenon of experience for Henry, but the core of it. We do not choose but rather undergo these affective experiences. Indeed, the passive undergoing of what it feels like to exist is a key theme in his work. The joys and pains of life form the basic horizon through which the world appears to us. However, Henry continues, modern thought is uniquely blind to the truth of life, preferring the crystalline purity of quantitative science and formal methods to the messy pathos of life. *Qualia* seems like a will-of-the-wisp hiding behind the more rigorously known objective phenomena only because, Henry argues, modern culture (drunk on the successes of modern natural science) has come to think of truth solely in terms of externalized, objective criteria. This relegates the affective tonalities of life to the status we might also give to designer wallpaper: interesting and compelling, perhaps, but ultimately more decorative than essential.

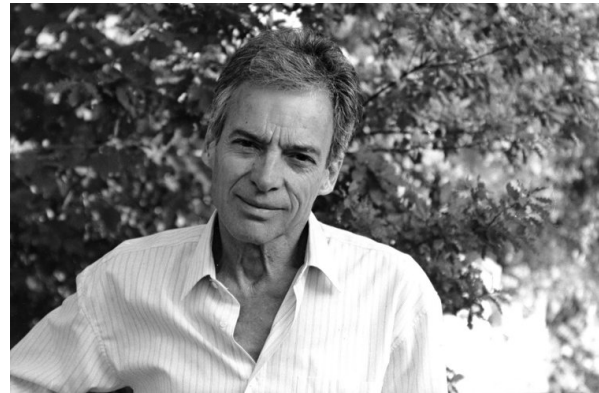
While many readers are most interested in how he develops his theological phenomenology in works such as *I am the Truth* (<https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=1153>) (1996), *Words of Christ* (<https://www.eerdmans.com/Products/6288/words-of-christ.aspx>) (2000), and *Incarnation* (<https://nupress.northwestern.edu/9780810131262/incarnation/>) (2000), his most pertinent texts for our purposes here are those most concerned with the application of his phenomenology to a critique of modern life: *Barbarism* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/barbarism-9781441132659/>) (1987) and *From Communism to Capitalism: Theory of a Catastrophe* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/from-communism-to-capitalism-9781350009035/>) (1990). Henry argues that the marginalization of pathos by modernity’s focus on objectivity alienates us from ourselves, with profoundly negative political and sociological effects. Henry’s most

GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY

important terms here are "culture" and "barbarism." Culture denotes the expression of the joys and pains in daily life. Historically, culture first emerged in quotidian tasks related to gathering food and creating shelter, later developing into art, religion, and ethics. Culture encompasses song and dance, sports, liturgy, feasting, and fasting, and so on. Barbarism describes the transformation of culture when it is cut off from the pathos of life by an overweening concern with exteriority or objectivity. In barbarism, food becomes nutrition, education is reduced to test scores, artistic value measured by Sotheby's auctions, and so on. It is culture's doppelgänger, where cultural practices, cut off from their roots in life's joys and pains, wither and decay. Barbarism is both antiseptic and toxic. Antiseptic because it flees from the joys and pains of life, seeking efficiency, safety, and repeatability; toxic because a life permeated by antiseptic impassibility is joyless and grey. Returning to Henry's phenomenological beginnings, wherein he believes that consciousness is primarily affective, its marginalization in modern life is a profound source of self-alienation. We are not built to live in the way barbarism trains us to live, whence the widespread unhappiness and dissatisfaction of most technologically advanced nations. As we spend more time attending to exteriority, we lose contact with interiority.

Barbarism does not blame any particular regime or political platform for this, but rather something impersonal and inhuman: the media. The media is not any one personality or channel but the sum total of electronic communication. Modern media trains us, Henry argues, to neglect unseen pathos of

life. Exteriority saturates our attentions, obscuring the interior life. Appearances are framed by the screen, reduced to 2D images flittering across the monitor and distracting us from the joys and sufferings of our actual lives. In fact, media repeatedly declares that what appears on the screen is more worthy of attention than the joys and pains of one's own life. Henry mainly has in mind television and radio, but his argument can be extended to include the internet and social networking. Indeed, nothing in "the information age" undermines his analysis; the processes he



Michel Henry

GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY

identified in 1987 have only expanded and accelerated. No longer is the TV in one place. Now, thanks to smart phone technology, it follows you everywhere. The emphasis on exteriority that characterized media culture in the 1980s has only become more profound. While television is a passive medium, with the rise of social networking one now actively participates in reducing one's life to photos and texts displayed on a social media platform. For many, one's inner life is less important than the digital life portrayed on, for example, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok.

The simplest idea of the selfie is that one takes a picture of oneself. More profoundly, the selfie alters one's experience of life. The point of the selfie is to upload a picture of oneself in some surrounding to a social media platform where friends and associates can see that you are there. The trip to the spot in question is often undertaken for the sake of taking a selfie—whence, one can find recommendations of good “selfie spots” in tour guides now. The selfie subordinates the inner experience of what it feels like to be there to the externalization of that experience via digitization online. The important world is not the one is experiencing, but the one displayed on social media. While selfie culture is sometimes derided as narcissistic, such a criticism is misleading. It actually represents a loss of self or subordination of the self to an externalized object, i.e., the digital image edited and filtered that will be posted online. The sad stories of people who have died taking selfies (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_selfie-related_injuries_and_deaths), falling off cliffs and whatnot, is an apt although dark metaphor for the phenomena Henry identifies: the (inner) life of the person ends for the sake of digital exteriority.

Albert Camus famously said that he learned all he knew about ethics from playing soccer. This can be taken in a Henrian way: the feelings of struggle, teamwork, resilience, commitment and so on that one experiences in soccer take deep root in one's life and teach lessons that exteriority cannot. If, as Aristotle said, part of being a good person is that one enjoys being good, then pathos is inseparable from ethics. Ethics shorn of affectivity becomes nothing more than an externalized rule, following and teaching ethics merely the propounding of rules and their justifications. In other words, as media culture increasingly obscures inner life, inevitably we become less moral, although perhaps more legalistic. Alienated from themselves, social media users inevitably drift toward an ideology. This is part of the phenomenon Henry approaches in *From Communism to Capitalism*: the subordination of life to ideology. The extreme

GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY

politics of Twitter, so to speak, Henry could argue, is predicated upon alienation from one's inner life and the decay of culture in barbarism. When life is subordinate to an ideology, ideology becomes the lens through which the world is viewed. The affective elements of experience do not disappear, but become hobbled and chained to the ideology. Ultimately, the triumph of ideology over life, according to Henry, means only that which comports with that ideology is seen as bearing value.



This alienation from life via social media contributes, if Henry is right, to the barbarization of the modern world rather than its improvement. At the same time, Henry's analysis suggests that a life immersed


in social media is deeply unsatisfying. It seems we are slowly beginning to recognize this. The BBC (<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60763168>), for example, reports that the sale of “dumbphones”— i.e., cell phones limited to talking and text features—have more than doubled since 2019. Perhaps there is reason to hope that the barbarism of social media may yet be resisted.

Brian Harding is author of Augustine and Roman Virtue (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/augustine-and-roman-virtue-9781441181848/>) *and Not Even a God Can Save Us Now: Reading Machiavelli after Heidegger.* (<https://www.mqup.ca/not-even-a-god-can-save-us-now-products-9780773550513.php>) *He lives in Denton, Texas, and teaches at Texas Woman's University.*

Brian Harding (/journal?author=61d1f1c165e1da2fe5f92608)

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GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY (/)

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