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Reading Politics

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## Chapter Five

### COMPLETE BULLSHIT



#### I. DEEPER INTO BULLSHIT

**bullshit** *n.* & *v.* *coarse sl.*—*n.* 1 (often as *int.*) nonsense, rubbish. 2 trivial or insincere talk or writing.—*v. intr.* (*-shitted, -shitting*) talk nonsense; bluff. **bullshitter** *n.*

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit.

—Harry Frankfurt

1. Harry Frankfurt's essay "On Bullshit"<sup>1</sup> is a pioneering and brilliant discussion of a widespread but largely unexamined cultural phenomenon. On being honored by an invitation to contribute to the present volume, I decided to focus on Frankfurt's work on bullshit, partly because it is so original and so interesting, and partly because bullshit, and the struggle against it, have played a large role in my own intellectual life. They have played that role because of my interest in Marxism, which caused me to read, when I was in my twenties, a great deal of the French Marxism of the 1960s, deriving principally from the Althusserian school.

I found that material hard to understand, and, because I was naive enough to believe that writings that were attracting a great deal of respectful, and even

<sup>1</sup> [All page references in this chapter are to this essay unless otherwise indicated.—Ed.]

reverent, attention could not be loaded with bullshit, I was inclined to put the blame for finding the Althusserians hard entirely on myself. And when I managed to extract what seemed like a reasonable idea from one of their texts, I attributed to it more interest and/or importance (so I later came to see) than it had, partly, no doubt, because I did not want to think that I had been wasting my time. (That psychological mechanism, a blend, perhaps, of “cognitive dissonance reduction” and “adaptive preference formation,” is, I believe, at work quite widely. Someone struggles for ages with some rebarbative text, manages to find some sense in it, and then reports that sense with enthusiasm, even though it is a banality that could have been expressed in a couple of sentences instead of across the course of the dozens of paragraphs to which the said someone has subjected herself.)<sup>2</sup>

Yet, although I was for a time attracted to Althusserianism, I did not end by succumbing to its intoxication, because I came to see that its reiterated affirmation of the value of conceptual rigor was not matched by conceptual rigor in its intellectual practices. The ideas that the Althusserians generated, for example, of the interpellation of the individual as a subject, or of contradiction and overdetermination, possessed a surface allure, but it often seemed impossible to determine whether or not the theses in which those ideas figured were true, and, at other times, those theses seemed capable of just two interpretations: on one of them they were true but uninteresting, and, on the other, they were interesting, but quite obviously false. (Failure to distinguish those opposed interpretations produces an illusory impression of interesting truth.)

No doubt at least partly because of my misguided Althusserian dalliance, I became, as far as bullshit is concerned, among the least tolerant people I knew. And when a set of Marxists or semi-Marxists, who, like me, had come to abhor what we considered to be the obscurity that had come to infest Marxism—when we formed, at the end of the 1970s, a Marxist discussion group that meets annually, and to which I am pleased to belong, I was glad that my colleagues were willing to call it the Non-Bullshit Marxism Group. Hence the emblem at the head of this article, which says, in Latin, “Marxism without the shit of the bull.” (The group is also called, less polemically, and as you can see, the September Group, since we meet each September, for three days.)

2. I should like to explain how this essay reached its present state. I read Frankfurt’s article in 1986, when it first appeared. I loved it, but I didn’t think critically about it.

<sup>2</sup> As Diego Gambetta has pointed out to me, a mechanism merits mention that is different from the “sunk cost” one that figures above. You can be so happy that you’ve got *something* (after whatever amount of labor, or lack of it, you’ve expended) from someone who is reputed to be terrific that you overvalue it. In both mechanisms you misattribute the pleasure of getting *something* to the quality of the text you got it from.

Having been asked to contribute to the present volume, I reread the article, in order to write about it. I came to realize that its proposal about the “essence” of bullshit worked quite badly for the bullshit (see Section 1) that has occupied me. So I wrote a first draft that trained counterexamples drawn from the domain of the bullshit that interests me against Frankfurt’s account. But I then realized that it was inappropriate to train those examples against Frankfurt, that he and I are, in fact, interested in different bullshits, and, therefore, in different *explicanda*. Frankfurt is interested in a bullshit of ordinary life,<sup>3</sup> whereas I am interested in a bullshit that appears in academic works, and, so I have discovered, the word “bullshit” characteristically denotes *structurally* different things that correspond to those different interests. Finally, and, belatedly, I considered, with some care, the *OED* account of “bullshit,” and, to my surprise, I discovered (and this was, of course, reassuring) that something like the distinct *explicanda* that I had come to distinguish are listed there under two distinct entries.<sup>4</sup>

So, instead of citing cases of the bullshit that interests me in disconfirmation of Frankfurt’s account, I now regard it as bullshit of a different kind<sup>5</sup>—which is not to say that I have no criticism of Frankfurt’s treatment of the kind of bullshit that interests him.

Frankfurt is partly responsible for my original, misdirected, approach. For he speaks, after all—see the second epigraph at the beginning of this article—of the “essence” of bullshit, and he does not acknowledge that the *explicandum* that attracted his interest is just one flower in the lush garden of bullshit.<sup>6</sup> He begins by saying that the term “bullshit” is very hard to handle, analytically, but, as we shall see, he rather abandons caution when he comes to offer his own account of it.

Consider, then, the *OED* reading of “bullshit”:

**bullshit** *n.* & *v.* *coarse sl.*—*n.* 1 (often as *int.*) nonsense, rubbish. 2 trivial or insincere talk or writing.<sup>7</sup>—*v.* *intr.* (*-shitted, -shitting*) talk nonsense; bluff. **bullshitter** *n.*

<sup>3</sup> His essay begins as follows: “One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share.”

<sup>4</sup> Frankfurt himself cites the *OED*, but mainly with respect to meanings and uses of the word “bull”: he touches on its definition of “bullshit” only in its use as a verb, I disagree with his discussion of the entries he cites, but it would be an imposition on the reader’s capacity to endure tedium to explain why.

<sup>5</sup> Four differences between the kinds of bullshit that exercise Frankfurt and me are listed in n. 27 below. The import of those differences will emerge in due course, but the reader will probably follow me better if he or she glances ahead now to n. 27.

<sup>6</sup> [In his festschrift “Reply to G. A. Cohen,” Frankfurt writes: “If I am reluctant to endorse Cohen’s claim that the sort of bullshit on which my attention was focused ‘is just one flower in the lush garden of bullshit,’ it is not because I doubt that his claim is true. It is only because I cannot help recalling that bullshit is an animal product and not a plant” (p. 340)—Ed.]

<sup>7</sup> “Trivial” is very different from “insincere,” partly because it has weaker implications for the state of mind of the speaker/writer. I shall take 2 with the accent on “insincere.”

The bullshit that interests me falls under definition 1 of the noun, but the bullshit that interests Frankfurt is closer to what falls under definition 2 of the noun. And that is because of the appearance of the word "insincere" in that second definition of "bullshit." In definition 2 of the noun "bullshit," bullshit is constituted as such through being the product of discourse governed by a certain state of mind. In this activity-centered definition of bullshit, the bull, conceptually speaking, wears the trousers: bullshit is bullshit because it was produced by a bullshitter, or, at any rate, by someone who was bullshitting at the time. Bullshit is, by nature, the product of bullshitting, and bullshitting, by nature, produces bullshit, and that biconditional, so understood that "bullshitting" enjoys semantic primacy, is true of Frankfurt's view of the matter.<sup>8</sup>

Definition 1, by contrast, defines "bullshit" without reference to the bullshit-producer's state of mind. The defect of this bullshit does not derive from its provenance: almost any state of mind can emit nonsense or rubbish, with any old mix of sincerity and its lack. Here the shit wears the trousers, and *if* there are indeed "bullshitters," and "bullshittings," that correspond to the bullshit of definition 1, then they are defined by reference to bullshit. But it may be the case, as I meant to imply by that "*if*," that the words "bullshitting" and "bullshitter" don't have a stable place on this side of the *explicandum* divide.<sup>9</sup> However that may be, definition 1 supplies an output-centered definition of the noun: the character of the process that produces bullshit is immaterial here.

Note, moreover, how the alternatives in the brief entry on the verb "to bullshit" match alternatives 1 and 2 in the definition of the noun (even though that entry isn't, as it perhaps should have been, subnumbered "1" and "2"). One can "talk nonsense" with any intentions whatsoever, but one cannot unknowingly or inadvertently "bluff": bluffing is a way of intending to deceive. (I'm not sure, by the way, that the dictionary is right in its implication that it suffices for bullshitting, in the nonbluff sense, that you produce bullshit, in sense 1: innocent producers of bullshit might be said not to be bullshitting when they produce it.)<sup>10</sup>

It is a limitation of Frankfurt's article that, as we shall see, he took for granted that the bull wears the semantic trousers: he therefore focused on one kind of bullshit only, and he did not address another, equally interesting, and academically more significant, kind. Bullshit as insincere talk or writing is indeed what

<sup>8</sup> Frankfurt certainly believes that a person bullshits if he produces bullshit, since he thinks it a necessary condition of bullshit that it was produced with a bullshitting intention. He (in effect) raises the question whether that intention is also sufficient for bullshit at p. 119. But, although he doesn't expressly pursue that question, his definition of "bullshit" (p. 125), and its elaboration (p. 130), show that he holds the sufficiency view as well. It is because Frankfurt asserts sufficiency that he can say (p. 129) that a piece of bullshit can be true.

<sup>9</sup> See, further, the last two paragraphs of Section 4 below.

<sup>10</sup> See, once again, the last two paragraphs of Section 4 below.

it is because it is the product of something like bluffing, but talking nonsense is what it is because of the character of its output, and nonsense is not nonsense because of features of the nonsense-talker's mental state.

3. At the beginning of his article, Frankfurt describes a complexity that afflicts the study of bullshit:

Any suggestion about what conditions are logically both necessary and sufficient for the constitution of bullshit is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. For one thing, the expression *bullshit* is often employed quite loosely—simply as a generic term of abuse, with no very specific literal meaning. For another, the phenomenon itself is so vast and amorphous that no crisp and perspicuous analysis of its concept can avoid being procrustean. Nonetheless it should be possible to say something helpful, even though it is not likely to be decisive. Even the most basic and preliminary questions about bullshit remain, after all, not only unanswered but unasked. (p. 117)

I have no problem with Frankfurt's first remark, to wit, that "bullshit" has a wide use in which it covers almost any kind of intellectual fault. To circumvent this problem, to identify a worthwhile *explicandum*, we could ask what "bullshit" denotes where the term does carry (as Frankfurt implies that it sometimes does) a (more or less) "specific literal meaning," one that differs, in particular, from the meanings carried by words that are close to "bullshit," but instructively different in meaning from it, such as the word "horseshit," which, at least in the United States, denotes, I believe, something characteristically produced with less deviousness than characterizes the production of (*OED*-2) bullshit. And I think that, for one such meaning, Frankfurt has provided an impressively discriminating (though not, as we shall see, fault-free) treatment: much of what he says about one kind of bullshit is true of it but false, for example, of horseshit.

Frankfurt's second remark, about the difficulty caused by the fact that "the phenomenon itself is so vast and amorphous," is more problematic. Notice that this remark is meant to be independent of the first one (hence the words "For another ..."), as indeed it must be, since no *phenomenon* could be thought to correspond to "bullshit" where it is an undifferentiated term of abuse. In making this remark, Frankfurt must suppose, if, that is, he supposes, as he appears to do, that he will command the reader's agreement, that the reader has some "specific, literal meaning" of "bullshit" implicitly in mind. But that is extremely doubtful, partly because it is a gratuitous assumption (and, indeed, as the *OED* reveals, a false one) that "bullshit" has some *single* "specific, literal meaning." In a word: how can we be expected to agree, *already*, that bullshit is "vast" and "amorphous," when no specification of "bullshit" has yet been provided?

However that may be, Frankfurt leaves these preliminary problems behind, and plunges right into his subject, by reviewing, refining, and developing a definition that Max Black once gave of "humbug" (which is close to bullshit of the *OED*-

2 kind), and then by commenting on an example of real or feigned rage expressed by Ludwig Wittgenstein against (putative) bullshit uttered by Fania Pascal.

Emerging from the Black and Wittgenstein discussions, Frankfurt very surprisingly says that "the essence of bullshit ... is ... lack of connection to a concern with truth— ... indifference to how things really are ..." (p. 125), where that indifference (see the Frankfurt passage quoted in the paragraph that follows here) is concealed by the speaker. It's the word "essence" that surprises me here: it seemed to be implied by Frankfurt's preliminary remarks that the term "bullshit," considered comprehensively, denotes no one thing whose essence one might try to specify,<sup>11</sup> and Frankfurt had not in the interim indicated a particular *region* of bullshit, whose bullshit might, perhaps, be identified by an essence.

Frankfurt later elaborates his definition as follows:

This is the crux of the distinction between him [the bullshitter] and the liar. Both he [the bullshitter] and the liar represent themselves falsely as endeavoring to communicate the truth. The success of each depends upon deceiving us about that. But the fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it. This does not mean that his speech is anarchically impulsive, but that the motive guiding and controlling it is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are. (p. 130)

Notice that, when Frankfurt elaborates what is supposed to be a proposal about bullshit, he speaks not of "bullshit" but of the "bullshitter." This confirms that, in Frankfurt's account, it is the bull that wears the trousers. But he wrongly takes for granted that that is the only important or interesting bullshit that there is.

Now, in the light of the semantic promiscuity of "bullshit" that was discussed at the outset of this section, it was, so I have suggested, unwise of Frankfurt to cast his claim as one about the "essence" of bullshit, as he does in the p. 125 passage. He should have submitted his indifference-to-truth thesis as an attempt to characterize (at least) one interesting kind of bullshit, whether or not there are other interesting kinds of it. Let us assess his thesis as such, that is, not with the ambitiously generalizing status that Frankfurt assigns to it, but as an attempt to characterize one kind of bullshit, and, in particular, an activity-centered kind of bullshit. I return to the distinct bullshit-*explicandum*, which corresponds to OED definition 1, in Section 4 below.

<sup>11</sup> Does Frankfurt think that the phenomenon of "indifference to how things really are" is "vast and amorphous"? Surely not. Then *what*, again, is he asserting to be "vast and amorphous," in his second preliminary remark, which I criticized two paragraphs back?



Consider Frankfurt's statement, with which we may readily agree, that "[t]he realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept" (p. 122). I find it hard to align this remark with Frankfurt's proposal about the essence of bullshit: advertisers and politicians are often very concerned indeed "to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality" (p. 130) and to design what we might well call "bullshit" to serve that end (yet the quoted p. 130 words are used by Frankfurt to characterize the purpose of liars *as opposed* to bullshitters). Is it not a problem for Frankfurt's proposal about the essence of bullshit that those whom he designates as paradigm bullshitters engage in a great deal of what is not, for Frankfurt, bullshitting?

Frankfurt might say (as he must, to sustain his proposal) that, when advertisers and politicians seek to cover up the truth, they are doing something *other* than bullshitting. But when we are inclined to agree with Frankfurt that advertising and politics supply paradigms of bullshit, it is not the subset of their doings to which his proposal points that induces our inclination to agree. I think we are induced to agree partly because we recognize at least some lying to be also bullshitting.<sup>12</sup> Frankfurt's contrast between lying and bullshitting is mal-constructed, and he erred, I believe, because he failed to distinguish two dimensions of lying, which we must separate if we are to determine the relationship between lying and Frankfurt's bullshitting.

Standardly, a liar says what he believes to be false: let us call that his standard *tactic* (or, for short, his tactic). Liars also standardly seek to deceive their listeners about some fact (other than the fact that they disbelieve what they say): we can call that the liar's (standard) *goal*. And normally a liar pursues the stated *goal* by executing the stated *tactic*: he says something that he believes to be false *in order to* induce his listener to believe something false. (Usually, of course, what I have called the liar's "standard goal" is not also his ultimate or final goal, which may be to protect his reputation, to sell a bill of goods, to exploit his listener, or whatever.<sup>13</sup> But the liar standardly pursues such further goals by pursuing the goal which liars standardly seek. None of these further goals *distinguish* the liar from nonliars.)

Now, what I have called the "standard tactic" and the "standard goal" of lying can come apart. Consider what was one of Sigmund Freud's favorite jokes:

<sup>12</sup> I suppose all lying is insincere talk, and I do not think all lying is bullshitting: at least to that extent, the OED-2 definition is too wide. But *some* lying is undoubtedly also bullshitting, so Frankfurt's definition of activity-centered bullshit is too narrow.

<sup>13</sup> Few liars care about nothing more than inducing false beliefs: that is the ultimate goal of only one of the eight types of liar distinguished by St. Augustine. See "On Bullshit," 131.



Dialogue between two travelers on a train from Moscow:

"Where are you going?"

"To Pinsk."

"Liar! You say you are going to Pinsk in order to make me believe you are going to Minsk. But I *know* you are going to Pinsk. So whom are you trying to fool?"<sup>14</sup>

Suppose that the first traveler's diagnosis of the purpose of the second traveler's uttering "To Pinsk" is correct: let us therefore call the second traveler Pavel (because of the "P" in Pinsk), and let us call the first traveler Trofim. On the indicated supposition, Trofim is right to call Pinsk-bound Pavel a liar, since, as Frankfurt says, the liar is someone who tries "to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality" (p. 130), and that's what Pavel is trying to do to Trofim. The peculiarity of the present example is that Pavel here seeks to deceive by telling the truth. Pavel does not, in my view, lie, on this occasion, but he nevertheless proves himself to be a liar. Pavel's goal is the standard goal of the liar, but his tactic, here, is to speak the truth. (The important and entirely nonverbal point is that the standard goal and the standard tactic of lying lose their normal association here, not whether Pavel is lying, or telling a lie, etc.)

A converse case, in which the standard tactic subserves a nonstandard goal, would go as follows. Pavel knows that Trofim knows that Pavel habitually lies, at any rate when it comes to disclosing his intended destinations. But, on the present occasion, it is very important to Pavel that Trofim should believe the truth about where Pavel is going. So Pavel, once again traveling to Pinsk, says that he is going to Minsk, precisely because he wants Trofim to believe the truth, which is that Pavel is going to Pinsk. I don't know, or very much care, whether Pavel thereby lies, but he is not here "attempting to lead [Trofim] away from a correct apprehension of reality," save with respect to his own state of mind: he wants him to think he's trying to get Trofim to believe something false, when he's not.

We must, accordingly, distinguish two respects in which liars characteristically traffic in falsehood. Liars usually intend to utter falsehoods, while intending that they be thought to be speaking truthfully; but that is quite separate from their standard goal, which is to cause a misrepresentation of reality in the listener's mind.

What is the bearing, if any, of this distinction on Frankfurt's distinction between lying and bullshitting?

The root difficulty for Frankfurt's bullshitting/lying distinction, the difficulty underlying the problem with his advertiser example, is that, while Frankfurt identifies the liar by his goal, which is to mislead with respect to reality, he assigns no distinctive goal to the bullshitter, but, instead, identifies the bullshitter's

<sup>14</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

activity at the level that corresponds to what I have called the liar's tactic. The standard liar pursues his distinctive goal by asserting what he believes to be false and concealing that fact. Frankfurt's bullshitter asserts statements whose truth-values are of no interest to him, and he conceals *that* fact. But Frankfurt assigns no distinctive goal to the bullshitter that would distinguish him from the liar. And, in fact, Frankfurt's bullshitters, as he identifies them, have no distinguishing goal: they have a variety of goals, one of which can be precisely to mislead with respect to reality, and that, indeed, is the goal of bullshit advertising.<sup>15</sup> Advertisers and politicians spew a lot of bullshit, and they indeed seek to induce false beliefs about reality, but those are not, as Frankfurt must have it, separate but, typically, coincident activities on their parts.

The failure to distinguish the level of tactic from the level of goal runs throughout the discussion. Frankfurt writes at p. 128:

Bluffing too is typically devoted to conveying something false. Unlike plain lying, however, it is more especially a matter not of falsity but of fakery. This is what accounts for its nearness to bullshit. For the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*. (my emphases)

The problem is that this falsehood is at the level of tactic, whereas phoniness is at the level of goal. If bluffing is like bullshit, that is partly because bullshitting, too, is often devoted to conveying something false—although often not by saying that false thing itself.

As Frankfurt says, the bullshitter may not care whether or not what he says is true. But Frankfurt has confused that with the bullshitter's not caring whether his audience is caused to believe something true or false. That explains an error that Frankfurt makes about the Fourth of July orator whom he describes at pp. 120–21:<sup>16</sup>

Consider a Fourth of July orator, who goes on bombastically about "our great and blessed country, whose Founding Fathers under divine guidance created a new beginning for mankind." This is surely humbug. ... [T]he orator is not lying. He would be lying only if it were his intention to bring about in his audience beliefs which he himself regards as false, concerning such matters as whether our country is great, whether it is blessed, whether the Founders had divine guidance, and whether what they did was in fact to create a new beginning for mankind. But the orator does not really care what his audience thinks about the Founding Fathers, or about the role

<sup>15</sup> It is not, of course, the ultimate goal of that advertising, which is to cause (some of) its audience to buy what's advertised.

<sup>16</sup> Strictly, the orator's oration is presented as an example of humbug, rather than bullshit. But it's clear that Frankfurt would also say that he is a bullshitter, precisely in virtue of what makes him a purveyor of humbug, whatever difference between humbug and bullshit Frankfurt might want to affirm.

of the deity in our country's history, or the like. At least, it is not an interest in what anyone thinks about these matters that motivates his speech.

It is clear that what makes Fourth of July oration humbug is not fundamentally that *the speaker regards his statement as false*. Rather ... the orator intends these statements to convey a certain impression of himself. *He is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history*. (my emphases)

The orator's unconcern about truth is, mistakenly, identified at the level of his goal, rather than, in line with p. 130, merely at the level of his immediate tactic. For the bullshitting orator, as Frankfurt describes him, might well care a lot about what the audience thinks about the Founding Fathers.<sup>17</sup> If the orator had been Joseph McCarthy, he would have wanted the audience to think that the "new beginning" that the Founding Fathers "created" should persuade the audience to oppose the tyranny supposedly threatened by American communism. The fact that it is not "fundamental" that "the speaker regards his statements as false" in no way implies that "he is not trying to deceive anyone concerning American history." (Similarly, advertisers may not care whether or not what they say is true, but they do care about what their audience is caused to believe, or, rather, more generally, about the thought-processes that they seek to induce in people.)<sup>18</sup>

4. Unlike Frankfurt's bullshitting, lying is identified in terms of the defect at which it aims, namely, falsehood. We clarify what a liar is by reference to falsehood, rather than the other way around; we do not, that is, when asked to characterize what falsehood is, say that falsehood is what a liar aims to say. In parallel, we might, unlike Frankfurt, seek to clarify what a bullshitter is by reference to what he aims at, to wit, bullshit. We might start with the shit, not with the bull. And that would induce us to consider *OED* definition 1 ("nonsense, rubbish") the one that fits the bullshit that interests me, rather than the bullshit that interests Frankfurt. My bullshit belongs to the category of *statement* or *text*. It is not primarily an activity but the result of an activity (whether or not *that* activity always qualifies as an activity of bullshitting).<sup>19</sup>

A liar who tries to say something false may inadvertently speak the truth, whether or not he is then lying, and whether or not what he then says is a lie. And there is also the opposite case in which an honest person, by mistake, speaks falsely. The bullshit that interests me is relevantly parallel. I countenance a bullshitter who has tried, but failed, to produce bullshit—what comes out,

<sup>17</sup> I do not think Frankfurt means to be *stipulating* otherwise: we are meant to agree with what he says about the orator on the basis of his initial, first-sentence-of-the-passage description of him. "Surely," in the second sentence, would otherwise make no sense.

<sup>18</sup> Although this is not, again (see the text to n. 13 above), their ultimate goal.

<sup>19</sup> See the final paragraph of this section.

by accident, is good sense—and I also countenance a lover of truth who utters what he does not realize is bullshit. A person may avow, in full honesty, “I’m not sure whether what I’m about to say is bullshit.” These are not possibilities for the bullshit that interests Frankfurt. But they are possibilities. So the bullshit that interests Frankfurt doesn’t cover the waterfront.

A person who speaks with Frankfortian indifference to the truth might do so yet *happen* to say something true, and, in at least one sense of the term, the one that interests me, what he says could not then be bullshit.<sup>20</sup> And, oppositely, an honest person might read some bullshit that a Frankfurt-bullshitter wrote, believe it to be the truth, and affirm it. When that honest person utters bullshit, *she’s* not showing a disregard for truth. So it is neither necessary nor sufficient for every kind of bullshit that it be produced by one who is informed by indifference to the truth, or, indeed, by any other distinctive intentional state.

The honest follower, or the honest confused producer of bullshit, may or may not count as a bullshitter,<sup>21</sup> but she is certainly honest, and she certainly utters (one kind of) bullshit. There exists bullshit as a feature of utterances that does not qualify as bullshit by virtue of the intentional state of the utterance’s producer (although that state may, of course, causally explain why the bullshit is there, and/or why what’s there is bullshit).

But what *is* that feature of utterances? *One thing it can be*, at least to a first approximation, is what the *OED* calls it, to wit, *nonsense*. But what particularly interests me is a certain variety of nonsense, namely, that which is found in discourse that is by nature *unclarifiable*, discourse, that is, that is not only obscure but which cannot be rendered unobscure, where any apparent success in rendering it unobscure creates something that isn’t recognizable as a version of what was said. That is why it is frequently an appropriate response to a charge of bullshit to set about trying to clarify what was said. (Think of attempts to vindicate Heidegger, or Hegel. The way to show that they weren’t bullshitters is not by showing that they cared about the truth, but by showing that what they said, resourcefully construed, makes sense. Those who call them bullshitters do not doubt that they cared about the truth, or, at any rate, it is not *because* of any such doubt that they think Hegel and Heidegger were bullshitters.<sup>22</sup> That Frankfurt issue isn’t the issue here.)

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps in contrast with Frankfurt’s sense, and certainly in contrast with what Frankfurt says about that sense (see p. 129).

<sup>21</sup> That question is addressed in the penultimate paragraph of this section.

<sup>22</sup> For the record, I do not believe that Hegel was a bullshitter, and I am too ignorant of the work of Heidegger to say whether or not he was a bullshitter. But I agree with my late supervisor Gilbert Ryle that Heidegger was a *shit*. I once asked Ryle whether he had continued to study Heidegger after he had written a long review of *Being and Time* in *Mind*. Ryle’s reply: “No, because when the Nazis came to power, Heidegger showed that he was a shit, from the heels up, and a shit from the heels up can’t do good philosophy.” (Experience has, alas, induced me to disagree with the stated Rylean generalization.)

Something is unclarifiable if and only if it cannot be made clear, but I shall not try to say what "clear" means in this essay. (I'm inclined to think it's not possible to do so, in an illuminating way.) Note, however, that there are relevantly different forms of unclarity, all of which have bearing here. There is the unclarity of a sentence itself, and then there is the unclarity as to why a certain (possibly perfectly clear) sentence is uttered in a given context. So, for example, the meaning of Wittgenstein's "If a lion could speak, we would not understand him" is in one way perfectly clear, but it might nevertheless be judged obscure, and unclarifiably obscure, by one who doubts that it carries, in context, a graspable point. There is also the unclarity of why one statement should be taken to lend credence to another statement. And there are no doubt other pertinent unclarities too.

Note that it is not an objection to the proposed sufficient condition of bullshit that different people might, in the light of different background beliefs, impose different standards of clarity, and, therefore, identify different pieces of texts as bullshit. Some of the people might, of course, be wrong.

I emphasized "one thing it can be" three paragraphs back because defects other than unclarifiable unclarity can suffice to stigmatize a text as bullshit. I focus on this variety of the phenomenon because it commands a greater academic following than other varieties do. In the various varieties of bullshit, what is wanting, speaking very generally, is an appropriate connection to truth, but not, as in Frankfurt's bullshit, as far as the state of mind of the producer is concerned, but with respect to features of the piece of text itself. Unclarifiable unclarity is one such feature. Rubbish, in the sense of arguments that are grossly deficient either in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence, is another. A third is irretrievably speculative comment, which is neither unclear nor wanting in logic, such as David Miller's excellent example, "Of course, everyone spends much more time thinking about sex now than people did a hundred years ago."

I focus on unclarifiable unclarity in particular in preparation for a further inquiry into bullshit that addresses the question why so much of that particular kind of bullshit is produced in France. This kind of academic bullshit, unlike the two contrasting types of bullshit, be they academic or not, mentioned in the previous paragraph, comes close to being celebrated for its very unclarity by some of its producers and consumers. What some of them certainly celebrate is a disconnection with truth: in what perhaps ranks as the consummation of the development of unclarity-type bullshit, a consummation that Hegel might have called "bullshit risen to consciousness of itself," truth is, in much postmodernism, *expressly* disparaged.

Although I forswear a definition of "clarity," I can offer a sufficient condition of unclarity. It is that adding or subtracting (if it has one) a negation sign from a text makes no difference to its level of plausibility:<sup>23</sup> no force in a statement has

<sup>23</sup> This criterion of bullshit was devised by Professor Arthur J. Brown, to whom I am indebted.

been grasped if its putative grasper would react no differently to its negation from how he reacts to the original statement. The deliberate bullshit published by Alan Sokal no doubt comes out as unclarifiable, by that criterion.<sup>24</sup> Note that this test does not apply to the different sorts of bullshit reviewed a couple of paragraphs back, and, being a merely sufficient condition of unclarifiability, it does not characterize *all* cases of the latter either.

An objection that faces my account is that it appears to classify good poetry that isn't bullshit as bullshit, since a piece of good poetry may be unclarifiable. A tempting way of acquitting such poetry of the charge of bullshit is by reference to its designation *as* poetry, rather than *as* some sort of contribution to knowledge in a more straightforward sense. But then the same text would be bullshit or not according, Frankfurt-like, to its, as it were, intentional encasement, and I am trying to characterize an intention-independent sense of the term.

An unclarifiable text can be valuable because of its suggestiveness: it can stimulate thought; it can be worthwhile seeking to interpret it in a spirit which tolerates multiplicity of interpretation, and which therefore denies that it means some one given thing, as a clarifiable piece of text does. So let us say, to spare good poetry, that the bullshit that concerns me is not only unclarifiable but also lacks this virtue of suggestiveness.<sup>25</sup> (I am sure that many academic bullshitters get away with a lot of bullshit because *some* of their unclarifiabilia are valuably suggestive, and therefore not bullshit. Their readers then mistakenly expect more, or most, of it to be so.)

So much by way of a preliminary attempt to identify the *bullshit* that interests me. But what reading of "bullshitter," if any, corresponds to the bullshit that I have tried to identify? Producers of Cohen-bullshit are clearly not by nature bullshitters, in Frankfurt's sense, though Frankfurt-bullshitters often produce Cohen-bullshit, at least in the academy. Rather, I would say that the word "bullshitter" that corresponds to my bullshit has two readings. In one of its readings, a bullshitter is a person who is *disposed* to bullshit: he tends, *for whatever reason*, to produce a lot of unclarifiable stuff. In a second acceptable reading of the term, a bullshitter is a person who *aims* at bullshit, however frequently or infrequently he hits his target.<sup>26</sup> (Notice that other nouns that signify that their

<sup>24</sup> In his wonderful spoof "Transgressing the Boundaries" (which was published as a nonspoof in the thereby self-condemning *Social Text*).

<sup>25</sup> I am allowing that the unclarifiable may be productively suggestive, but I would not go as far as Fung Yu-lan does: "Aphorisms, allusions, and illustrations are ... not articulate enough. Their insufficiency in articulateness is compensated for, however, by their suggestiveness. Articulateness and suggestiveness are, of course, incompatible. The more an expression is articulate, the less it is suggestive—just as the more an expression is prosaic, the less it is poetic. The sayings and writings of the Chinese philosophers are so inarticulate that their suggestiveness is almost boundless." *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Otsuka comments insightfully on a familiar academic "case in which the two come apart: i.e., in which someone is disposed to unclarifiable unclarity without aiming at it. Many academics (including perhaps an especially high proportion of graduate students) are disposed to pro-



denotations engage in a certain activity display a similar pair of readings: a killer may be a being that tends to kill, with whatever intention or lack of it [a weed-killer, for example, is a killer, and a merely careless human stomper on flowers is a (flower-)killer]; or he may be a being who intends to kill, whether or not he ever does.) Aim-(Cohen)-bullshitters *seek* and *rely* on unclarifiability, whereas innocent speakers of bullshit are merely victims of it. Aim-bullshitters resort to bullshit when they have reason to want what they say to be unintelligible, for example, in order to impress, or in order to give spurious support to a claim: the motives for producing bullshit vary. (And just as a person might sometimes kill, without being a killer in either of the senses I distinguished, so a person who is in neither of the senses I distinguished a bullshitter might, on occasion, produce bullshit.)

What about the verb, "to bullshit"? Does the producer of my bullshit, always bullshit when she produces bullshit, as Frankfurt's does? I see no reason for saying that an innocent does, especially if she's not even a disposition-bullshitter. But an aim-bullshitter who produces bullshit indeed bullshits.<sup>27</sup>

5. It matters that bullshit can come in the non-intention-freighted form by which I am exercised. For there is, today, a great deal of my kind of bullshit in certain areas of philosophical and semiphilosophical culture, and if, as we should, we are to conduct a struggle against it, the sort of struggle that, so one might say, Alan Sokal has inaugurated,<sup>28</sup> then it is important not to make false accusations, and not, therefore, for example, to charge possibly innocent traffickers in bullshit with lacking a concern for truth, or with deliberately conniv-

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duce the unclarifiable unclarity that is bullshit, not because they are aiming at unclarifiable unclarity, but rather because they are aiming at profundity. Their lucid utterances are manifestly unprofound, even to them. Their clarifiable unclear utterances can be rendered manifestly not profound through clarification. But their unclarifiably unclear utterances are unmanifestly not profound. Hence it is safe for them to think that they are profound. These utterances are not profound either because they are meaningful (in some subtle way, should there be one, that is consistent with their unclarifiable unclarity) but unprofound or because they are meaningless. They are *unmanifestly* not profound because it is hard to demonstrate that they are not profound, given their unclarifiability. By aiming at profundity, these academics tend to produce obscurity. But they do not aim at obscurity, not even as a means of generating profundity" (private communication, September 2, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Let me now list some central differences between the two kinds of bullshit that I have distinguished:

	<i>Typical context of utterance</i>	<i>Corresponding OED definition</i>	<i>Primary locus</i>	<i>Essence</i>
Frankfurt's bullshit	everyday life	2	activity	indifference to truth
Cohen's bullshit	the academy	1	output	unclarifiability

<sup>28</sup> Initially in the article referenced in n. 24, and then more comprehensively in *Intellectual Impostures*, which he wrote with Jean Bricmont.



ing at obscurity.<sup>29</sup> Our proper polemical target is bullshit, and not bullshitters, or producers of bullshit, as such. So while it's lots of fun for people like me, who have a developed infantile streak, to talk about bullshit, and even just to write "bullshit" over and over again, in an academic essay, there is nevertheless, in my opinion, something important at stake here, and the character of what is at stake makes the bullshitter/bullshit distinction important.

To prevent misunderstanding, let me add that I do believe that there is quite a lot of *aiming* at obscurity in the production of philosophical bullshit, and a lot, to boot, in this region, of lack of concern with truth.<sup>30</sup> But these moral faults should not be our primary focus. For reasons of courtesy, strategy, and good evidence, we should criticize the product, which is visible, and not the process, which is not.<sup>31</sup>

## II. WHY ONE KIND OF BULLSHIT FLOURISHES IN FRANCE

6. Whatever may be the relationship between (unclarifiably unclear) bullshit and intentional states, such as the will to conceal a lack of concern for truth, the philosophical culture which, since the Second World War, has been, so I believe, the most successful producer of bullshit, both in respect of the volume of bullshit that it has produced and in respect of the warmth with which that bullshit has been received, is Francophone philosophical culture.<sup>32</sup>

I have views about the explanation of this fact,<sup>33</sup> but I am neither a historian nor a sociologist, and I shall therefore probably say a number of ill-judged things in my attempt to explain it. I think that the question of how the flores-

<sup>29</sup> Consider this sentence from the work of Étienne Balibar: "This is precisely the first meaning we can give to the idea of dialectic: a logic or form of explanation specifically adapted to the determinant intervention of class struggle in the very fabric of history" (*The Philosophy of Marx*, p. 97). If you read that sentence quickly, it can sound pretty good. The remedy is to read it more slowly, and you will then recognize it to be a wonderful paradigm of bullshit: yet I know Balibar to be an honest thinker.

<sup>30</sup> The evidence assembled in Sokal and Bricmont's *Intellectual Impostures* proves, so I think, the truth of those beliefs.

<sup>31</sup> We may hope that success in discrediting the product will contribute to extinguishing the process. I try to contribute to the project of discrediting the product in an unpublished discussion of "Why One Kind of Bullshit Flourishes in France" [published as Part II of this chapter—Ed].

<sup>32</sup> I cannot claim to have read a great deal of what I consider to be French bullshit, since, perforce, I have experienced no incentive to pursue it deeply. But what I have read of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva leads me to think that there is a great deal of bullshit in their work.

<sup>33</sup> Of, that is, the fact that France has produced so much bullshit. That French bullshit has been well received in certain academic quarters outside France is not something I shall offer to explain here, largely because it is not very puzzling. (Someone has said: "Fashions in ideas, like *haute couture*, are invented in France and sell in America." But French bullshit does not sell well in philosophically advanced American places.)

cence of bullshit in French philosophy is to be explained is a fascinating one, and I want to get my attempt at explanation into the public domain, so that others can criticize it, and do better. I am conscious that much of what I shall say can be challenged ( $\neq$  refuted), through, for example, citation of discrepant parallel instances, cases, that is, where one or two (or more) of the features that I think explain French bullshit are present outside France yet bullshit is not, and cases where bullshit is present, but, as it were, Frenchness, or the French cultural features that I shall adduce, is or are not. I welcome the discussion that, so I hope, the cases that create difficulty for my view will stimulate.

Despite my unprofessionalism in empirical matters, I am confident that three features of French intellectual culture dominate the explanation of the fact that France has produced so much bullshit,<sup>34</sup> although I am quite uncertain about how they figure in that explanation. I shall describe the three features, in no particular order, and I shall then cite, for good measure, some further possibly explanatory features.

The first feature is that within French culture only one place, Paris, is authoritative with respect to the endorsement and rejection of intellectual claims. Anglophone culture is, by contrast, multipolar. It matters what is thought about an intellectual claim in Oxford, in New York, in at least two Cambridges, in Los Angeles, in Berkeley, in Sydney, and so on. It seems to me evident that a plurality of authoritative judging centers encourages the exposure of intellectual fraud, of which bullshit is one type; and that, contrapositively, the existence of only one authoritative judging center makes it easier for fraud to flourish (whatever may be the right conjecture about how this feature, that is, French culture's unipolarity, combines with the others that I shall mention in my attempt to explain why so much bullshit is produced in France).<sup>35</sup>

The fateful unipolarity is not essentially a matter of *one city*, but of a unified national academic structure,<sup>36</sup> and the location of the pinnacle of that structure

<sup>34</sup> The features that I shall list characterized French culture before the Second World War. So they certainly don't explain the *timing* of the French bullshit explosion, which postdates that war. I have no speculations about what *triggered* that explosion. I seek to identify features that made such an explosion more likely to occur in France than in other places.

<sup>35</sup> Unipolarity is not a necessary condition of lots of bullshit. Otherwise, as Diego Gambetta has remarked to me, Italy could not, as it does, foam with bullshit, since Italian intellectual life is not unipolar. Perhaps, for multipolarity to do its cleansing work, some well-formed notion of objective criteria must be around, one that is sufficiently clear to be enforced. And that is lacking in Italy. (See, further, n. 47 below, for a conjecture that the lack of objective criteria enjoys a certain explanatory primacy.)

<sup>36</sup> Cécile Fabre writes: "To be sure, Parisian academic institutions set the tone, but what I think is more relevantly unipolar is the way academics are appointed, and the qualifications they all must have, in order to be appointed, foremost of which is the *agrégation*—in short, the uniformity of career paths. Nowadays, candidates for university lectureships, before they can apply to a university, must be vetted by a national committee: once they are so vetted, they can apply to universities for four years in a row; if they are unsuccessful, they have to be vetted by the national committee

in what is in every respect the dominating center of the culture, which helps to make "intellectual activity both highly politically charged (Paris is also where politics is) and a form of cultural commodity,"<sup>37</sup> to the detriment, for both reasons, of dedication to truth.

The second relevant feature of French culture, manifest in its painting, its architecture, its buildings, its couture, its automobiles, even, indeed, in the very posture, both physical and mental, of the French, is a concern with, and a capacity for, style. French artifacts, both material and social, are arresting and, frequently, brilliant.

We must distinguish conditions that promote a propensity and/or an ability to *produce* bullshit, from conditions that promote the *spread* of bullshit. Style operates on both sides of that distinction, because it encourages bullshit as a form of art (we speak, indeed, of bullshit artists), and because style helps to conceal the fact that bullshit is bullshit, thus facilitating its spread. For, to spread, to gain acceptance, bullshit must be good at concealing its status as such. (Italian bullshit is so patently bullshit that no one, outside small circles, buys it.<sup>38</sup> Bullshitters must have the gift to make what they say credible, and the peculiarities of French style help here.)

There is, of course, also a chic style in British culture: there is Britpop, Brit-art, and so forth. But I believe that it is less accomplished, and in any case the overwhelmingly important fact, here, is that such style has very little academic penetration, no doubt because of the absence in Britain of what I believe to be the third pertinent feature of French intellectual culture, which is that there is a large lay audience for intellectual products in France. Being lay, that audience will read philosophy only if it is *interesting*, and being interested in interestingness is quite different from being interested in truth. (Professionals are paid to be bored, if necessary, so, when they represent the whole audience, the boringness that sometimes accompanies the exposition of truth is more acceptable). The difference between how a philosopher writes in the *Journal of Philosophy* and how she writes in the *New York Review of Books* is greater than the difference between how a philosopher writes in a French academic journal and how

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again. That makes for great intellectual homogeneity: even though the national committee will not usually turn down someone who is already strongly wanted by a university, it has quite a lot of leeway to decide who, in fact, will become a lecturer. If there were several cities in France that were thought to be a judging centre (in fact Lyon is becoming one), but if the members of the academic institutions in all cities were all from the same intellectual mould, the system would still be unipolar. Contrast the Anglophone world: what makes it multipolar is not the fact that there are several *geographical* centres of excellence, but the fact that these centers differ: an undergraduate at Harvard does not work in the same way as his Oxford counterpart, or, indeed his Cambridge (UK) counterpart; the academic culture in the US is different from the British one, and so on" (private communication, August 30, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> Mark Philp, private communication, October 16, 1999.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps Italian bullshit fails because of the prominence of what Diego Gambetta calls "discursive machismo" in Italian culture: see his "'Claro.'"

she writes in *Le Monde*. The existence of a large lay audience for philosophy in France reflects the fact that all French *lycée* students study philosophy,<sup>39</sup> whereas very few high school students do so in English-speaking countries.<sup>40</sup> This makes educated French people expect to be *engaged* by philosophy, and status-seeking intellectuals gladly cater to that expectation.

Those are the three features that I believe to be central. But certain other features of French culture may also play a role.

Fourth (to continue the count) there is the consideration that French universities lack the tutorial system, which enables students to grill their teachers. Take it from me: it is easier to sustain the flow of bullshit in a lecture hall in front of five hundred students than in a semidomestic Oxbridge setting, when you are asked, over tea, or sherry, what you *really* mean. And the bullshit-eliminating effect of tutorials may be more pronounced for students than for teachers, since there is much more grilling of students than of teachers in tutorials. The proportion of British academics who were tutored is much higher than the proportion who tutor, since a much higher proportion were taught at, than teach at, Oxbridge, and most British universities lack a developed tutorial system.

Fifth, and evidently helping to consolidate the popular audience for philosophy, there is a long tradition of works of literature with philosophical content, on the Continent in general and in France in particular: think of Dante, Goethe, Unamuno, Thomas Mann, and, for France, Rousseau, Sartre, and Camus.<sup>41</sup> The legitimacy of philosophy in literature renders literature legitimate in philosophy: people are accustomed to the mix—they expect it. And because literature is beyond the reach of the sort of criticism repeated doses of which render philosophy rigorous (think of what analytical criticism would [inappropriately] do to Keats's identification of truth and beauty, or to Sartre's identification of hell with other people), there is less tendency for philosophy to become rigorous in a culture that conjoins philosophy and literature. (Think of Montaigne and Pascal, who enjoy high philosophical *and* literary status.) A related point is that, while

<sup>39</sup> Cécile Fabre tells me "that the Philosophy paper of the *baccalauréat* is often discussed the day of the exam on TV, and the day after the exam in *Le Monde* and other dailies."

<sup>40</sup> Note, moreover, that French students encounter philosophy at an age when people are inclined to be less critical and more deferential than they are at the age at which Anglophone students first encounter philosophy. Those who regard themselves as unprofessional incompetents are inclined to take bullshitters on trust. And since they think they're incompetent, they believe that what is immediately intelligible to them, and, therefore, what lacks an element of obscurity, cannot be valuable and important. (As Diego Gambetta explains in his "'Claro,'" in some cultures, such as Italy, Latin America, and, to a lesser extent, France, if you say something utterly clear, your audience may feel slighted, almost as though obscurity is a necessary condition of a worthwhile theoretical utterance. [In section 3 of his foreword to *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen remarks that in Britain, by contrast to Paris, "it is not generally supposed that a theoretical statement, to be one, must be hard to comprehend."—Ed.]

<sup>41</sup> I do not consider these writers to be bullshitters, but the present point does not require that I do so.

British philosophy emancipated itself from religion hundreds of years ago, Continental philosophy remained closer to religion, and, therefore, to its rhetorical style, which persisted even in antireligious writing by, for example, communist philosophers. And the particular religion of France is, of course, the strain in Christianity, to wit, Roman Catholicism, which is particularly unfriendly to debate that challenges fundamental doctrine.

The reference above to rhetoric suggests a sixth relevant feature, which is

that many continentals are proud of not being British 'cold fish'. Writing passionately and responding to passionate writings, [caring], is looked on less condescendingly than [in Britain]. Writing passionately often involves being unfair, inaccurate, rhetorical, or exaggerated. Under such conditions, it is easier to sell something that is bullshit but sounds left-wing and radical to people who are left-wing and radical. ... Being rebellious, radical, spontaneous, non conformist, defying authority and tradition, not being as law-abiding as the British is also seen as cool, more often than in Britain.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, one may cite a potent seventh feature, namely, the authoritarian ethos of French intellectual life, which combines balefully with the first feature (unipolarity): unipolarity buttresses the intellectual authoritarianism, although it is logically distinct from it. The authoritarian ethos no doubt also connects with the fourth feature, that is, the *de haut en bas* teaching style, and also with the Roman Catholic tradition.

7. It might be thought that the discussion of Section 6 violates the precept affirmed in Section 5, that we should criticize the bullshit, not the bullshitters. But the suggested explanatory elements, while indeed referring to people's interests, and habits, are pretty neutral vis-à-vis the intentions and goals of French bullshit producers. I need take no stand on how much they *aim* at bullshit: I am examining cultural and social circumstances that reinforce a propensity to bullshit, whatever may hold at the level of individual psychology.

That said, let us consider the difficult question of how the elements that I have isolated might be thought to interact.

Each feature would, on its own, threaten fidelity to truth, and, so I believe, they interact to produce an interest in interestingness rather than in truth. But *how* do they interact? Which ones support which other ones? And which ones act jointly with others, and with what synergy, relative to the production of bullshit? I can only offer speculations here.

A premium on style in philosophy and the presence of a lay audience certainly support one another: it is hard to say which (if either) underlies the other. But how does unipolarity affect those two? Paris is the center not only of intel-

<sup>42</sup> Paula Casal, private communication.

lectual, but also, of course, of social life; it therefore matters, disproportionately, for intellectual life what is and what is not boring at Parisian cocktail parties and similar nonacademic occasions, with consequences for what gets into, and is there to be taken out of, journals and books.

As I have said, the features, singly, and (more so) together, put a premium on interestingness, and such a premium is dangerous in the domain of science and philosophy, where the premium should always be on truth. Within French culture, theories tend to be selected and rejected because of their interestingness and their boringness. Too much value is put on the new, as such, and too much disvalue is put on the old, as such. Theories go not because they are refuted<sup>43</sup> but because they are *passé*.<sup>44</sup> The truth might be boring, and it might be old and all too familiar, and the truth can be shunned in France for these bad reasons.

I do not say that nothing's boring in the massive output of French intellectual culture. On the contrary: it's full of boring stuff, partly *because* it's full of bullshit, and the elaboration of a bullshit idea tends to be boring. Truth and evidence do not control elaboration of the idea, so there is, as it were, no creative tension that draws one on when one reads the relevant texts. But the boredom is (to a degree) tolerated, because of the arrestingness of the idea under elaboration. One may wonder, moreover, how many people actually *read* the big boring books that they display on their shelves. Books produce academic legitimization, even when they are not read.

In one way or another, the features conspire to make authors go for something novel, and interesting, and, if possible, shocking,<sup>45</sup> rather than for what increases contact with the truth. In what perhaps ranks as the consummation

<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that there is no debate in French bullshit, but it tends to be debate of a truth-disregarding kind. Malcolm Anderson advises: "You might mention the fragmented character of French political culture as a result of catastrophic political divisions from the Revolution to the Vichy regime. This has had two effects which contribute to bullshitting—the first is that ideas and intellectual positions are regarded instrumentally (as useful or not useful in political combat, regardless as to whether or not they are true); the second is that people do not genuinely engage in debate with one another in an attempt to discover whether a position is valid or not. This leads to scholarly (and other) periodicals being under the control of particular political-intellectual tendencies and one publishes in those periodicals with which one is generally in sympathy on the grounds that 'one does not shout the truth from the wrong windows'. People are incredibly dismissive of those belonging to other intellectual-political strands. This leads to the erroneous impression that the French are highly critical" (private communication, September 5, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> One might suppose, after Thomas Kuhn, that this is true of theories in general. But I believe that Kuhn's diagnosis of the dynamics of theory change was incorrect, and that, even if he was right, in France theories go because they are *passé* in a cruder sense than Kuhn's. For Kuhn, theories go when enough "anomalies" have accumulated. It is not merely a matter of growing tired of hearing something and coming to want to hear something else.

<sup>45</sup> Reflecting on an earlier draft of this paper, Tracy Strong remarked, not unfairly, that to a certain extent I am saying that bullshit comes from the desire of an intellectual class to *épater* and the wishes of a bourgeoisie to be *épâtée*.

of the development of bullshit, a consummation that Hegel might have called "bullshit risen to consciousness of itself," truth is (as it is in much postmodernism) *expressly* disparaged.<sup>46</sup> Partly because truth is not even aimed at, false, or, rather, untrue theses, abound, and they are protected against exposure by obscure statement and/or by obscure defense when they are challenged: so bullshit, too, abounds.<sup>47,48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> As logic itself was by Jean-Paul Sartre, who responded to A. J. Ayer's criticism of his discussion of nothingness by announcing, "Je ne me place pas sur le plan de la logique."

<sup>47</sup> Perhaps, there is also, to some extent, a reverse moment. Perhaps, that is, the lack of objective criteria in the philosophical culture *allows* Paris, and chic, to dominate it, and enables high intellectual life to reach a semi-intellectual wide public. The lack of objective criteria encourages the confident, institutionally well-established, bluffer. Developing this point, Paula Casal writes: "Since even a [junior, not well-connected teacher in Clermont-Ferrand] is capable of coming up with a good comment or objection, more objectivity gives non-dominant groups more of a chance. This is combined with the general phenomenon that people tend to see genius where they expect it. Those who expect to find in Plato the deepest thoughts are more likely to find them than those who don't. People's expectations cause them to make greater efforts to see the point, the importance or the originality of something ... The more such faith is required the more confidence and reputation counts. Faith tends to be more important when something is difficult or appears to be unintelligible or implausible (perhaps because it is)" (private communication).

<sup>48</sup> For comments on an earlier draft [of the material that constitutes this chapter—Ed.], I thank Malcolm Anderson, Annette Barnes, Jerry Barnes, Sarah Buss, Paula Casal, John Davis, Jon Elster, Cécile Fabre, Diego Gambetta, Grahame Lock, Ian Maclean, David Miller, Alan Montefiore, Michael Otsuka, Lee Overton, Derek Parfit, Rodney Peffer, Mark Philp, Saul Smilansky, Alan Sokal, Hillel Steiner, Tracy Strong, and Arnold Zuboff.