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Racist or Hero of Social Art?

Degas, the Birth of Sociology, and the Biopolitical Gaze

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Degas and his Awareness of Social and Biopolitical Conditions

Edgar Degas (1834–1917) was one of the first artists to consider in sociological terms the milieus he represented, often in an entire series of paintings. At the beginning of his career, he became fascinated by the habits and social conditions of his own, upper class, Parisian milieu (Lipton 1986, 17–72; Herbert 1988, 93–140). Having survived the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–1871, the upheavals of the Paris Commune in 1871, and increasingly, after the death of his father in 1872 (an event revealing that the family's banking and business enterprises were close to failure), Degas increasingly devoted his attention to other milieus he encountered, including backstage events at the Paris Opera (Armstrong 1991, 62–70). Even when it was still located in a more modest building in the rue Le Pelletier (prior to its transformation into an ostentatious public building designed by architect Charles Garnier and completed in 1875), the Paris Opera constituted the largest performance and entertainment industry of his era (DeVonjar and Kendall 2002, 28–61; DeVonjar and Kendall 2011). By creating critical paintings that documented behind the scenes goings-on, Degas succeeded in participating at the same time commercially in the enormous success of his era's most spectacular business.

During Degas's era, sociology was in its infancy as a discipline. The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), a founder of this new science who coined the term "sociology," considered society analogous to an organism. Medical studies suggested to him that laws regulating the interplay of organs functioned similarly to those maintaining the equilibrium of a social group (Pickering 1993, 561–604). This motivated him to envision a new scientific discipline that investigated collective behaviors and societies (Pickering 1993, 429–476, 605–690). "Crisis" and "milieu," two of sociology's most fundamental concepts, are terms borrowed from medicine;

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both were used for analyzing the condition of French society in the final decades of the nineteenth century. "Crisis" owes its origin to a metaphorical extension to society of the term used to describe human bodies suffering from high temperature; thus, the effect of a fever on an individual could be considered analogous to that of a revolution on society (Repplinger 1999, 85–106). The French Revolution and its aftermath had left indelible marks on Comte's adolescent formation and also on his later career.

"Milieu" as a sociological term was relatively new when Degas began exploring the effect of social conditions on physical appearance and intellectual habitus, but also on viewing practices, especially those of privileged individuals observing milieus other than their own (Spitzer 1942). In this hegemonic viewing, gender played a major role: feminists have examined how Naturalism in literature and art viewed women, especially in relation to then-contemporary beliefs about female inferiority (Pollock 1991; see also Vinken 2009 on stereotypes of women between saint and whore). Still, approaches to "social crisis" and "milieu" have not adequately considered contemporary discourses bridging physiology and sociology, and their impact on social art. This essay addresses this lacuna.

Initially, "milieu" was a physics term that described the material ambiance created by waves in water or the transmission of light waves that enable sight (Spitzer 1942, 172–175). French physiologist Claude Bernard (1813–1878), founder of medical chemistry and the study of the physiology of human organs, coined the terms "inner milieu" and "outer milieu" to designate the liquids surrounding an organ and operative within it, respectively (Bernard 1865; Fruton 1979; Grmek 1997, 121–180; Prochiantz 1990). Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) was the first sociologist to adapt the term "milieu" metaphorically for the analysis of the social environments he studied, along with climate and geography, as factors that played decisive roles in determining the character of peoples and their cultures, including literature and the visual arts (Taine 1863; Seys 1999; Richard 2013).

The Self and the World: Historical Experience from Romanticism to Realism/Naturalism

France was a singularly unstable nation in the nineteenth century. It experienced seismic traumas: political, economic, and social. Four revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848, 1871) resulting in more than a half dozen regimes, efforts to legitimize power under Napoleon III, including the radical transformation of Paris under the leadership of Baron Haussmann, the collapse of formerly stable value systems, and the rise of capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, and "opportunism," made France a nation of deeply divided public opinion, more sensitive than its European neighbors to the inherently precarious character of the nation as a social body. Preceding its establishment as an academic discipline (the first chair in sociology at the Sorbonne was established by Emile Durkheim in 1895), sociology invited intellectuals to consider the impact of the French Revolution and of subsequent revolutionary turmoil.

Since first Realism, then Naturalism became prominent in the visual art and literature in the mid-nineteenth century, individual bodies—even those of fourteen-year-old dancers (Degas, *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*, 1881; Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art)—were considered to be formed by society. Social critics considered even beautiful adolescents as marked by crisis, a situation that could—according to

contemporary beliefs—bring to the fore inherited tendencies such as inclinations to crime or prostitution (Hall 1904, v. 1 325–410; Arnett 2006). Social formations—their material conditions, wealth, and poverty, but also their hygienic habits or criminal behaviors,—were increasingly considered the shapers of outward appearances, or physiognomies. The new sensitivity to these issues marked the beginning of a biopolitical consciousness: politics as a force that ruled over the life of citizens in general and that controlled the conditions of everyday existence by means of credit and taxation, hygiene and public health, education and industrialization, economic regulation, by insurance and later also social security. Furthermore, politics established the conditions of life from birth to death in a way that favored some more than others. Societies increasingly adopted liberal legislation and economic principles, even if they were still ruled by monarchs. French philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term "biopolitics" for the change from ancient, pre-democratic regimes in which the sovereign power let people live but could make them die—by imposing death sentences and public executions—to modern forms of government, marked increasingly by elements of liberalism, in which the state makes people live but lets them die—for instance, in prison. He considered this a shift from a "classical age" in which life was controlled by princely powers to modern political forms that emerged around 1800—parallel to a tendency to increasingly base policy on statistical inquiry into society and knowledge about its condition and habits (Foucault 1975; 1976; Lemke 1997; 2007; Hacking 1990).

Beginning in the 1870s, Degas identified with the Naturalist movement (however preferring the term "Realism", temporarilly outmoded during those years when even Courbet was often treated as a Naturalist); in 1876, he embraced Edmond Duranty's label of Realist. He considered himself an empiricist who delighted in observing and describing the social world of late nineteenth-century Paris (Armstrong 1991, 73–100). Although he co-organized, exhibited in, and financially supported several Impressionist exhibitions, Degas never accepted the label "Impressionist" because he felt his objectives differed substantively from those of his colleagues. Mallarmé declared Impressionism the art of social classes Republican politician Léon Gambetta defined as "les couches nouvelles" (Mallarmé 1986, 33). While Degas shared Impressionism's aim to faithfully observe contemporary middle class life, he avoided identifying with the "new classes" as Claude Monet and Pierre Auguste Renoir did; he pursued a more radically distanced, analytical approach. Degas devoted much of his attention to marginalized people—whether materially or with regard to how they were perceived. In *Fourteen-Year Old Dancer* and the pastels of murder scenes exhibited at the 1881 Impressionist exhibition, Degas even resorted to stereotypes invented by the Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), who published a series of popular and influential books, beginning with *Criminal Man* (1876–1897, 5 vols.) that were quickly translated into French and English (Regener 1999, 171–191). However, Degas did not uncritically embrace views marked by such forms of social determinism.

Furthermore, the fact that in 1894 Degas (like Cézanne) sided with anti-Semitic army officers who wrongfully accused Jewish army captain Alfred Dreyfus of espionage continues to spark scholarly speculation about Degas's anti-Semitism not only during these years (Callen 1995, 107–108). But Degas never presented himself solely as an observer of either society, including his Jewish friends, or the female body. Relying on his disciplined, detached aesthetic gaze, Degas not only analyzed women of all classes, but also his own, socially coded way of looking at them. He acknowledged that his family's financial difficulties, of which he suddenly became aware in 1873, motivated

his painting a series of dancers in the Paris Opera ballet (Boggs et al. 1988, 212); he wanted to avoid earning money mostly through portrait painting, an artist's profile he thought to be humiliating for him. Degas also claimed that his financial situation, together with his self-imposed obligation to be productive as a painter, had prevented him from marrying (Bogg et al. 1988, 216). However that might be – Scholars speculating about the question if his experimental monotypes of brothel scenes were related to his personal life reveal more about their own attitudes than Degas's (Callen 1995, 36; Beyer 2014, 205–211).

The painter's growing awareness of social conditions might also be attributed to his own origins: partly Italian (father's side) and creole (mother's side) (Armstrong 1991, 211–244), making him simultaneously an insider (Parisian) and an outsider. Degas also felt unsure of his artistic talent for many years, although he excelled as a portrait painter, choosing mainly family members as models (Boggs et al. 1988, 47–60). Departing from the much-admired portrait style of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), Degas invented new types of portraits, showing sitters in their usual dress and poses, but also in their domestic ambiance and milieu (Boggs 1994, 20–26). During the 1860s, Degas seemed destined to become an innovative bourgeois portraitist.

This seemed particularly likely because of his lack of success with history painting, the most prestigious of painting genres. In 1860–1862, he painted a strange scene showing a group of adolescent Spartan girls inciting boys to compete amongst each other in a sporting event (*Young Spartans Exercising*, Figure 29.1). Here, too, was

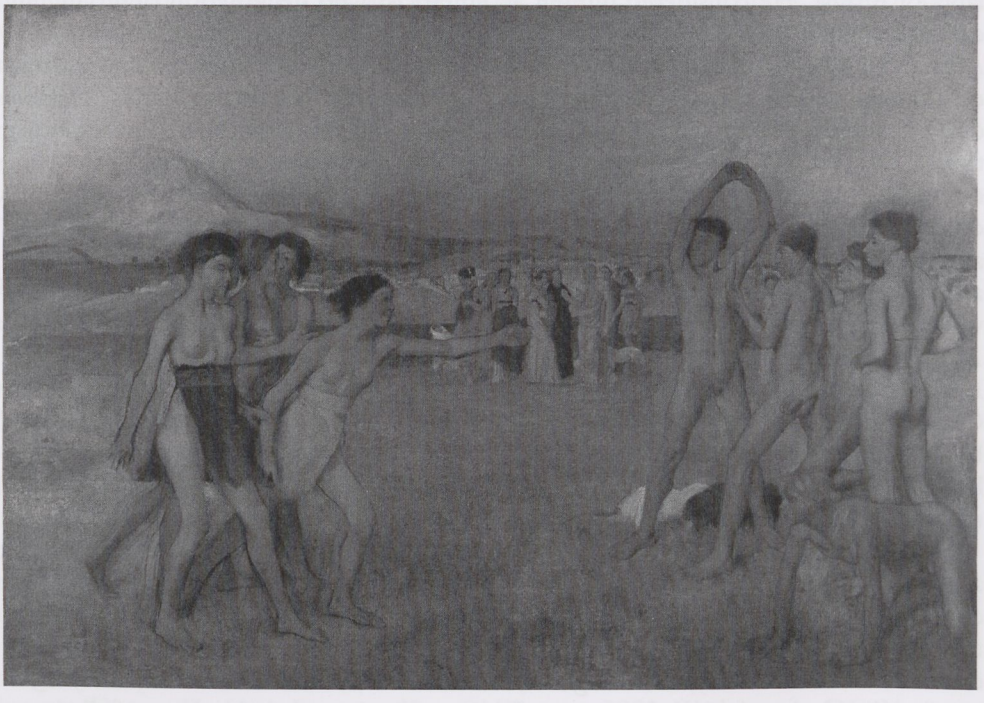

FIGURE 29.1 Edgar Degas. *Young Spartans Exercising*, 1860–1862. © The National Gallery, London. Bought, Courtauld Fund, 1924. Reproduced with permission.

Degas's first display of numerous, carefully studied adolescent bodies in a context that celebrated a biologically selective education as an antidote for decadence. He never exhibited *Young Spartans*, but at the Salon of 1865 he showed *Scene of War in the Middle Ages* (1865; Paris, Musée d'Orsay), depicting young soldiers massacring adolescent women with bows and arrows. Scholars explain the scene as motivated either by Union army treatment of women in New Orleans after defeating Confederate forces there in 1862, or as an allegorical representation criticizing the Romantic idealization of the medieval era (Armstrong 1991, 114–120). Researchers have been intrigued by Degas's precise anatomical depiction, too accurate to correspond to erotic stereotypes and in contrast with the outrageous cruelty of the situation (Adhémar 1967). The canvas was certainly intended as a provocation, but it's placement high on the Salon walls meant that it was barely noticed by critics or the public. By the end of the 1860s Degas's paintings were known only to insiders of the circles of Edouard Manet, Émile Zola, and Edmond Duranty, while his friends Gustave Moreau and James Tissot were already successful. We will see why and how by the 1870s, Degas abandoned his aspirations for success according to remotely academic standards, becoming a fervent champions of his own brand of Realism, redefined within the broader context of Naturalism.

Degas even succeeded in inscribing his own medical condition into his work. Aware of worsening vision and impending blindness since the early 1870s, he offered various explanations for his weakening eyesight, including that a shot unhappily fired while he defended a besieged Paris in 1870–1871 accelerated a process that had begun earlier (Boggs et al. 1988, 212). Thus, even political conflict seems to have left its mark on Degas's eyesight. By finding a method for adapting his painting approach to his weakening visual acuity, Degas introduced his own biopolitical condition into the very substance of his art. It is in the sense of the double challenge of the milieu and social conditions of the persons he depicted and his dispassionately self-aware social viewpoint that we may consider Degas the first artist aware of what later was labeled biopolitics.

Medicine and Positivism in the Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Inventor of the Term "Sociology"

The *Course in Positive Philosophy* (*Cours de philosophie positive*; hereafter *Course*), published in six volumes by Auguste Comte between 1830 and 1842, remained influential among scientists and the general public well after 1850. Comte's attempt to define a scientific approach to society inspired not only scientists, but also Naturalist writers (Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola) and artists (Gustave Courbet and Degas) to be open to the challenges of the experiential world. Often reduced to an average understanding of Positivism, a term and philosophy invented by Comte, later scholars, even contemporaries, sometimes overlooked the pragmatic dimension of his approach. Comte understood that "facts" were more than the raw material of scientific knowledge and that their establishment was based on observations that depended on theories and natural laws and on technical equipment established by earlier scientific investigations. He also insisted that all knowledge was limited to phenomena whose understanding was influenced by perceptions and previously established beliefs, acknowledging that scientific knowledge is subject to constant revision. His writings exhibit a modern form of fallibilism (accepting that all observation is based on theories which are in turn

constantly revised)—as distinct from philosophical skepticism: while one should question every observation, every theoretical explanation, and thus every "fact," it makes no sense to doubt the existence of the *whole* of the world (Brandom 1994; Sellars 1997; Bernstein 2010). Thus, Comte's doctrine was less a doctrine concerning the "positivity" of facts than a theory considering practice and utility as criteria integral to human understanding. The first sketch of Comte's system (1822) evidences his pragmatic orientation: *Plan of the Scientific Work Necessary for Reorganizing Society.*

Comte believed that the study of art, culture, and literature should adhere to the same standards as natural science. To describe his new general science of societies, its crises and transformations, Comte first proposed the term "social physics" before—and following a dispute with the Belgian sociologist Adolphe Quételet concerning the value of statistics—he coined the term we still use, sociology. For him, the most advanced stage of human understanding was linked to sociological knowledge, to the analysis of societies. Comte based his utopian social vision on scientifically based sociological principles. The French Revolution and the subsequent revolutionary transformations (which he all considered failures) inspired him to develop a model of society that would finally achieve stability thanks to a social equilibrium that he described in medical terms. According to his theory, this end goal of history was prepared by stages inscribed into the whole of history and which every individual personality repeated in his/her own development. According to his "law of three stages," human history and knowledge began with a theological era (which began with animism and led to polytheism, then monotheism), followed by a metaphysical era, and culminated in the third and final era, Positivism. The metaphysical era included the philosophy of Plato and his followers, medieval neo-Platonism and scholasticism, as well eighteenth-century rationalism as articulated by René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who were both guilty of metaphysical certainty regarding their abstract observations, according to Comte. By considering Positivism as the final stage of human thought, Comte challenged Enlightenment thinkers and contemporary philosophers like Victor Cousin (1792–1867), the founder of Eclecticism, a philosophy combining elements of German Idealism and Scottish Pragmatism. This strategy allowed him to dismiss philosophical speculation as a form of thought that corresponded to traditional monarchies, whereas Positivism fostered liberal approaches to life and government. Initially, Comte associated freedom in daily life to freedom of thought. Both contemporary and later liberals sympathizing with either a republican form of government or a constitutional monarchy that included liberal elements frequently adhered to his doctrine (Bensaude-Vincent 2003).

A great advantage of Comte's strategy—in which Positivism replaced metaphysics—was that it favored a humbler philosophy than one confident in the power of rationality to fully understand the whole of the governing principles of the universe. Comte's epistemology is strictly relativistic and based on the sensualistic credo he inherited from seventeenth-century British empiricists like John Locke and to which eighteenth-century Enlightenment French philosophers like Voltaire subscribed. He believed that human knowledge was limited to that gained by examining appearance and behavior. Accepting such limitations of human knowledge seemed not only more reasonable than speculating about intangible essences, but also a more mature stage of intellectual development. Positivism, thus, represented a norm as well as a type of knowledge.

Comte believed that these three stages—theology, metaphysics, Positivism—must occur before a science devoted to understanding the totality of society could evolve. In

1835, when he began publishing his *Course*, biology and medicine still operated according to vitalist principles, which maintained that living beings were kept alive by an autonomous, mysterious force. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century was the concept of a vital force abandoned. According to the *Course*, the basic structure of science comprises the division between inorganic and organic physics. In inorganic physics, Comte separated astronomy from earth science and physics from chemistry, which he considered one of physics's sub-disciplines. Organic physics also had two parts: physiology, soon labeled biology, and social physics, renamed sociology. In this supreme form of knowledge, Comte borrowed relevant paradigms from other fields, including clinical medicine. According to Comte's *Course*, physiological research and clinical medicine were the basis for the study of society. Sociology thus employed key concepts derived from the study of living organisms in order to understand society as an organism.

Georges Canguilhem, in his influential PhD thesis "Thoughts Regarding Several Problems Concerning the Normal and the Pathological," first published in 1943 (expanded and republished in 1966 as *Le normal et le pathologique*), was the first to observe that Comte used a central concept concerning illness from the medical discourse of his time in order to define what it meant for a society to be in *crisis* (Canguilhem 1966, 18–31). If, Canguilhem explains, clinical medicine substituted observation for experimentation—impossible with regard to human maladies for ethical reasons—sociology could, as Comte asserted, do the same by studying social crisis, since France in the era of revolutions was widely considered in some way unhealthy (Lepenies 2002, 14–48; Lepenies 2010, 17–29; Le Blanc 2010, 168–180). Canguilhem recognized that Comte was indebted to the French physician François Broussais (1772–1838), who insisted on the continuity of normal states and of pathological conditions in organisms. Thus, illness should not be considered an active force essentially different from an organism and its organs. A respected clinical researcher, Broussais published an influential study in 1822, before outlining his convictions in 1824 in a pamphlet entitled *Catechism of Physiological Medicine*. Comte also quoted Broussais's 1828 study, *On Irritation and Insanity*, in which Broussais extended his principle to mental illness (Broussais 1822, 1824, 1828). He believed that two types of stimuli controlled the human body, one coming from external milieu, the other from the brain, and that illness was generated by either an excess or lack of excitation from either of these sources. Canguilhem recognized that it was more the "personality of his author" than its coherence that made Broussais's ideas popular (Canguilhem 1966, 24). Soon, critics condemned Broussais for treating patients with leeches; an English doctor even commented that French patients could be recognized by the scars of the bloodsuckers (Pickering 1993). Leech therapy had its heyday between 1828 and 1832 (during a cholera pandemic) and was based on the theory that illness resulted from a disturbance in an organism's inner equilibrium. Even after Broussais's reputation declined, Comte applied his ideas to sociology, for example the assumption that pathological situations were essential to understanding normal ones (Canguilhem 1966, 18–31). Crisis situations, thus, were considered crucial to the study of social change and to understanding social normality. The principle that pathological conditions helped to explain the characteristics of normality thus infiltrated both the social sciences and cultural studies. Pathological situations—as well as social, political, and cultural change—no longer were considered as failures to conform to supposedly universal norms—but as anomalies, disturbances of an equilibrium through an excess or lack of outer or inner stimulation. This view

remained influential for a long time, and justified opposition to new discoveries in cell biology from the 1840s onward. Only after researchers such as Rudolph Virchow and Louis Pasteur introduced new hygienic and nutritional practices based on data provided by bacteriology, virology, and immunology, was the theory regarding continuity between normal and pathological situations questioned. The revolutionary medical paradigms of cell biology and of newly discovered pathogenic agents also found their way into the metaphors of the social sciences, and politics (Canguilhem 1966; Le Blanc 2010). Roberto Esposito demonstrated that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century racism, including fascism and Nazism, relied on metaphoric extensions of the notion of immunizing an organism against foreign bodies (Esposito 2002; Sarasin et al. 2007). Notably, race was no longer considered an identity of a group with shared biological features, but a value linked to purity, which in turn lead to a conceptual transformation from social genetics to eugenics and, in the twentieth century, to racial hygiene (Geulen 2014, 61–74, 90–103). Beginning in the 1880s, not only racists, but also some humanitarian anarchists favored a type of eugenics invented in 1882 by Francis Galton. Although racial ideas proliferated during the heyday of industrial imperialism (leading eventually to World War I), this thinking was not limited to aggressive forms of nationalism (Osterhammel 2009, 1155–1238; Geulen 2014, 92–101).

Nineteenth-century Realism, a term later replaced by Naturalism, was indebted to Comtian Positivism (Rubin 1996, 52–57; Needham 1996, 685–689). Gustave Courbet's introduction to the catalogue of his solo exhibition at the 1855 Paris world's fair typified the general climate. There, he declared that the title "Realist" had been imposed on him by critics, while his goal was simply "*savoir pour pouvoir*"—to know in order to be able to act (Courbet 1978). Comte promoted the pragmatic aspect of his Positivist credo in his *Course*, declaring "voir pour prévoir"—see in order to act—a goal attained only by privileging observation over imagination, a strategy characterizing a scientific rather than a metaphysical approach. (Comte 1830–1842, v. VI 439). His widely quoted motto was "Savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour prévenir"—know in order to forsee, forsee in order to prevent (Comte 1830–1842, 1839, 154–155; 1842, 439). Courbet's elliptic paraphrase expressed allegiance to scientific belief linked to Positivism.

Claude Bernard and his Impact: Physiology and the Modern Notion of "Milieu"

Claude Bernard established the modern physiological study of organ functions, a branch of science grounded in biochemical experimentation with animals living and dead. He opposed vitalism, but also its opposite: reductive thinking that explained life exclusively through the experimental methods of physics, especially Newtonian mechanics. He sometimes considered contemporaries such as Hermann von Helmholtz, Émile Dubois-Raymond, and Ernst Brücke too reductive in a physical way (Fruton 1979). Bernard advanced a method of inquiry into biochemical processes within organs and organisms. Without knowing the exact role of enzymes in the digestive process, and although he could not thoroughly examine the interdependency of neurophysiological and endocrinological processes in circulation, he discovered fundamental principles of metabolism and neurology. Such discoveries encouraged him to claim

physiology as an autonomous form of scientific inquiry that could not be understood through physics or chemistry alone. Bernard advanced physiology as a promising branch of science.

His ideas were embraced beyond the scientific community, enabling his notion of an organism's inner and outer milieu to impact ideas about sociology, namely social history of culture, including literature and the arts. In his influential *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865), Bernard presented one of his major discoveries: the liver synthesizes and stockpiles sugar in the form of glycogen for further combustion by the body (Homes 1974; Unger 1979). Previously, medical researchers believed that only plants could synthesize sugar or starch, whereas animals could only burn it. Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794) had discovered that all combustion, physical or biological, was linked to oxidation, and Pierre Laplace (1749–1827) had demonstrated that coal in combustion and animal respiration produced analogous amounts of carbonic acid. This led biologists to exaggerate analogies between respiration and nutrition and processes such as combustion and corrosion. For Bernard, it was essential to understand that biochemical processes of combustion—all occurring in liquids at body temperature—differed fundamentally from the processes of physical chemistry.

Careful observation was crucial to Bernard's methodology; he always performed experimentation more than once to confirm his findings. While investigating liver function, Bernard measured the amount of sugar found in the liver of a rabbit he had just killed, but could not conduct a second test that day to confirm his findings. The next day, he was astonished to find the amount of sugar had increased. Bernard explained that normally, a scientist would have doubted such an observation because it contradicted accepted doctrines, and would therefore dismiss it either as unimportant, or minimize it by combining the first and second observation into a mathematical average. He insisted that if a fact observed in a laboratory challenged existing theories, it was a scientist's responsibility to courageously doubt even the most authoritarian theory. In this way Bernard adopted Comte's Positivism and demonstrated its consequences in scientific experimentation. For him, however, a true Positivist was more an experimental scientist like himself than a philosopher like Comte (Virtanen 1960, 49–64). Bernard repeated the rabbit experiment several times, always arriving at the same result. Even if he washed the rabbit's liver after its death, several hours later it again produced considerable quantities of sugar.

Bernard's liver experiments led him to change general assumptions concerning nutrition. His observations about the synthesis of sugar in the liver were closely linked to his investigations into pancreatic functions and gastric liquids. He concluded that the body, instead of just importing nutritional substances such as sugar (or carbohydrates) or fats into the blood, must radically transform them in order to utilize them. Although he did not yet understand the role of enzymes in the processes he observed, he understood that fermentation played a major role.

One of Bernard's key conclusions about living organisms was that they remain alive only if they maintain an equilibrium between their inner and their outer milieus. Based on his biochemical discoveries, he concluded that processes of growth and decay, synthesis and analysis were essential to all life forms, and both outside and within them. Health and illness were just abstract terms designating various stages of this equilibrium. Canguilhem demonstrated that Bernard's approach was vital to renewing Comte's theory, based on Broussais's obsolete research, that pathological stages constituted a gradual deviation from normal ones (Canguilhem 1966, 32–51); Leo Spitzer has shown in a brilliant analysis how Bernard's notion of milieu entered into sociology (Spitzer 1942, 182–183).

Taine, Zola and "Naturalism": Sociological Awareness and Scientific Physiology

French social theorist Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) applied the medical notion of milieu to the study of culture, history, and society, developing theories consistent with Comte's Positivism. Although his enterprise thwarted his ambition to attain a university professorship in philosophy, he became an influential public intellectual—part universal humanist, part popularizer of science. Through his reading of Spinoza and Aristotle, Hegel and John Stuart Mill, Taine interpreted cultural developments through the lens of various historical and socio-psychological aspects. While working as an historian of art, literature, and society, Taine systematically inquired into race, milieu, and moment, the three factors he considered essential to understanding the formation of an individual or a people. In the preface to his four-volume *History of English Literature* (1864), Taine explained his system for the first time. He believed that numerous factors linked to milieu—including climate and geography—influenced race. And he postulated that qualities once acquired under their influence were inherited, without understanding how that functioned (Taine 1863; Michaud 1996; Toepfer 2013, 37–46). Like later Social Darwinists, his ideas were more consistent with the evolutionary ideas of Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck than with Charles Darwin, who believed that chance played a central role in evolution. Later, most so-called Social Darwinists were really secret Lamarckians, who considered race not as a natural identity whose purity had to be preserved, but as a project achieved through "marriage politics" or eugenics (Geulen 2014, 91–94). One reason racism spread was because Gregor Mendel's laws of inheritance remained largely unknown before their rediscovery around 1900 by botanists such as Hugo de Vries. Earlier, Darwin's evolution was often understood by complementing it with hypothetical reflections similar to Lamarck's belief that infants inherited qualities their parents had acquired. Taine refused to subscribe to racism, although he used the concept of race to describe national character.

Taine's notion of milieu was indebted to ancient climate theories revitalized during the Enlightenment. Around 430 BCE, Hippocrates asserted the influence of air, water, soil, and habitat on character and milieu. Thus, warm locations like Mesopotamia were considered too prosperous to develop higher forms of culture, whereas in northern Europe and Asia people had to struggle so much against cold that faculties other than courage never developed. Only Greeks, situated in a moderate climate, could attain the zenith of culture. In variants of climate theory of later periods, Roman Italy or absolutist France could take the role of classical Greece. Taine, like Aristotle, believed that forms of government—Oriental despotism (Mesopotamia), barbaric anarchy (North), and democracy (Greece or a dreamt-of French Republic)—were also conditioned by climate (Aristotle 1932, VII 1327; Müller 2003, 2005). He often argued that climate and milieu (including social ambiance created through habits and institutions) influenced a society's—and a people's—psychology.

The notion of moment is hard to integrate into Taine's system, especially for those who understood his theory as a scientific doctrine that viewed cultural production as determined by natural or social factors such as inheritance and milieu. In accounting for moment, Taine integrated ideas of Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831). Thus, for individuals, their historical moment was also affected by the range of their ability to react to natural and historical events. The extent of an individual's freedom to act was thus determined by historical conditions. For Taine however, limitations on

freedom in earlier periods were affected more by natural factors than was "free" action in a modern society—once historical preconditions for it were established (Richard 2013, 127–170; Bernstein 2010, 89–105). Hegel called this the "ruse of reason," which asserted that the "world spirit" paradoxically "utilized" individuals such as Napoleon to advance history; during this process an overarching reason governing history acquired awareness of its own freedom (Hegel 1970, 49).

Taine wrote about earlier milieu theories as elaborated for instance in Honoré de Balzac's novel cycle, *La Comédie humaine*, which sought to portray all the classes of French society during the Bourbon restoration (1815–1830). In 1858, in a series of articles published in the *Journal des Débats*, he described Balzac as an intellectual of Naturalism. Taine's own eclectic doctrine was received as the most recent synthesis of a positive, scientific approach to the study of society and cultural history. His writings were soon discussed along with Naturalism in literature and art. However, Bernard's notion of milieu slowly infiltrated these debates—even before Zola (again?) read his *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* in 1878, and before he promoted Bernard's methods in *The Experimental Novel*, in 1880 (Virtanen 1960, 171–191; Zola 1968a, v. 10 1143–1415; Zola 1968d; Mitterand 2001, 501–505). Bernard's ideas increasingly influenced discussions about Naturalism, a term sometimes used interchangeably with Realism during the 1850s. Zola admired Taine, who in 1864 again in the *Journal des Débats* published a positive review of Comte's *Course*. When Taine's *History of English Literature* was released in 1864, Zola was working in the marketing department of Hachette, Taine's publisher, and responsible for the book's distribution. In 1864, Taine was finally appointed to the chair in aesthetics and art history at the Paris École des Beaux-Arts. There he published his lectures on Italian (1866), Netherlandish (1868), and Greek art (1869). Later, they were united in one volume, *Philosophy of Art*.

The art historical debate surrounding Realism and Naturalism has primarily concerned the interpretation of Courbet's work. His allegiance to Realism was shared by critics such as Champfleury (Jules François Félix Husson) and Edmond Duranty whose ideas about Realism later had an impact on Degas. However, after 1855, the term Naturalism gained prominence among critics like Jules-Antoine Castagnary, who insisted on the artist's independence from academic and social prejudices and stereotypes when observing the social world, and the link between originality and objectivity. Consequently, Naturalism was more compatible than Realism with liberal, radical republican, and anarchistic conceptions of personality, and with their emphasis on freedom. In 1865, Zola entered the Courbet debate when the Lyon-based newspaper *Le Salut Public* published his polemic against Pierre Joseph Proudhon's socialist ideas, as elaborated in *On the Principal of Art and Its Social Purpose* (Proudhon 1865; Herding 1978, 120–140), in which Proudhon interpreted Courbet's paintings as depicting decadence under capitalism (Zola 1968a, v. 10 35–46; Mitterand 1999, 434–514). Zola refused to consider the painter a moralist. Instead, he praised Courbet's strength of temperament, emphasizing the erotic undertones in his approach to nature's "full flesh" and to female models. Zola's theory combined emancipatory liberalism with Positivism and a sociological awareness based on physiology. For him, an artist's temperament was also the result of race, milieu, and moment, and therefore a part of the same natural world the artist studied.

The debate about Realism and Naturalism emerged in literature before appearing in art criticism of the 1870s in connection with Degas and younger artists participating in the

Impressionist exhibitions, which began in 1874. In February 1866 Zola published "Monsieur Taine, artiste," an article he later integrated—alongside his polemic against Proudhon's interpretation of Courbet—into *My Hates. Literary and Artistic Anecdotes.* Here he praised Taine, although regretting that the sociologist had not sufficiently valued the role of artistic genius and personality, before introducing his own definition of art as "a corner of creation as seen through a temperament" (Zola 1968b, 154). By 1867, Naturalism had become a program described by Zola (in another article about Taine) in a more objective vein as: "an introduction of pure observation, exacting analysis applied to the study of deeds both moral and physical" (Zola 1968c, 198).

In 1866, Zola published *Thérèse Raquin*, a Naturalist novel that led the reader through various Parisian middle class milieus before ending in decadence and crime. It recounts the story of a murder committed by the unfortunate painter Laurent (modeled after Zola's boyhood friend Paul Cézanne) and a woman of half-Oriental background (Raquin) who married Camille, a young man with whom she had grown up. Although Laurent and Thérèse successfully concealed their murder of Camille, their temperamental incompatibility and differing expectations led to a sinister end. The novel is filled with brutal events: for example, Laurent drowned the victim in an suburban, "impressionist" idyll, then searched for him among corpses in the morgue. When Zola republished the novel in 1867, he attacked his critics in a foreword, claiming that his aim had been "scientific": "I simply performed similar analytic work on two living bodies that surgeons perform on cadavers" (Zola 1962, 520). It was easy to read this passage as an allusion to vivisection, since Zola's novel is pitiless, delighting more in physical and ethical abjection than what seemed to be required by "scientific" observation of society.

Degas, the "Pitiless Observer," and his Adherence to Realism

In the 1860s, Degas's drawings of adolescent bodies already exceeded academic idealization and oversexualization, thereby anticipating the physical characterization of individuality as marked by social type—a pursuit later described as Naturalism by most critics, while Degas always considered himself a Realist. However, Naturalism did not apply to his portraiture or history paintings. Degas chose subjects strategically, constructing his career via public exhibitions in a manner that anticipated modern self-fashioning and marketing. If one confuses his exhibited works with those remaining in his studio, one gets an inaccurate idea of his quest for public attention. *Interior* (Figure 29.2), for instance, addressed sexual violence in contemporary society, a decisive step toward Naturalism, even if he continued to declare himself a Realist. In a lamp-lit bedroom a man leans against the door, hands in pockets, while a young, half-dressed woman leans away from him in apparent pain, possibly crying. Her clothes hang over the bed frame or lay on the floor, and a black box lined with salmon-red velvet glistens under the lampshade—the only object introducing surreal ambiguity into the scene. Art historian Theodore Reff was justifiably struck by the proximity of this scene to passages in Naturalist novels dedicated to female protagonists, such as those by Flaubert and Zola (Reff 1976, 200–239). Had Degas exhibited *Interior*, it would have been interpreted as evidence of his conversion to Naturalism, but he would have risked being categorized as an artist too dependent on literary sources (Reff 1976, 200–202). Furthermore, it was probably around this time that Degas decided to privilege the concept of Realism over that of Naturalism.

FIGURE 29.2 Edgar Degas, *Interior*, also called *The Rape*, 1868–1869, oil on canvas, 81 × 116 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Henry P. McIlhenny Collection in memory of Frances P. McIlhenny, 1986-26-10. Reproduced with permission.

Thus, Degas chose another path. The public possibly knew him as a master of group portraits in the spirit of seventeenth-century Holland: he may have exhibited in 1867 the Bellelli family portrait, showing his aunt and uncle with their daughters (*The Bellelli Family*, 1858–1867; Paris, Musée d'Orsay), as Henry Loyrette believes (Boggs et al. 1988, 77–82). Here, Degas evoked Dutch models to revivify bourgeois family portraiture (Boggs 1994, 20–22). Three years later, he pursued a new strategy for revivifying portraiture when he portrayed his musician friend, the bassonist Désiré Dilhau, playing in the orchestra pit of the Paris Opera (Figure 29.3). Here for the first time the artist showed female dancers on the stage above the musicians cropped at the shoulders and illuminated by gas footlights. Subsequently, he experimented with compositions contrasting the heads of orchestra musicians with groups of dancers (e.g. *Ballet of Robert le Diable*, 1971–1972; New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

After 1871 Degas depicted ballet classes at the Opera. By then, the Durand-Ruel gallery represented the artist and, in 1872, one of these paintings appeared in its London gallery, where it was sold for a high price (Figure 29.4). At the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874, Degas exhibited a series of these scenes. Balzac, in 1838, had already described the milieu of the very young "*rats de l'opera*," their parents' attempts to use their daughters' short-term celebrity for social climbing, arranging for the Opera ballerinas to be high class "escorts" with high-placed men who might be helpful in advancing the careers of their fathers (Balzac 1977). Thus, the ballet paintings were

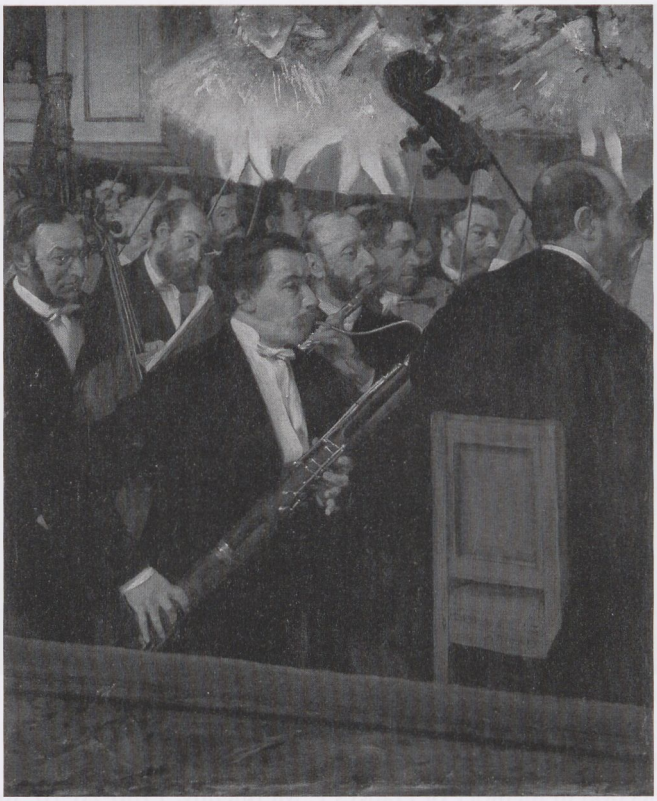

FIGURE 29.3 Edgar Degas, *The Orchestra of the Opera*, c.1870, oil on canvas, 56.5 × 46.2 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Reproduced with permission.

clearly intended as visual studies of an ambiguous milieu situated at the crossroads of various social classes. The fact that he showed ballerinas not on stage during a performance, but rather behind the scenes, conformed to Realism's—but also Naturalism's—directives: he revealed aspects of the public spectacle along with the private "truth" of society beyond the stage. At the same time, he depicted these women with a technique that conformed to academic expectations of drawing. In letters, Degas ironically described his dancer paintings as "my merchandise" (Degas 1945, 42, 62). He was thus aware that by choosing the Opera as a Parisian media spectacle, he marketed his own social perspective on it.

Degas frequently visited the Opera, but initially not the rehearsal- and classrooms (Degas 1945, 64; DeVonjar and Kendall 2002, 12–28). Whereas his earlier, horseracing scenes represented a leisure amusement enjoyed by his own quasi-aristocratic social class, he also systematically investigated milieus other than his own, such as ironing women, whom he began painting in 1873. In the later 1870s, café-concert singers became another topic of interest, and Degas can from that point be considered a Naturalist painter involved with the milieus of the entertainment industry developing in "Haussmannized" Paris. If critics—including Zola—did not accept him as a painter capable of rivaling the tradition of what they considered "great" art, it was because he refrained from producing what they considered "finished" paintings, preferring to

FIGURE 29.4 Edgar Degas, *Dance Class*, 1871, oil on panel, 19.7 × 27 cm. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929.

endlessly recombine familiar motifs—to a point that critics often described one painting while mistakenly referring to another (Armstrong 1991, 1–16). With this strategy, Degas inscribed the movement of dance into a seemingly unending series of mobile visions that anticipated cinema, as Carol Armstrong has demonstrated (Armstrong 1991, 9; Berger 2014, 27–35). Thus, he also guaranteed that his paintings remained attractive to the art market.

Contemporary critics commented about Degas's "cold" objectivity, with women studied as accurately as horses, and judged him a "cruel observer," as Paul Mantz wrote, in 1877, about the dancers (Armstrong 1991, 38–40). Implicitly, Mantz may have been alluding to a relationship he saw between Degas's social aesthetic and vivisection. The sociological gaze is ironic and ruthless, whether in physiognomies, novels, or paintings. Degas participated in this ruthlessness.

With this background, it is hardly astonishing that social art history has interpreted Degas in conflicting ways. For some scholars, he represents a hero of social art especially sensitive to social contradiction during the Impressionist era, while others accuse him of a misogynistic attitude toward women, even of racism (Lipton 1986, 3–16; Callen 1995, 8–13). The Degas narrative has also been affected by troublesome events. In the 1890s, Zola became the principal defender of Colonel Alfred Dreyfus, whereas Degas sided with the anti-Dreyfusard camp. The Dreyfus Affair hurt the artist's relationship with Zola, a major defender of Naturalism, and initially also of Impressionist artists such as Manet.

However, Zola had dissociated himself from the Impressionists already during the 1880s, when he attacked them as experimental artists who paved the way for a "genius of the future" without producing themselves more than sketches (Brookner 1971). The same situation applied to Degas's relationship with another long-standing friend, the author and librettist Ludovic Halévy, with whom he ceased to have contact after January 20, 1898 (Halévy 1995, 173–174). Scholars have sometimes oversimplified the disintegration of personal relationships during the Dreyfus Affair (Callen 1995, 107). Degas, for example, remained a mentor and friend of Daniel Halévy, Ludovic's son, who, even more than his father, was publicly active as a courageous Dreyfusard. Later, Degas participated in Ludovic's funeral (Halévy 1995; Duclert 1996). It remains troubling, and important for the study of Degas's oeuvre, that he broke his long-lasting friendship with Ludovic Halévy during the Dreyfus Affair. However, it would be misleading to base the study of Degas on the assumption that he was a racist and anti-Semite from the very beginning of his career. His long-term friendship with both the Halévys and Camille Pissarro, and also with Zola, remain an important context for understanding how he developed his special variant of "Realism," and how he choose the subjects of his painting.

The fact that Degas experimented with the scopic regimes, and with the specific social awareness of his time (and not with sociological interests as an ahistorical aspect of art in general) exposes him to the danger of seeming to simply have adhered to racist theories of physiognomy and criminal anthropology. Although he clearly engaged with such paradigms in a small number of paintings, it would be inaccurate to assert that Degas—a painter systematically inquiring into scopic regimes—unhesitatingly endorsed them. This is true particularly since the Dreyfusards Zola and Halévy had previously coined key concepts or defined interests embraced by Degas. His career and devotion to his own brand of Realism began in the late 1860s, placing him in a position close to Naturalism and related tendencies championed by Zola. Degas's choice to depict dancing lessons and life behind the scenes at the Opera was indebted to Ludovic Halévy, his guide into the world and social backgrounds of the Paris Opera (Halévy 1996; Brown 2017).

Degas extended his sociological gaze to the physical conditions of his (mostly female) models. A radical republican and unapologetic supporter of a market economy, he positioned himself against the Academy, the Salon, and state intervention (Degas 1945, 33 and 36; Boggs et al. 1988, 212–220). He asserted the artist's freedom to critically examine society and believed that social circumstances shaped individuals—behavior, habitus, even bodies. The very ideas, stereotypes, and ideologies that inspired his interest in social anthropology, social Darwinism, and even racism, were similar to those that guided him to become an acute social, biopolitical observer. These aspects of his artistic approach and interests continue to seem contradictory and to raise questions. We certainly can understand the ambivalent viewpoints taken by Degas only if we take into account the broad range of his era's biomedical, social, and artistic choices. And if we remain sensitive for a central element of his approach: irony, which might have inspired an attitude that is often discussed as a strategy of postmodern, cynical reason: "affirmative subversion."

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