The case studies themselves are well-written and consider much of the important detail of success or failure of each SMO in its particular Eco-Battle. The book’s best material is its considered exposé of industry campaigns against the environmentalists. A recap of industry rhetoric and campaign tactics in each case illuminates the military metaphor well. The cases form a series of contests about the way we treat the environment. The measured analysis of how industries appeal to the public while fighting environmental referenda and policy is useful to students of social movements and active environmentalists. Libby shows that the power behind much of the anti-environmentalist “social movement” is big business.

When presented with this material, a class I taught on the sociology of the environment lit up with a new understanding of how and why certain groups oppose what seem on the surface to be reasonable environmental politics. Libby shows the institutional connections linking big business with government allow corporate interest groups to make hegemonic arguments about growth in defense of their self-interested policies. These arguments are successful on every issue except secondhand smoke; the tobacco companies lost.

This aspect of Eco-Wars is its saving grace. The reader ends up impressed with the difficulty of forming a counter-hegemonic movement based on expressive social values like environmentalism. The underlying and implied argument is that environmental concerns are ipso facto in opposition to the growth paradigm in modern American capitalism. Materials in the case studies document the surprisingly increased resonance of environmental issues among owners of small businesses, who fear that new technologies may render them obsolete. The case studies also reveal the usefulness of enlisting celebrities and politicians to reach out to new groups on an issue-by-issue basis. The emphases on rhetoric and against exaggeration bring lessons home to readers more interested in social action than social movement theory. While lacking a theoretical punch and a coherent ideological scheme, the cases form an empirical approach to understanding how the environmental SMOs can become significant in the formulation of policy.

Timothy M. Koponen
Department of Sociology, University of Illinois
1007 W. Harrison Street, Chicago
IL 60607-7140, USA
Tel.: +1-312-543-5546
E-mail: koponen@uic.edu

PII: S0486-6134(02)00115-8

Breaking With the Enlightenment: The Twilight of History and the Rediscovery of Utopia
Rajani Kannepalli Kanth; New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997, 184 pp., $22.00 paperback,
$49.95 hardback (Amazon)

Considering the almost universal contempt in which Rajani Kanth holds economists of all ideological persuasions (Marxist, neoclassical, scientific, etc.), it may be somewhat of a blessing for the author of this review that my “economic” credentials lack the finesse (and
attendant blinkers?) of a specialization in formal economics. My approach to economics is via political science, itself a dubious science. In this vein I will attempt a critical review of a book that I feel is invaluable in any (re)introduction to political economy. It is, however, the politics and not the economics of the work which is the most striking.

Breaking With the Enlightenment is not always the most straightforward book to decipher. Kanth’s (1997) depth, and the iconoclastic and passionate rhetoric he uses, often challenge the reader to more than simply read the work. This work by its style and content is demanding, and considering today’s glut of technical works of objective and dispassionate analysis, it is refreshing to read a book so engrossing and didactic. In method, Kanth does not restrict himself to deconstruction at the expense of proscription; similarly his work is neither quite hermeneutic (though this does shine through as the dominant method), nor is it exclusively a work in critical realism. Kanth claims to use cultural-realist critiques of modern economics and philosophy, and offers us a real, preexisting cultural ontology as a regiven ‘solution’ to the malaise of modernism.

From the outset, Kanth is less than hesitant to remind his readers that he holds economics and the “metaphysics of materialism” from which it spawned in total contempt. Moreover, Kanth traces this materialism to the “spirit of an age” (namely ours) that dawned with the “Enlightenment” (doomed to be “qualified” indefinitely), and the rise of an obtuse and inefficient form of science: positivism. Further, Kanth argues that the paradigmatic “Capital” which loped out of this “modernist,” “progressivist” agenda is itself part of a “metaphysic of materialism.” Kanth argues, as have Dewey and Horkheimer before him, that both capitalism and Marxism are born from a modernist philosophy and a technical rationality, both of which (he argues) are tied to an intrinsic rationale of progress defined in materialistic terms. Kanth argues that our salvation is to be found right under our noses. Unfortunately, modern epistemologies and limited notions of ontology blind us to what Kanth sees as our only hope of saving ourselves from certain ecological, military, or economic disaster: namely a wholesale rejection of economic science and the modernist philosophy which is its chassis.

We can see from the above that there is a certain circularity to the issues raised, however, Kanth is essentially an “antimodernist” who advocates an ethic of femininity and a celebration of myriad hued parochialisms that make this world an amazing place as a starting point for change. Kanth argues that it is our inherited ideas, ideologies, and perceptions of reality that hold us back from seeing where our salvation may lie. Further, our inability to transcend these shared ideas is due to our unthinking faith in the very things that perpetuate these ideas: namely science, the state, etc.

Broadly speaking, there are six interrelated topics in Kanth’s work. They are the issues of (in no particular order) history, economics, modernity, culture as an ontology, science as an epistemic ideology, and utopian libertarianism.

A great deal of Kanth’s historical analysis is reminiscent of Frank (1978, 1998) and Noam Chomsky. Of course, without meaning to detract from its original content, Kanth weaves his passionate rhetoric around a reified history in order to rehumanize it, and thus to reemphasize the idea of human agency in economic and political affairs. In tones reminiscent of Unger (1987), Kanth argues that we can no longer sit idly by and treat history as a treasure trove of indisputable facts that we are powerless to influence or alter. The past is no artefact, much in the same way as the future is not determined by actions derived from the past. This is not,
however, an epistemological sleight of hand common to postmodern analysis. Kanth argues that we, one and all, created the world in which we live by our conscious and unconscious actions, and we are, therefore, our only salvation. This is also more than an effort to draw agency into his argument in the way others, such as the radical historian E.P. Thompson and Charles Beard, have done. The history of modernism and economics is the story of a journey to the brink of disaster disguised by appeals to objectivity and justified by the pursuit of profit. Most obviously Kanth’s historical analysis reads like a rewriting of history in order to validate a theoretical agenda. Unfortunately, there is nothing new here.

Neoclassical economics, indeed Marxist economics too, are given rather an ungracious introduction via the argument that both represent a global form of ideological imperialism common to both sides of a rather illusory ideological iron curtain. What Kanth demonstrates, much in the same way as Berman (1982) attempted in All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, though with a decidedly less flattering approach to modernity, is that both capitalism and Marxism are tied to the same intrinsic modern doctrine of a faith in progress, technical rationality, positive science, and a “metaphysics of materialism.” Moreover, as Kanth argues, the fact that one cannot untie capitalism and economic rationalism from its Nazi zenith is proof enough that rationalism is more often than not a preface to irrationalism; the decoration of Henry Ford by the National Socialists being a notable example in this regard. As such the range of possible outcomes, which both broad agendas dictate, is very limited. Most often the debates concerning the limitations of ideology revolve around questions of autonomy, control, order, and other such palliatives of the ruling elites be they corporations, “think tanks,” scientific “communities,” markets, or governments.

Kanth argues that “modernism,” the philosophy of post-eighteenth century enlightenment, forms what could be seen as the chassis of present day thinking about what constitutes reality (ontology) and the ways in which we can come to know this reality (epistemology). Further the ways in which these arbitrary categorizations interact in our conceptualization of scientific “spheres” should not be missed. For Kanth the way in which we approach the study of the “economic sphere,” however fetishized, has been overreliant on the false foundationalism of what he terms a “physics envy.” In order to construct the inane models and theories of the economics profession, it has been imperative to assume the total separation of subject and object. This allows for reification in terms of historical analysis; it allows for dispassionate attitudes concerning the most basic human needs and necessities; it allows economists to reduce the most fundamental aspects of human life to simple cost benefit ratios, and utility theorems; and it turns humans into consumption machines. Needless to say, the flipside being that economics also justifies the self-interest doctrine in necessitarian terms, and limits economic spheres to those areas most conducive to the unhampered pursuit of material greed: namely the domain of production and profit margins. Life does not exist for the economist outside of these spheres, and if it does it is invariably “beyond” the scope of his science.

One such “beyond” is the domain of culture, which brings us to the main thread of Kanth’s argument. The celebration of cultural idiosyncrasies underscores Kanth’s entire ontology, and for Kanth, basic cultural conviviality is one way of overcoming the atomization of modern society. Kanth’s agenda orbits this central cultural axis. On the most basic level, Kanth’s work is a direct attempt to “break the near hegemonic spell of late European ideology,” and while this may sound straightforward to a postmodernist like myself, the reality is a little more
complex. The originality of this work lies in the fact that it is a direct attack upon the established
ontologies handed down over the last 200 to 300 years, and the ways in which these “universal
conceptualizations” have served the perverse ends of imperialism, colonialism, consumerism,
and the science of economics.

The question of ontology is also hammered out in Kant’s critique of modern radical political
economy. The “question of ontology” is an attempt to demonstrate the importance of, and to
relocate, culture as a central issue in radical political economy. Kant transforms this
extent to which a so-called science of economics has no concept of the things which make a dif-
ference in people’s lives on a day-to-day basis: issues such as biodiversity, self-determination,
and harmony, things which do not conform to core self-interest axioms, rational actor models,
and the necessitarianism common to positivism. The most glaring examples of these short-
comings are in the “one size fits all” structural adjustment programs and loan conditionality
clauses of the World Bank and the IMF. Kant argues that at base to adopt a cultural ontol-
ogy would allow us to celebrate differences and work with them without having to reduce all
cultures to deriving from the same base economic motivators and patronizing autonomous
human beings in the process.

One must concede, and as Kant argues, the above neglected yet intrinsic aspects of culture
are not universal phenomena (i.e. conviviality, ecological harmony, etc.), and the concept of
a mature culture, indeed any culture of contextual and historical relevance, excludes most if
not all people within the fattened North-West. “North-West” here being an evidently arbitrary
geopolitical assumption, can nevertheless denote an area in which people’s daily lives have
been stripped so clean of any cultural diversity that the very term culture is more synony-
rous with icons such as McDonalds than with local mythology, or legend. Furthermore, the
economic logic of the former has become deified over and above the cultural aesthetic of the
latter.

Culture, for Kant, also holds the key to any future humanity may have. Culture encompasses
a less militaristic etymology than the Marxist “class consciousness,” and for Kant can provide
the raw material for a resurrection or retaliation against the imperialism of the United States
and Co. Kant points to the “grassroots” backlash against the economic rationalism of the
“first world” as an area of optimism. Ironically, one need only look to the way in which “the
revolt against rationalism” has manifested itself at the recent G8 meeting in Genoa to see how
our common epistemes and simplistic concepts of Western history provoke exactly the same
violence that the movement aims to halt.

Neither is this to demean the more grassroots element of the backlash that has been less
publicized for its undeniably less violent content. Kant uses these instances of resistance as
validation of his cultural argument and of his ontological commitment in such a way as to
show how cultural peculiarities will not allow for universal economic proscription. At base
Kanth shows that there is a revolt underway against the emancipatory efforts of enlightenment
philosophy as applied in the modern era. “[T]he promise of better goulash” he argues, is no
longer enough to sustain the emancipatory hot air of political ideologies of all persuasions.

Moving on to Kant’s deconstruction of social science, chapter seven of Breaking With the
Enlightenment sets the tone for an ontologically liberated social praxis devoted to improve
the lot of countless millions around the globe. Needless to say there is no set method, though
Kanth’s agenda argues for self-determination as opposed to the rapaciousness of centrally
planned post-Bretton Woods institutions and the philosophy that supports them. For example, the corporatist tendency in economics will not allow for autonomy in small-scale production, though the alternative is evidently disastrous ecologically. Not only does Kanth argue for a wholesale rejection of economics in its present form, he also argues for self-determination as opposed to historical or institutional proscription, and for a return to premodern modes of social interaction. Lewis Mumford’s The Story of Utopias comes to mind here, and without too much “rose tinting” Kanth also argues that we should nurture what is left of our premodern affections and social modes, as they exist today outside (or, quite often inside though dying out and marginalized) the so-called “advanced” or “developed” “first” “world.”

If Kanth’s position were to be embraced whole-heartedly (an unfortunately ludicrous fantasy) by the economics profession, what would this demand as far as refashioning a science is concerned? First, as Kanth argues in his final chapters, contexts and agendas would need to be interpreted for what they appear to be, and for what they appear to serve. There would need to be a rejection of the false objectivity common to most ideologies and sciences, and a resurgence of linguistic modes of analysis derived from the philosophical movement taken from the oeuvre of a late Wittgenstein. As Kanth argues in his work, a refashioned agenda would need to incorporate also the oeuvre of Gandhi. Gandhi’s social philosophy and nonviolent philosophy of civil disobedience could hold invaluable tools for many anarchists/anticapitalists around the world, not to mention a wholly different epistemology and ontology for the average economist.

For Kanth, the “rediscovery of utopia” means to shed our ideological commitment to all things modern, and to rediscover more affective modes of interaction. This would involve ending our quest for material wealth and the science dedicated to discovering the most cost-effective ways of doing so. To relocate Kanth’s argument for conviviality in social discourse, there would also need to be a rejection of the sovereign voice of technical rationality as defined by materialistic agendas. Kanth also argues that this conviviality would need to assume the inherently feminine qualities of care, empathy, compassion, and nurturing, along with a refashioning of our attitudes towards what constitutes “productive” labor and to what ends. This encompassing though radical concept of the new locus of social transformation is inherently libertarian, and is also unashamedly feminist, the prevalence of which is striking throughout the text. One can only hope that Kanth’s agenda receives more criticism, for paradoxically that will be the only way to “get the conversation going,” if you like.

There are elements to Kanth’s work that a discourse of economics can no longer silence and ignore, unless voices such as Kanth’s, and others such as Ormerod (1994) or Chossudovsky (1997), are to become the norm. It is my own personal hope that all parties can beat out the basic chassis of something new for the future, knowing now that we do know far more than they did then. The point, contrary to modern science, is not to simply solve problems, but to refashion and create our own futures in whichever way we care to, and also to know that it is completely possible to do just that. Real people created the mess we are in today; real people are going to have to fix it. As Kanth says, “The modernists have tried . . . to change the world, the point now, however, . . . is to save it” (139). This work will appeal most to those who feel disillusioned by traditional foundational works in political economy, and need a radical alternative to the norm to realize more transformative ends. It will also appeal to those who feel autonomy and self-determination should mean more in economics than “modern” philosophy.
will “allow.” In this regard Breaking With the Enlightenment is more than simply a step in the right direction.

Alex Prichard
Department of International Politics
University of Wales, Aberystwyth UK
E-mail: wap01@aber.ac.uk

PII: S0486-6134(02)00110-9

References

Amherst, N.Y.: Humanities.

Economics & Utopia: Why the Learning Economy is not the End of the History
Geoffrey M. Hodgson (Ed.); New York: Routledge, 1999

The book is devoted to the theme of this epoch. The author convokes other authors from diverse currents in social science, particularly in economics, to find out whether or not they have something to say about the possible outcome of capitalism. Most authors thus brought to the fore are found wanting; some more wanting, some less, others almost not at all. Among the latter, institutionalists rank high. Indeed, the author himself declares from the outset that “the present work is better described as institutionalist rather than Marxist.”

The general picture is bluntly put: “I am of the firm opinion,” says Hodgson, “that the conceptual apparatus of much of the mainstream economic theory is ill-suited to the task of both understanding our present condition and of envisioning a viable future.”

Hence, two major reproaches are pointed against “mainstream” economic theory writ large. Hitherto, this theory has failed to account for social and cultural diversity within capitalism, and to draw meaningful insights from the realities brought upon present society by the agency of increasingly knowledge-intensive production processes. Guilty of having overlooked these outstanding features of late capitalism (diversity and knowledge-intensity), and of other related drawbacks, “mainstream economics” is rendered incapable of knowing what present history is about.

Indeed, what is it about? At this point let us turn the table around and beckon the author to come before the high tribunals he has himself set up for the judgment of our predecessors.