

Can the Subaltern Shave?

A Primer of Philo-Follicular Thought

Timothy Roberts

This essay will trace the deeply-rooted connections between post-structuralist philosophy and hairstyle. While this may sound reductive, please note that I am not proposing that there is a *direct* relationship between the two concepts. Instead, I plan to trace the connection between the *inner* architecture of ideas (in the philosopher's mind), and their *outer* architecture, as manifested in (or through, rather) the philosopher's hairstyle.

Case 1: The Millean Muttonchops

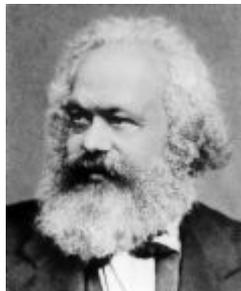


We start, for contrast's sake, with the philosopher who is perhaps most inimicable to the poststructuralist system. The whiggish (dare we say wiggish?) spirit of Victorian England is on ostentatious display with John Stuart Mill. Mill literally wears his ideals on his own head, using the repressed hegemonic aspirations of his crown to annex the virgin territory of his face by means of stealth and subterfuge. Notice, too, that the contrast between crown and face symbolizes the conflict between Mill's *ostensible* philosophical project (increase of personal liberty, here represented by the – admittedly delightful – free-roaming and unrestrained sideburns) and his *actual aims* (Mill's underlying conservatism, of course, represented by the constricting vectors of the rear neck-warmer, which draws energy away from the pseudo-dialectical radicalism of said sideburns.) If any further proof were required, the uncanny and often-noted resemblance between Mill's hair to a barrister's wig is definitive proof of his sinister underlying project of liberating the individual while preventing wide-scale anarchy and suffering.¹

Case 2a: The Marxian Mane (a dialectical view)



I included Mill not to demonstrate an ideologically *defensible* hairstyle, of course, but rather to provide the reader, for her guidance, with a ‘control case’ that clarifies the repressive stylistic impulses that had, inevitably, to be brushed away like so much dandruff. In this spirit, I give you the first significant – nay, essential – departure from the classical philo-follicular approach. The lower photograph, taken late in Marx’s life, clearly evinces the evolution of his thought. The encroaching march of the bare forehead onto the voluminous mane, of course, represents the painful emergence of his more *practical* philosophy of revolution, in which the proletariat comes to understand its dependence on the bourgeoisie. (The



intense battle, and eventual interdependence, of these class structures is clearly visible here in the shifting nature of the forehead/mane dialectic, where the proletarian mane is seen beating back a retreat against a newly-emboldened bourgeois forelock.) Notice that in all photographs of the earlier, more idealistic Marx (upper photograph), the sheer *extent* of the forehead’s encroachment of the temples has not yet been recognized by the young thinker – the writer of the *German Ideology* could not, at that stage, understand that his outer covering was dialectically interdependent on its absence. (Did he learn nothing from Hegel?) The older, chastened Marx understood that the vital hegemony of the early mane was unsustainable, as he came to terms with the failure of the 1848 revolutions. Marx’s later hairline, however, effectively dramatizes the ‘withering away’ of the state, cleverly represented here by the hairline.

Case 2b: The Engelsian Efflorescence



Engels, as we all know, bravely continued the Follicular Revolution after Marx's death, dampening the head-based 'superstructure' while markedly intensifying the face-based 'substructure' of his hair, carrying on a terrifyingly effective, downward-mobilized hairroots form of guerrilla warfare.

Case 3: The Nietzschean Duck's Arse



Attacking tradition on two fronts, Nietzsche unleashes the full force of his patricidal impulse, which in this photograph bravely emerges out of his face and head. The upper front, cutting deeply into the twin monoliths of traditional straightness and repressive flatness, joyfully realizes its potential as pure being, as the *überfringe* struggles against, and eventually overcomes, its comb-imposed boundaries. Notice also that, in typical Nietzschean fashion, this hirsute rebellion takes place in the *opposite* direction than the one expected; that is, towards the rear – gleefully fleeing from the homogenizing pressures of barber-ism.

On the second front, Nietzsche's assault advances downward, away from the Appolonian domain of sterile, detached thought (as if that were even possible!) and towards (but never quite reaching!) the Dionysian genicular/pubicular nexus, overstepping its 'bounds' – as defined by the weak – the hairless – the plucked – the bald!

Case 4: The Heideggerian Hair-Challenged



Eschewing the Humanism of previous philosophical hairstyles, while retaining their disdain for predetermined structures, Heidegger's hair instituted an austere, yet ultimately liberating, method of follicular preparation. While 'the they' were content to concentrate on the dead-ends of Nietzsche's follicular effulgence, cultivating ever more decadent and inauthentic departures from one's own being (*scalpenshaven*), Heidegger stripped back this philosophy to its essentials, freeing up much morning time for gazing into the actuality of *vital being* (a rough translation of Heidegger's coinage *Vidalsasoonung*), which is reflected in the blinding gleam of one's pate – an entity unafraid of glimpsing its true self in all its dazzling shininess.²

Case 5: The Derridian *Bouffant* (or *boufference*)



It is with Derrida that we see perhaps the most salient conjunction of hairstyle and thought-system. Here, the hair functions as the *trace*, but it is its slippage *away* from a linear path that is most noticeable: the path of the follicle never coincides with itself. Derrida's hair, then, is always-already messy, even (and especially) when he is in a formal setting, suggesting an authenticity that is unavailable to comb-owning heirs of the enlightenment. For Derrida, the public face of the binary was the parting (left- or right-hand-side: Derrida, unlike many others, recognized that the left-hand-side part simply reversed the binary rather than overturning it, thus forming part of the problem)³, and he tirelessly worked to undermine this and other divisive hairstyles throughout his active, heavily-tousled life. Further, his destruction of the hierarchy between speech and writing is echoed in his critique of the presumed truth

that wetting *precedes* combing; in his follicular practice, Derrida often daringly reversed these crude binaries, resulting in an indistinct yet radical form that – crucially – seemed to have no center whatsoever.

In later works, such as *Conditioners*, *The Gift of Hair* and *The Hair of the Other*, Derrida confronted critics who claimed that his philosophy was based on an amply-haired concept of normality.

Case 6: The Lacanian *Topocranial Gordian Knot* (abbr. 'topknot')



Just as the infant's gaze in the mirror succeeds in reuniting the splintered parts of its ego through vision, Lacan's hairstyle yearns for this same sense of wholeness, of one-ness, of the primordial. By boldly rejecting the schism that most others inflict between each separate hemisphere of the hair, Lacan's own hair seeks to become impermeable, even as it can never fully attain this sense of totality. Like the infant who has finally recognised its estrangement, and seeks to redress this, Lacan is able to reconstitute the separate facets of his hair into a single, united mass by looking in a mirror and concentrating. To adapt a passage from the Mirror Stage essay: like the infant recognising its wholeness for the first time, Lacan's hairstyle "overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of [its] support".

Case 7: The Foucaultian Anti-Enlockenment



The iconoclastic Foucault was the first to utterly do away with the entire *basis* of other philosophers' critiques of the Enlightenment, choosing to forge a path away from follicular realignment and towards a *genuine* embracement of the nothingness, hitherto

concealed by the morally bankrupt humanist project. Calling this ethos ‘hairnormative’, Foucault dedicated most of his life to stripping back the illusion that ‘growth’ – follicular or otherwise – was possible.

In *Hairless is Civilization*, Foucault reactivated the vital systems of the past that had been trampled under the bootheels of growth-obsessed scientists and bureaucrats.

Tragically, Foucault could not live up to the implications of his early views (see photograph). Towards the end of his life, coming full circle (to the chagrin of his supporters), Foucault reconciled with Mill’s philosophical system, and spent several years unsuccessfully attempting to simulate sideburns with his hands.

Case 8: The Barthesian Toupé



This photograph depicts Barthes shortly after he formulated the split between signified and signifier in terms of cultural symbols, a concept he articulated in *Mythologies*. The follicular manifestation of his adaptation of Saussure is clearly apparent in the schism between the signified (here evident in the austere temple-located hair section) and the signifier (the effulgent shock of ‘culturally enhanced’ hair that forms a wave running from right to left, culminating in its imbrication with the signified about three inches above the ear). While it is very easy for the viewer to see the point of intersection between the two ‘hairzones’⁴ (their juncture is expressible as the ‘sign’, Barthes’ preferred word for ‘part’), it is extraordinarily hard to interpret the bi-directional hair system that undergirds it.

Case 9: The Butlerian Helmet



By incorporating the insights of many of the above philosophers into Gender Theory, Butler has done more to alert the public to the dangers of extravagant follicular expression, with its dead-end concept of Romantic individuality, than anyone bar Foucault (and perhaps Heidegger, as we have seen).

As we can see, the style here undermines, subverts and ultimately destroys phallogentric follicular conventions by subtly mimicking them. In a forthcoming work, she plans to courageously assault (and ultimately expose the appalling non-liminality of) British Analytic philosophy⁵ by growing a highly parodic (and thus unstable) version of Frege's mouth-covering beard [in press]. This will have the added benefit of cleverly exposing the implied silence of the female subaltern.

Please note: Every effort has been made to trace the original source of all images used in this paper. Where the attempt has been unsuccessful, the authors, editors and publishers would be pleased to hear from copyright owners in order to rectify any errors or omissions.

¹ It is often forgotten that Mill's attachment to the bourgeois elements of his cranio-facial hair contributed, in no small part, to his rejection of Occam's entire system of thought.

² Heidegger's hair gradually formed a clearing as he matured, allowing him to experience increasing levels of openness to being. Reflecting the change in his thought from 'doing' to 'dwelling', it was only after his hair stopped 'dwelling' on his head that he stopped 'doing' it.

³ Derrida's brief flirtation with the centre-part, in *The Truth in Parting*, was quickly rescinded – to his credit. He soon returned to his contentious idea of 'overturning'.

⁴ The concept of the 'hairzone' was later expanded by Gilles Deleuze, who in later life radically complicated the signified/signifier distinction by extending Barthes' subtemple hairsection far, far below his ears.

⁵ Represented, for example, in the works of A. C. Greying and W. V. O. Quiff.