

# The Hegemony of Politics and Ideology in Saul Bellow: Contradictions, Philosophical Influences, and the Struggle Between Humanism and Modernity

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**Abstract**—This paper discusses the hegemony of politics and ideology in Saul Bellow’s writings. It further examines the ideological and philosophical inconsistencies in Bellow’s writings, focusing on the interplay between politics, humanism, and the hegemonic forces of modernity. This study, drawing on a theoretical framework that integrates Kantian ethics, Hegelian dialectics, Marxist class struggle, and Foucauldian power structures, explores how Bellow upholds the philosophical traditions that reveal the fundamental contradictions in his worldview. His writings simultaneously reinforce aspects of the very systems, creating a paradoxical stance on modernity proving critique on capitalism, materialism, and totalitarian ideologies. Through the findings and an analysis of *Humboldt’s Gift*, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, and *Herzog*, this study highlights how Bellow’s portrayal of Jewish identity, the Arab Israeli conflict, and Western intellectual traditions reflects an unresolved tension between his literary aspirations and philosophical influences. Moreover, the findings suggested that Bellow, despite his attempts at subversion and critique, remained deeply entrenched in the ideological structures he wanted to challenge. His shifting perspectives—ranging from a critique of Western hegemony to an implicit reinforcement of its values—reflect the broader struggles of 20th-century thought, where the search for moral and political clarity often gives way to ambivalence. Finally, the researcher concludes that, in Bellow’s writings, the contradictions are not merely personal but emblematic of the inherent tensions within Western modernity and its philosophical traditions.

**Index Terms**—politics, ideology, inconsistency, subversion, hegemony

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bellow’s writings have attracted a large number of critics, and their critical attention has established him as one of the great humanists due to his attachment to community, human nature, and the ameliorative prospects that lie within man’s physical grasp (Glenday & Glenday, 1990). Moreover, he provides many instances of inconsistencies in his writings, both semantically and stylistically. In fact, the author attacked certain capitalistic and materialistic practices and values such as materialism versus humanism, capitalism versus socialism, technology versus art, war, science, mass media, identity, victimization versus victimizers (Marrouchi et al., 2020; Siddique et al., 2020; Teymourli et al., 2018) without being able to free himself fully and unconditionally from the hegemonic powers of modernity, that is, the negative aspects of modernity. He, therefore, presents a model of thinking in a state of crisis, where one cannot establish an objective world without completely shielding oneself from all co-opting encroachment by the modern system of life (Ravinthiran, 2016; Ahonen, 2022).

In *Humboldt’s Gift*, Charles Citrine, the philosopher, crystallizes his sublime ends as follows:

And money wasn’t what I had in mind. Oh God, no, what I wanted was to do good. I was dying to do something good. And this feeling for good went back to my early and peculiar sense of existence—sunk in the glassy depths of life and groping, thrillingly and desperately, for sense, a person keenly aware of painted veils, of Maya, of domes and many colored glass staining the white radiance of eternity. (Bellow, 1975, p. 9)

These Platonic intentions are strikingly contrasted by ‘the melancholy of affluence’ and the madness of materialism and capitalism. This begins when Humboldt acknowledges the hegemony of money over his idealistic views on poetry at the novel’s outset. The paradox becomes more acute when we learn about the poet’s readiness to exchange his poetic reflections on Yeats, Blake, and Wordsworth, as well as his intellectual debates on history and postmodern Western societies, for wealth (Glenday & Glenday, 1990). Citrine, on his part, contradicts himself twice: first, when he admits that he dies to do good for sublime ends, while in practice he strives ‘to buy his fame by his frequent referring Humboldt.’ Second, he portrays his life as one filled with sexual adventures, deals, journeys, business, and excitement, which contradicts his ultimate ideals regarding knowledge, poetry, and philosophy (Bellow, 1975). Unlike Citrine and Cantabile, Humboldt was not able to achieve affluence. While in his philosophical and poetical meditations, Citrine professed that humanism is an unconditional feeling; in practice, he could not retreat from the world of business and

money. What is even more ironic is that the author sought to structure the novel around striking paradoxes between intellectuals and ordinary people, thieves and nobles, Men of letters and Men of business, kind men and cruel women. Such an inconsistent gesture leaves no doubt that Saul Bellow was ‘anything but a firm believer in what he wrote.’ This desire to conceal the true faces of his subjects and the techniques of creating a whole world from acute paradoxes contradicts the author’s ideals of humanism, evoking the status of Western capitalist culture, which is deeply rooted in contradictions. Although Bellow’s tone was highly assertive to the very extent that one can feel the intensity of morality and humanism, he was far from that ‘humanist hero’ he strived to emphasize in his writings (Assadi, 2014). If one may account for these inconsistencies by admitting the author’s consciousness of history and his intellectual maturity, it is always unconvincing as a reason for his deliberate and ceaseless moments of inconsistencies.

One objection that might be raised is that the writer is not the speaker in his novels and essays and that he was merely imagining a better world through his fictional subjects. However, one should not forget that the writer has been publicly asserting his writing to be a direct reflection of his beliefs; otherwise, his project of deconstructing the amorality of the postmodern age and his strategies of subversion and satire would have no meaning whatsoever. Additionally, the purpose behind comparing his theoretical ideals to his attitudes in reality is not meant by any means to downgrade him or even to criticize him, but to epitomize the fundamental moments of weaknesses in his thought in the first place, and ‘to show how a western culture/subjectivity, no matter how consistent it claims to be, always ends up falling into contradiction’.

In his doctoral dissertation *American Holocaust Novels*, Chanen (1987) portrays Bellow as a humanist figure who spent his lifetime advocating for humanist causes. Referring to the opinions of historians, theologians, Holocaust theorists, literary critics, eyewitness documents and diaries, intellectuals, soldiers, ordinary people, and Men of letters, the writer has strived to introduce the Jews as the victims of twentieth-century atrocities. Chanen (1987) attempts to provide a reading of the author’s vision of life, humanism, peace, war, sacrifice, and Jewishness; he does not raise suspicious questions about how these visions could not be as uniform as they were made to seem. Even when he registers a moment of inconsistency, he assumes to consider it the ‘growth’ of the mind of the author and never conceives it as a radical change in his thoughts. Personally, Bellow’s might be seen as contradicting himself at three fundamental moments. First, when he published his *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970) and before it *Dangling Man*, one can easily notice his contradictory attitudes towards the concept of the war (Chanen, 1987). In fact, while Joseph in *Dangling Man* valorizes war as the only means to achieve the independence of the Jews, Dr. Elya downgrades it as it only leads to the end of the world and the deconstruction of man (Best, 2021). Second, one can mention the author’s ambivalent attitudes towards the Arab Israeli conflict, which were firmly conveyed in his autobiographical work, *To Jerusalem and Back*. In line with this, his political and moral ideals contradict his beliefs in freedom and dignity. He considers the Arabs as devils threatening the future of the newly emerging Jewish state. To his mind, they were invaders, terrorists, savages, ignorant and barbaric people. His Jewish assumptions further aggravated this ambivalence by the way he dramatized the Holocaust in *Ravelstein* and *The Bellarosa Connection* (Best, 2021; Cronin & Trepanier, 2013). Strikingly enough, while the writer depicts the Jews as victims of Nazism, wars, he unexpectedly ignores the right of the Palestinians to live in their land. Eventually, one can admit that the writer consistently contradicted himself from the beginning of his career to his death. This is evident in the way he introduced capitalism and socialism in his early writings. When Tommy Wilhelm and Augie March strongly criticized the unjust system of capitalism, when Henderson, Mosby, and Sammler envisioned the savage face of the Western civilization, and when Herzog overemphasized the spiritual loss of the Western culture, Bellow remained faithful to the totalitarian and dogmatic ends of modernity. A first glance at his writings might induce the author’s ceaseless attempts to subvert the heritage of Western ideals, but a profound exegesis of the rhetoric and logic of his texts reveals an immense sense of ambivalence in his political, social, and philosophical attitudes (Gold, 1979; Best, 2021).

What changed in the mind of the author were not his basic views of life, which revolved around ambivalence and deconstruction, but the perspectives, the interests, and the contexts that decisively trigger off his attitudes. On this say, the researchers such as Hojjati (2008) and Eichelberger (1999) believed that the writer has been contradicting himself from the beginning of his career till his death for how could a writer who had rebelled so much against barbarism, especially the wars of the twentieth century, hegemony, unjust causes, madness, totalitarian regimes, dogma [...], fail to abide by the very principles of humanism he preached for? Can this be regarded as a moment of inconsistency that features a huge gap between Bellow’s theoretical and utopian ideals and his practices in life? More satirically, is this a mark that signals the failure of the totalitarian projects of modernity and enlightenment? And again, is this a gesture that epitomizes the author’s failure to represent the American dream? Can it be regarded as a perfect example that envisions Bellow’s misunderstanding of the dogmatic and hegemonic ideals of modernity? Or is it a logical result of the writer’s failure to translate his human and moral beliefs into practice? If a reading to the author’s strategies of subversion could not prove these inconsistent instances, then the insights of modernity, postmodernity and after postmodernity can clearly show how the Western model has always relied on this contradictory strategy: to idealize values and then to push the individual to transgress the very principles that have shaped his life (Hojjati, 2008).

There are many other questions that could be asked about Bellow’s political position. For example, why is it that a novelist who spent his lifetime writing against socialism, refusing its political, economic, and cultural systems (which are heavily regarded as a threat to capitalism and liberalism), is now changing his attitudes by launching a radical

critique of his early beliefs? In this sense, when the writer published his early novels in the 1950s and 1960s, he strongly criticized the hegemony of communism, as he was asked to lecture and present his political and philosophical views to students at universities in Jerusalem, North America, and Europe. He demonstrated careful reading in the archaeological and genealogical design, as cited by Foucault, which structures modernity (Gustafson, 2014; Cronin & Trepanier, 2013). Supporting the concepts of morality, justice, freedom, and law, he strikingly asserted that this project of modernity is an unfinished process of enlightenment. In doing so, Bellow 'disdainfully' downgrades the dogma and the unfair system of capitalism. This fact could be easily traced in the intellectual and philosophical debates generated by *Herzog* and *Ravelstein*. The author's essays, short stories, and autobiographical writings showed how the writer agreed to play the game that he had previously condemned (Hojjati, 2008; Assadi, 2014).

So far, while tracing Bellow's contradictory and irreconcilable positions regarding several political, cultural, and philosophical concerns. It can be safely acknowledged that he has been found to alter his beliefs and behaviors as if he had never been committed to a philosopher. To this, it can also be argued that he failed to engage critically with the major political issues. What remains to be stressed is that the author was never conscious of all that because he was himself the victim of the power of his silent Jewish assumptions, as well as the system in which he was born and reared up. Interestingly, his excessive faith in individualism, freedom, morality, justice, and humanism ultimately failed to provide him with a clear political, social, cultural, and philosophical framework (Gustafson & Azmi, 2019). Bellow was not the child of his age to quote Hegel, but rather its victim. The rebellious/subversive nature of his mind devoid all his efforts of criticism of any serious result. Accordingly, one logical conclusion one might draw is that the author was unable to provide a deep and coherent insight into the main issues posed in his time. Another general conclusion is that the writer's deconstructive reading of twentieth-century political issues in specific and the Western habits of thought in general cannot escape the act of criticism itself (Gustafson & Azmi, 2020; Allman, 2020; Viscuso, 2024).

Pointing out these inconsistent standpoints is quite fundamental in the reevaluation of the subversive strategies of a writer who has been very scrupulous in condemning the norms of both modernity and postmodernity simultaneously. In the next part of this study, it will be demonstrated how the hegemony of ideology played a significant role in shaping the author's inconsistent moves.

## II. THE HEGEMONY OF IDEOLOGY

How did the hegemony of ideology overemphasize Saul Bellow's inconsistent moves? At this stage, the objective is to ensure that Bellow was under ceaseless kinds of pressures and powers (Snedeker, 2023). In other words, various 'ideologies' qualified the way the author perceived life and the world. Accordingly, they can be categorized as follows:

(a) The ideology of politics and the author's blind reflections on Western ethics. This fundamentally includes the Jewish cause.

(b) The ideology of the Jewish culture and tradition. This would clearly overemphasize the extent to which the Jewish assumptions affected the author's views.

(c) The ideology of the various philosophical trends of thought. Although the writer has strived to exploit certain philosophical insights and, more than this, develop a theory of writing that crosses the borders between discourses, he was entrapped by these theories. He could not act outside the heavy influence of philosophy; that is, he could not establish a critical distance between his ultimate ends and the findings of philosophy he was using. Bellow was essentially under the influence of Kant's theory of morality, Hegel's notion of the absolute unity, Marx's theory of the structure of history and the conflicts between classes, Foucault's assumptions of power, archeology and genealogy, Derrida's deconstruction, Habermas (1990) and Adorno's views of the dialectical function of modernity/the enlightenment, Bauman and Davis's after postmodernity which is generally referred to as after theory (Davis, 2004, pp. 152-177). In short, philosophy functions as a means that triggers the author's critical thinking as well as a sort of power that cripples liberty (Ogunmekan, 2024; Marrouchi et al., 2020).

As has been ceaselessly argued, politics dominated the writer's fictional world and introduced highly debatable issues in his writings. Interestingly, whenever Bellow was accused of inconsistency, subjectivity, and haziness, this accusation could be easily attributed to the influence of the hegemony of certain political views (Marrouchi et al., 2020). For instance, the imperialistic politics of the Western powers, the strategies of wars, the theory of expansion, and the feeling of the legitimacy of taking over others' land contradict the author's beliefs in morality and humanism. When he published his *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, one can remarkably notice the Jewish imperialistic assumptions of expansion and war, which were highly reiterated in his autobiographical journey to Jerusalem. The writer's pronouncements of morality and humanism in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* contradict his early beliefs. Sammler's sharp criticism of modernity and the wars of the twentieth century may not accurately reflect the author's true intentions. More satirically, it makes these ethical and moral concepts merely ruling illusions (Pifer, 1991; Ravinthiran, 2016; Watson, 2013; Turner, 2023). Accordingly, one can only wonder if this represents one aspect of the hegemony of politics on Bellow's part. Is he not moralizing and rejecting morality at the same time? Is it clear that the author's views on politics and morality underwent considerable changes in the course of his intellectual career? Is it fair enough to illustrate Bellow's view on morality, politics, and ideology to that of Karl Marx? It is tempting to see this change of attitude as a move on the author's part from an initial endorsement of a distinctive ethical position to a subsequent rejection of these attitudes.

Obviously, one cannot gain an insight into these pronouncements without seeing the deep influence of Kant's moral theory on the author. The moment of showing the hegemony of politics symmetrically begins with Hegel's critique of Kant's morality. When Hegel endorses the abstractness, lofty outlook, and empty formalism of Kant's moral theory, Saul Bellow expresses it in his critical reflections on the imperial behaviors of the twentieth-century empires. The totalitarian concepts of morality and happiness that overwhelmed his subjects generated a feeling of the superiority of the Western culture and civilization in general and the Jewish community in specific. Henderson, Humboldt, Sammler, and Herzog overemphasized the way the moral duty of bringing some change to the world led to exile and marginalization. Tommy Wilhelm and Augie March are portrayed as victims of the hegemonic forces of capitalism. They ceaselessly showed never-ending tragic failures in society (Assadi, 2014). Joseph and Asa Leventhal represent the failure of the dogma of morality and justice in the modern era. Joseph confirms the unjust and totalitarian system of politics that kept him dangling and waiting for his part to go to the war. However, Asa Leventhal laments being a victim of his own amorality and his failure to take responsibility for others. Below, in parallel with this, he did not attempt to develop a new concept of morality that shifts from the abstractness, loftiness, and totalitarianism of Kant to the reality of Marx, thereby showing his inability to escape the political implications of these principles. The writer, to my mind, could not profess Marx's historical criticism or even be aware of his view. When he focused on morality and humanism, he forgot to address the issue of class conflicts, the imperialistic and materialistic consequences of capitalism (Glenday & Glenday, 1990). In short, assuming that the author deliberately neglected the assumptions, the implications, and the details of the theory of morality that he was trying to establish, he was not able to avoid being the victim of its politics.

Another moment of hegemony on Bellow's mind should be read in the authority of certain philosophical theories during his intellectual career. This, as I would argue, includes:

- (a) The impostures of the Enlightenment ideals.
- (b) The problem of knowledge.
- (c) The specters of theory or what Davis (2004) would call after theory.
- (d) The writer's lack of awareness of the dividing lines between these theories and concepts.

In fact, although the author related his moral theory, especially in his early writings, to the ideals of the Enlightenment and attempted thereby to apply its findings, one can still acknowledge that this gesture played a totalitarian role in the formation and development of the writer's views. These norms were bound up with the mythology they claimed to repudiate; their appeal to reason, to quote from Adorno and Horkheimer, is racist and imperialist. The project of the Enlightenment which sought to "develop objective science, universal morality, autonomous art according to its logic" (Davis, 2004, pp. 35-37) is now taking the wrong path, while these efforts to mark the separation between the contemporary world from the Middle Ages and antiquity are regarded as the last stages in history. In tune with this, Bellow defines these themes as the fundamental focus of his writings. He addressed topics such as justice, morality, humanism, reason, happiness, and religion in his early writings. During the 1970s and 1980s, he was commonly regarded as a writer of morality and humanism in the US, as he strove hard to defend the rights of individuals as well as communities. Being affected by the power of the Enlightenment norms, the author initially attempted to improve the conditions of everyday life (Gold, 1979). Nevertheless, he was unable to escape his dogma and totalitarianism, and thus diminished the importance of the present, impairing the original critical impetus of using reason.

Strikingly enough, this hegemony could be further justified through the ethics of postmodern philosophers and theorists. Accordingly, the writer was remarkably influenced by the findings of certain philosophers like Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault (Ravinthiran, 2016). He was "aware that while modernity promised progress and emancipation, yet it signaled the downing of postmodernity, which denies the progress in morality or knowledge and promises only discord and the struggle for dominance." Habermas (1990) explains this disastrous shift as follows:

The skeptical scholar who wants to unmask the perversion of the will to power, the revolt of reactionary forces, and the emergence of subject centered-reason by using anthropological, psychological and historical methods has successors in Bataille, Lacan, and Foucault; the initiate-critic of metaphysics who pretends to a unique kind of knowledge and pursues the rise of the philosophy of the subject back to its pre-Socratic beginnings has successors in Heidegger and Derrida. (Habermas, 1990, p. 97)

Analyzing in detail the erroneous paths taken by the assailants of the Enlightenment such as Derrida, Foucault, Bataille, Adorno, and Horkheimer, one can easily remark that Bellow's late writings are heavily enriched by their insights (Davis, 2004). Herzog, for example, raises the crisis of knowledge and existence, philosophy and literature, history and storytelling, and the Jews and the world, suggesting thereby a huge discrepancy between the hero, Herzog, the skeptical scholar, and the initial promises of emancipation generated by the Enlightenment. Sammler showed the failure of the 'grand narratives' of reason and morality by focusing on the atrocities of the 20th century. Ravelstein and Humboldt appear to be poor readers of the history of the Jews and the intellectual trajectory of philosophy and poetry. They repeat some of the failings of which the author was accused: misreading the ethics of modernity, generalizing from limited evidence, exploiting ideas/issues out of context, and making dogmatic and subjective assertions rather than reasoned arguments. More importantly, if all these subjects have proven to be poor readers to the major social, political and intellectual problems of the age, Bellow himself might be seen as a poor reader to the post Enlightenment habits of thinking "[...] and the similarities here look too consistent to be merely a product of change" (Davis, 2004, p. 20). The

picture shows the author to be denouncing his early beliefs and epitomizes the politics of postmodernity to be playing a key role in reshaping his thinking. In both cases, one cannot deny the power of ‘the ideology’ of both the Enlightenment and the post-Enlightenment norms on the writer.

In his *The Illusions of Postmodernity*, Eagleton (2013) envisages the hegemony of the suspicious thought of postmodernity in the following way:

Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives and ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities [...] Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture, as well as between art and every day experience. (Eagleton, 2013, p. vii)

In Bellow’s context, terms such as identity, knowledge, storytelling, history, culture, and boundaries are already problematic issues. Being highly influenced by these illusive concepts, the author’s subjects concede that they are combating things that never existed. Having fallen in madness and purposelessness, Herzog, Sammler, Henderson, Humboldt, reproduce the void of the age, the deconstruction of values, the peculiar dilemma of reason and truth, the cultural conflicts and the problem of identity in literary terms (Bigler, 1995, p. 22). The working hypothesis is that the author was unconsciously influenced by this suspicious style of thought, which not only traces the status of knowledge at this era but also marks the end of [West]’s reconstruction (Lyotard, 2004, p. 11). This is coupled with Lyotard’s awareness of the crisis of science and, more tragically, the crisis of any solid ground of scientific theory. He asserts:

By concerning itself with undecidables, the limits of precise control, quanta, conflicts caused by incomplete information, ‘fracta’, catastrophes, pragmatic paradoxes, postmodern science theorizes its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable, paradoxical. It changes the meaning of the world knowledge, and it explains how this change can take place. It produces not the known, but the unknown. And it suggests a model of legitimation which is absolutely not that of the best performance, but that of difference understood as paralogy. (Lyotard, 2004, p. 97)

Also, differently put in Levinas’s (1979) way:

End of humanism, of metaphysics-death of man, ... Apocalyptic ideas or slogans of intellectual high society. Like all demonstrations of Parisian taste- or distaste- these words are imposed with the tyranny of the latest fashion, but they are made affordable to all and degraded. (Levinas, 1979, p. 95)

“The limits of control, quanta, conflicts caused by incomplete information, paradoxes, catastrophes, [reproducing] the unknown,” to cite Lyotard and “End of humanism and apocalism,” to recall Lévinas sketch the crisis of theory or let me call it the theory of the absolute and the unknown. Bellow’s intellectual career is heavily marked by moments of skepticism and a lack of solid theoretical ground, both at the levels of storytelling and meaning. He does not adopt a clear and simple strategy of telling stories. His “characters are enclosed beings, prisoners. Their story is never finished, it is still going on, but it does not advance” (Levinas, 1979, pp. 140-41). The heroes in the Bellowian fictional world move in a world of dogma, darkness, and uncertainty. They turn out to be mad intellectuals and all of a sudden become wise fools, romantic poets, hopeless philosophers, mischievous politicians, ordinary people, victorious businessmen, brave men, and eventually storytellers of imaginary stories. The kind of literature, novels, essays, poems or plays that the author was exposed to, is conveyed the tyranny and the barbarity of the Western methods of thinking. Thematization, or the said/the meaning, to cite Levinas (1979) again, revolved around existentialism, absurdity, romanticism, deconstruction, and idealism, thereby preventing any possibility of certainty. The saying or the techniques of telling the stories blurred the boundaries between discourses and made it difficult to unsay what Bellow really wanted to approach ‘the ethical relation with the other’.

More strikingly, the ordinary concept of plot is rejected in Bellow’s stories as it overtones the hegemony of the said/the meaning over the saying/representation. The way Davis (2004) interprets Lévinas’s textual practice triggers off an interesting parallel with the way Bellow develops his storytelling. Davis’s insight, though long, is worth being quoted in full:

[...] The subject is described as accused, persecuted, obsessed by the Other, as a sacrifice or hostage who must substitute for the Other and expiate for his crimes. Therefore, the text appears as if it gathers together the shards of an untold story involving violence and distress, and which it insists cannot be reconstructed. The whole chapter has the quality of a commentary on a novel we have not read, and we can only try to work out its plot on the basis of the clues in front of us. The story is untellable, as it falls ‘short of all memory, all recall,’ it cannot be ‘converted to memory,’ it occurs outside ‘any memorable past’ (165), it is located only in an ‘Anteriority anterior to any representable anteriority’ (195). Whilst the repeated use of the word plot suggests the possibility of telling the story, Levinas ensures that it is also untellable. No memory or narrative could reconstruct this story, and even the words which might evoke it evaporate or collapse into one another as we look at them. In Eagleton’s account, ‘dazzlingly, “substitution” becomes “one- for- the- other” becomes

“hostage” becomes “sacrifice” becomes “exposure” becomes “passivity beyond passivity” becomes “proximity” becomes “trauma” becomes “here I am” (Eagleston, 1997, p. 139). In the simultaneous refusal of storytelling and the shattered legibility of an untold story, it is possible to see one of the key stakes of Lévinas’s ethics: the problem of how to translate the unconditional responsibility for the Other into our lives. The examples which might link my responsibility to my actions, my saying to my said, are precisely missing or unrecognizable. Stories are withheld or dispersed and fragmented precisely because to answer the question “What does this mean?” would betray or falsify the meaning it should have. (Davis, 2004, pp. 98-99)

Bellow shows striking affinities with Davis’s ultimate findings on Levinas: the problem of plot, the persecuted characters, the sphere of void and darkness, the crisis of any ethical communication with the other, ‘untold, and unfinished if told, stories,’ the lack of a solid ground of knowledge and certainty, the issue of memory and representation [...]. Most probably, the author’s initial aim was to outline the fundamental moral and ethical norms of the Enlightenment in his writings. Unexpectedly, he took the wrong path- under the influence of the post-Enlightenment theorists- by endorsing the crisis of reason, truth, morality, freedom, and progress. As Habermas (1990) put it, “[his writings hope to recall that of other post-Enlightenment thinkers who] pursued the goal of enlightening the Enlightenment about its narrow-mindedness” (Habermas, 1990, p. 302). This involves revising the absolute notions of pure reason and morality in favor of communicative reason and amorality. This, indeed, can only epitomize the writer struggling against the hegemony of never-ending philosophical theories, attempting to ground meaning, making sense in his narratives and destabilizing it, which becomes the central issue of his thought until his death in 2005.

Additionally, Bellow makes no genuine efforts, despite his attempts at subversion and deconstruction, to understand the post-Enlightenment theorists and exploit their findings (Reed, 2023). The discovery of the inconsistencies inherent in their logic “inhibits, or serves as an excuse to ignore, any presumption that they may contain anything worth saying” (Davis, 2004, p. 27). Moreover, Bellow repeatedly draws hasty and general conclusions about the philosophers he discusses. In *Herzog* (1964), he suggests that Hegel and Heidegger did not understand human nature, that Karl Marx could not take the project of justice and equality between classes further. In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, *Ravelstein* and *Humboldt’s Gift*, the politicians of the 20th century, the famous poets, and the philosophers of morality, according to him, were not able to improve humanism and bring some change to the world. These suggestions are made on the basis of the writer’s lack of understanding of the Enlightenment itself; the misuse of certain theories and ideas lifted out their context, without taking any consideration to the intellectual context within which it should be used. Broadly speaking, the author, one can say, was not aware of the details of the philosophies and theories of the age, a gesture that can only epitomize “[...] a strange lesson in reading [art and the world], contesting every detail in [the world] without suggesting for one moment that one has seen its overall project, that is quite simply, its meaning” (Barthes, 1967, p. 42).

### III. CONCLUSION

In short, this study has examined the complex interplay of politics, ideology, and humanism in Bellow’s writings. However, the findings suggest that the fundamental weaknesses of Saul Bellow in this respect are, in fact, the weaknesses of the Enlightenment itself, as they reveal the ideological contradictions embedded within his works. Despite his critique of capitalism, materialism, and totalitarian ideologies, Bellow’s narratives often paradoxically uphold the very systems he sought to challenge. Therefore, by endeavoring to address the issues raised by the Enlightenment (justice, freedom, morality, knowledge, ethics), he unexpectedly fell under the hegemony of misunderstanding his own way. His philosophical engagement with modernity, viewed through the lens of Jewish identity, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Western intellectual traditions, highlights a tension between his literary aspirations and the hegemonic forces of his time. He could not resist the influence of other theorists and philosophers, partly because he misunderstood them and partly because they had a remarkably blind influence on the intellectual context around him. The author’s view of the concept of madness and his strategies of attacks against modernity, subversion and deconstruction further aggravated the matter. Moreover, the study suggests that Bellow’s works reflect a broader struggle within 20th-century thought, where attempts to critique Western hegemony frequently collapse into ambivalence, reinforcing the very values they seek to question. Ultimately, the contradictions in his writings reflect the inherent tensions within Western modernity, offering a profound insight into the complexities of ideology, power, and philosophical tradition in the modern age.

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