

7.

Postmodernism

Varieties of Postmodernism

With postmodernism it is as if we pass through the looking-glass of western reason. As we do so, apparently reliable conceptual distinctions are inverted or abolished altogether, and what was previously most solid 'melts into air'.¹ Postmodernism attempts a radical break with all of the major strands of post-Enlightenment thought. For postmodernists both the orthodox Enlightenment 'meta-narrative' of progress and emancipation and the 'speculative' narrative of Hegelianism and Marxism have lost their spell.² Phenomenology and existentialism are condemned as varieties of humanism or nostalgic philosophies of the subject. Even Derrida's acrobatic manoeuvres on the margins of metaphysics fail to convince. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, it is impossible to provide a straightforward definition of postmodernism. Not only are there conflicting views about what postmodernism is, but postmodernist positions are also adopted within a variety of disciplinary settings. There is a wide range of contexts for what are nevertheless related discourses of modernity and postmodernity. These include history and sociology, philosophy, art and art theory as well as literature and literary criticism. As a result, too, 'postmodern', 'postmodernity' and 'postmodernism' are not always straightforwardly cognate terms either. They have different connotations, depending whether a historical period, a form of society, a philosophical stance or an artistic movement is in question. In other words, postmodernism cannot be regarded as a purely philosophical

development. It is just as much a response to the calamitous history of the West.

The genealogy of postmodernist thought involves at least four distinct but interrelated contexts of formation. In the first place, postmodernism draws radical conclusions from a number of developments in philosophy. Certainly, postmodernism reiterates themes that have frequently been explored within the previous continental tradition. Postmodernists are critical of all of the most characteristic assumptions of the orthodox Enlightenment. They reject the universal pretensions of natural science and the 'instrumental', 'objectifying' or 'reductive' (sometimes also 'male' or 'masculinist') rationality it embodies. They also reject universal claims made on behalf of moralities founded on pure reason or an essential human nature. Again like some earlier critics, they speak up for traditions, cultures, values and peoples who fared badly at the hands of the 'civilizing mission' of Enlightenment rationalism. However, typically these earlier critics of Enlightenment still argued for the role of rationality, albeit a rationality differently constituted and articulated, in the advance and emancipation of humanity. In this sense, they were still committed to a version of the 'Enlightenment project' as a key factor in the momentum of western modernity. This is most clear in the case of Hegel and Marx, whose dialectical accounts of the advance of reason through history presuppose the advanced state of European culture and society. Both retain a clear commitment to modernity, if only as the necessary precursor to a more thoroughgoing social and intellectual revolution.

By contrast, postmodernism defines itself, on one level at least, by its rejection of any commitment to modernity or Enlightenment, including the more nuanced commitment of Hegel and Marx. It is here that anti-humanism and the critique of the subject, from Nietzsche and Heidegger to structuralism and poststructuralism, plays a decisive role in preparing the ground for a more radical break with the Enlightenment project. In its most radical form, the anti-humanist critique of the subject problematizes all the fundamental categories of modern western philosophy. Not only the universalist rationalism of the Enlightenment, but also Hegelian and Marxist narratives of the dialectical self-constitution of humanity are challenged. Even more recent phenomenological and existentialist inheritors of the project of modern philosophy are undermined. Foucault's Nietzschean genealogy traces knowledge, truth and the modern subject to constellations of power that are seemingly beyond the reach of a divisive and exclusionary reason. Derrida's deconstruction of the 'metaphysics of presence' applies a similarly corrosive scepticism to

the most basic conceptual oppositions of western thought. But these poststructuralists remain unwilling to make the final break with the Enlightenment project. Thus at the same time as Derrida demonstrates the impossibility of inhabiting the conceptual framework of western metaphysics, he also asserts the impossibility of simply leaving it behind. For him, to adapt Samuel Beckett's phrase, western philosophy 'can't go on, must go on'.³ Foucault too refuses to describe himself as a postmodernist. But equally clearly, the ideas of both thinkers prepare the ground for postmodernism. It is a relatively small step from the uncomfortably sceptical positions they both adopt to a more whole-hearted rejection of modernity and Enlightenment. Though not postmodernists themselves, Derrida and Foucault provide the most immediate point of entry into that mode of thought.

A second important context for the formation of postmodernist thought is provided by the history of Europe and the West (and the world in so far as it has been a victim of this history) in the twentieth century. This history includes two unprecedentedly destructive world wars, the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain and a protracted 'Cold War', maintained by the balanced nuclear terror of 'mutually assured destruction'. In the meantime, the colonial mission of modern and 'enlightened' European nations to civilize their 'barbarian' neighbours has lost conviction. Former colonies have been abandoned to movements of national liberation and the atrocities of former colonial regimes have been widely recognized. Most shockingly of all, though, the Nazi genocide of more than six million Jews, communists, homosexuals, gypsies and disabled people (and many others) dealt a fatal blow to any complacent reading of western history as the privileged site of civilization. The holocaust refutes in the starkest possible way that combination of ethnocentrism and optimism which has allowed the West to see itself as the embodiment of progress and the very antithesis of barbarism. In Germany, one of Europe's most economically developed, artistically cultured and philosophically creative nations, emerged a regime of the most refined brutality. But the holocaust is shocking not, or not simply, as an atavistic lapse from the path of progress and Enlightenment, but also as a demonstration of dangers intrinsic to modernity itself. The holocaust was a very modern affair. The genocide of six million people was carefully planned, administered with bureaucratic thoroughness and carried out with considerable technological sophistication. In Bauman's words, 'The Holocaust was a unique encounter between the old tensions which modernity ignored, slighted or failed to resolve – and the powerful instruments of rational and effective action that modern development itself brought into being.'⁴ The combined

effect of these catastrophic events of recent European history, from imperialist slaughter to Nazi genocide, is thus a dual challenge to the West's self-consciousness as modernity. Is modernity a secure achievement of the West? Is modernity really an achievement at all?

Another important episode from this history provides a third context for the formation of postmodernism, but one this time that is both historical and intellectual in nature. This is the fate of Marxism. It is also in the twentieth century, after all, that Marxism completed its evolution from theory to practice, becoming the official ideology of a number of 'actually existing' socialist regimes.⁵ It is, of course, possible to argue that these self-styled Marxist or Marxist-Leninist regimes have been anything but faithful to the more attractive ideals of Marx and Engels or even Lenin. Still, the bureaucratization of the socialist idea and, even more starkly, the Stalinization of both the Soviet Union and major cohorts of the communist movement could hardly fail to have a profound impact on the fate of Marxist theory and philosophy.⁶ Less dramatic, but in the long run equally corrosive, has been the stubborn failure of revolution to occur in the more developed capitalist societies of the West. A situation in which there is relatively widespread affluence and a working class apparently loyal to social democracy has offered scant basis for revolutionary optimism.

Against this fairly discouraging background a series of traumatic historical events has triggered repeated waves of intellectual exile from communist parties, from Marxism and ultimately from any remaining faith in socialist revolution. These events have ranged from revelations about party purges, 'show-trials', massacres and the 'gulag' of prison camps under Stalin, to the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The French communist party's failure to anticipate and its subsequent attempts to manipulate and co-opt the Paris 'May Events' of 1968 brought further disillusionment. In the mid-1970s came further revelations, this time concerning the excesses of China's 'cultural revolution' under Mao Tse-tung, with the implication that all was far from well under the Maoist model of socialism as well. Nor, finally, have the fortunes of Marxism and communism improved notably in recent years. Chinese communism survives only by dint of a combination of market reforms and repression. The collapse of communist regimes in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe since 1989 has eroded much of the remaining confidence in anything like the Marxist project.

The historical fate of Marxism has had considerable intellectual repercussions. 'Western Marxism', which includes the work of the Frankfurt School and Habermas but also such figures as Gramsci and

Althusser, has responded to the double disappointment of failed revolution and revolutionary failure with theoretical innovations of considerable ingenuity. Despite the recalcitrance of the 'problem of practice', these remain for many fertile currents of thought.⁷ But the same historical fate has produced a number of more radical departures. For a variety of reasons intellectual disillusionment has been particularly marked in France. In post-war France Marxism was not only a powerful political force, it also dominated the intellectual scene in a way unparalleled in most other western countries.⁸ Althusser's structuralist Marxism exerted considerable influence for a number of years. Even within existentialism and phenomenology Marxist theory was influential. Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and de Beauvoir were aligned with the revolutionary left for much of their careers. They were, at various times, all members of the French communist party. Their socialist commitment was expressed not only in extensive journalistic activities and political articles but also in much of their philosophical work, including Merleau-Ponty's writings on history and communism, and Sartre's lengthy *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Even many of those now associated with poststructuralism and postmodernism were previously Marxists. Lyotard and Baudrillard belonged to a variety of Marxist groupings. Foucault was a member of the French communist party, albeit only for a short time.

This background is important, because Marxism is arguably the most frequent, if not always the explicit, target of postmodernist critics of modernism. Warnings about the dangers of 'totalizing' theory, and scepticism about the unfounded pretensions of the philosophy of history are most plausibly read as references to Marxism. Attacks on the totalitarian tendencies of modernism make more sense in relation to the Stalinist degeneration of communism than they do when applied to liberal or pluralist strands of post-Enlightenment thought. And for intellectuals who regarded Marxism as the best available response to this more liberal Enlightenment, it is not surprising that Marxism's apparent failure is taken as final proof of the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment project and modernism. From this perspective, then, it is not just the prevailing forms of power and rationality, the capitalist rationalization of production or the bureaucratic rationalization of the state, which exemplify the baneful condition of modernity. Marxism too is a part of the problem. East and West are the two faces of modernity. By the same token, only an even more radical intellectual critique promises release from an Enlightenment project with nowhere to hide. Only by enthusiastically embracing the 'other' of western reason can we avoid forever reliving the totalitarian nightmares of modernism.

Developments in art and art theory provide a further context for the formation of postmodernist thought, one which, in terminological terms at least, proves decisive. 'Modern' and its cognates have been used to describe western society and philosophy at least since the Renaissance quarrel of 'ancients and moderns'. In historical periodizations the 'modern period' or 'modernity' usually refers to the period of European history from the Renaissance or about 1500 onwards.⁹ However the term 'modernism' has been restricted to a number of more specialized contexts and, until recently, was largely associated with artistic or literary modernism.¹⁰ Modernism in this sense refers to the self-conscious pursuit of formal innovation and the consequent overturning of artistic convention by a self-conscious 'avant-garde'. Although artistic modernism has clear roots in the nineteenth century, it is usually regarded as being at its height in the early years of the twentieth. In Gaggi's words, 'modernism' is used 'to apply to those major movements and techniques in the various arts that developed early in the century: Cubism, Fauvism, Futurism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Functionalism, atonality, serialization, and stream-of-consciousness'.¹¹ Modernism is thus associated with figures such as Marcel Proust and James Joyce in literature, Arnold Schoenberg in music and Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus School in architecture and design. Among these movements Gaggi also usefully distinguishes between a modernism of 'classicist order', for example with Corbusier and Mondrian, and the 'romantic assertion of the self' in primitivism, expressionism, fauvism and cubism.

In theory at least artistic modernism might seem a potentially limitless project, renewable as each successive avant-garde rebels against the conventions established by a previous generation of innovators. However by around the middle of the twentieth century modernism was betraying clear signs of mortality. In the first place, the pursuit of formal or artistic innovation for its own sake seemed more and more futile, resulting in novelty without genuine artistic or creative significance. By this time, too, the political hopes associated with artistic modernism had dissipated. The revolutionary ambitions of dadaists and surrealists remained unfulfilled; the futurists were discredited by their association with fascism.¹² Artistic modernism belonged increasingly to the establishment. Modernist works adorned the corporate temples of capitalism as well as the private collections of millionaires. As David Harvey puts it, modernism was more readily associated with the worship of 'corporate bureaucratic power and rationality' than with any kind of political radicalism.¹³ The emancipatory role which Frankfurt School theorists such as Adorno and Benjamin, in their different ways, assigned to modern art could no

longer be sustained either.¹⁴ By the late 1950s more and more artists and critics regarded modernism as aesthetically barren and politically compromised, a prestigious and profitable branch of the artistic establishment it had originally set out to shock.

The point of emergence of postmodernism as an artistic movement in reaction to modernism is usually located in the 1960s (though Barry Smart mentions the use, in the 1930s, by Federico de Onis of *postmodernismo* to refer to a 'kind of exhausted and mildly conservative modernism').¹⁵ Architecture was the first medium to exhibit clear postmodernist tendencies. These include eclecticism, ambiguity, wit and a playful allusion to earlier styles in the form of pastiche. As Jameson explains, pastiche is devoid of the serious ulterior motivation of parody; it does not deviate in order to assert a norm. Rather it is 'a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.'¹⁶ What are more sympathetically described as the playful aspects of postmodernism reflect one of its most important characteristics, namely its challenge to the privileged status of 'high' art and culture. In contrast to artistic modernism, which affirms the quasi-religious significance of art, postmodernism rejects any absolute distinction between high and low culture, between art and entertainment. Walter Benjamin's germinal essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is thus an important clue to the understanding of artistic postmodernity. Benjamin discusses the disruption of the 'aura' of the great work of art as a result of the easy availability of copies, produced by techniques of mechanical reproduction such as printing, photography and sound recording.¹⁷ Artistic postmodernism can be seen as the outcome of the tendency Benjamin identifies (even though he foresaw a different outcome), reinforced by the extensive role of communications and information technology in contemporary societies.

Gaggi also identifies 'self-referentiality' and 'epistemological scepticism' as key features of artistic postmodernism, along with a corresponding 'interest in great works from the past that turn in on themselves or otherwise make art itself the subject of art'.¹⁸ Self-referentiality is also apparent in postmodernist art's playful mixing of previous styles in pastiche. There are clear connections between this interest in self-referentiality and poststructuralist critical theory, which diverts attention from the author and the figurative or representational role of the work of art, focusing instead on language or

the work itself as the subject of artistic production.¹⁹ Style is the message as well as the medium of art. There is in this context also an interesting interaction between artistic and scientific developments. Einstein's relativity theory and quantum mechanics, notably in the form of Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle', undermine both notions of absolute space and time and deterministic interpretations of causality. At the same time, realist interpretations of science have come under attack even from analytical philosophers of science such as Kuhn and Feyerabend.²⁰ In art, chance and uncertainty are the basis of 'aleatoric music', whose completion depends on the unscripted, random choices of the performer, as well as of some aspects of dadaism. Artistic and scientific tendencies contribute to both the mood of uncertainty and flux and the greater openness to non-western cultures and worldviews, which are characteristic of postmodernism.

At roughly the same time as the emergence of artistic postmodernism, historical and sociological uses of the term were being canvassed. Smart refers to Toynbee's discussion in 1954 of a 'postmodern age', associated with the decline of the middle classes from around the turn of the century after their long period of hegemony. At about the same time Wright Mills identifies a 'post-modern period', characterized by loss of faith in both of the major ideologies of modernity, liberalism and socialism. There is also 'an increasingly pervasive sense that modern assumptions about the intrinsic relation of reason and freedom can no longer be sustained'.²¹ However, it is not until after 1968 that postmodernism emerges clearly, first as a recognizable intellectual current linking a broader range of philosophical and cultural themes, then as a self-conscious and distinct philosophical position. The Events of 1968 symbolize an important point of transition. The last years of the sixties saw the defeat of the new Left, accelerating disillusionment with Marxism and the frustration, or perhaps diversion, of the utopian aspirations of a generation. These events were also the prelude to the emergence of the multi-centred politics of new social movements. This political context, finally, helps to explain a basic ambivalence running through postmodernism. There is a disjunction between 'a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction', a postmodernism of revolutionary disappointment and a postmodernism of defiant radicalism.²² The critical evaluation of postmodernism is correspondingly ambivalent. Postmodernism is seen either as the last resort of critical intelligence or as a thinly disguised form of neo-conservatism.

In the further development of postmodernism along both of these paths, two separate regions must be distinguished (discussed in the

following two sections). In the first place, there is a radically sceptical, philosophical critique of the intellectual universe of modernism. This tendency targets both the Enlightenment project and some of its most influential continental critics. Postmodernism in this guise rejects all philosophies of history and provides a radical challenge to the most basic categories of western philosophy and metaphysics. But secondly, and of course not unrelatedly, a number of theorists make a connection between postmodern tendencies in art and culture and the state of contemporary, sometimes 'postindustrial', sometimes 'late' or 'advanced capitalist', sometimes 'postmodern' societies. This is primarily a postmodernism of social and cultural theory, identifying postmodernity as a stage of western society. Evidently there are significant tensions between the two approaches. Philosophical postmodernism seems to deny what postmodern social and cultural thought seems to require – a philosophy or, at least, an overall account of history.

The Philosophical Critique of Enlightenment and Modernity

The philosophical critique of modernism and the Enlightenment project has emerged most clearly in France in the aftermath of structuralism and poststructuralism. It is largely the product of a number of intellectuals who, whilst rejecting or at least significantly distancing themselves from Marxism, do not follow the simple return to liberalism of some 'new philosophers' (*nouveaux philosophes*) in the early 1970s.²³ One of the clearest expositions of the philosophical critique of modernity is provided by Jean-François Lyotard (1924–) in his 'report on knowledge', entitled *The Postmodern Condition*. During his career Lyotard has occupied a variety of political positions from Marxism and 'spontaneist' anarchism to his present identification with the 'mood' of postmodernity. In fact, as we shall see, despite its espousal of postmodernist themes his position retains a tangential allegiance to Marxism in the sense that capitalism remains a problem.

Lyotard describes postmodernity as a 'condition' or 'mood' that corresponds to the present stage of 'post-industrial' society. Postmodernity is, therefore, a sign of the obsolescence of modernity. Lyotard defines modernity in terms of the role played in western societies since the Enlightenment by 'metanarratives' for the legitimation of both science and the state. A metanarrative in Lyotard's sense is equivalent to a philosophy of history. The contingent events of histo-

ry are understood in terms of an all-inclusive narrative, which is supposed to encapsulate 'the' meaning of history. The reliance on legitimating metanarratives is intrinsic to 'the choice called the Occident'.²⁴ Lyotard proceeds to list a number of forms which metanarratives can take, for example 'the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth'.²⁵ Clearly these narratives correspond to some of the major currents of post-Enlightenment thought considered so far, including Hegelian idealism, hermeneutics, Marxism and theories of economic progress and modernization. But Lyotard isolates two major types, representing what he sees as the two dominant strands of post-Enlightenment thought. These are what we have identified as the mainstream of the Enlightenment and its most influential critique, firstly the 'narrative of emancipation' demonstrated both in modern science and in the politics of the French Revolution and, secondly, the 'speculative narrative' of Hegelianism and Marxism.²⁶ Both narratives imply that progress is guaranteed, either through the application of reason to production, politics and morality or as a result of the motor force of the dialectic. Both narratives have played an important role not only in modern philosophy but also in the West's self-consciousness as the embodiment of modernity.

The onset of a postmodern mood or condition, then, is marked by a gradual erosion of faith in meta-metanarratives, provoked by far-reaching developments in both society and culture. Lyotard refers to the onset of 'postindustrial society', a notion associated in France mainly with the work of Alain Touraine.²⁷ Postindustrial society depends on a mode of production in which, by contrast with earlier forms of society, knowledge and information technology play the central role. In particular, they are involved in 'the technological production of symbolic goods which shape or transform our representation of human nature and of the external world'.²⁸ Technical knowledge is applied to the production of new commodities, fostering new needs and even cultural values. According to Lyotard post-industrial society is dominated by the 'spirit of performativity', the attempt to reduce society to an efficient system, which guarantees 'the best possible input/output equation'.²⁹ The cultural and intellectual counterpart of this social form is a postmodern culture characterized by 'incredulity toward metanarratives'.³⁰ There is scepticism about all philosophies of history, all claims to foresee the inevitable goal of history and all political ideologies which promise to lead us to that goal. There is even scepticism about the universal validity of the values that define a particular historical future as good or bad. The 'death of God' announced by Nietzsche is closely followed by the

death of history and progress. There is even a loss of faith in anything other than the instrumental effectiveness of western rationality. Paradoxically, this loss of faith is the ultimate outcome of the Enlightenment's own historically novel demand for the rational justification of every claim to truth, rightness and authority. In other words, the Enlightenment project has fallen victim to its own sceptical onslaught against religious dogma, tradition and authority.

If the mood of postmodernity is defined in terms of incredulity towards metanarratives, the politics of postmodernity is radically anti-authoritarian. The sceptical mood of postmodernity is also intolerant of grand projects and ambitious political programmes, which are a prominent feature of modern states and ideologies. Attempts to unify society artificially according to some grand, 'totalizing' theory or ideology are no longer convincing. Even more clearly, the consequences of such attempts have often been disastrous.³¹ The twentieth century has witnessed unlimited global wars, bureaucratically organized genocide and fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism. Totalitarianism, for Lyotard and other postmodernists, is perhaps the quintessential expression of the modernist search for unity and order. Instead, society should be recognized as a 'heterogeneity of language games' or 'institutions in patches'. Far from being susceptible to theorizing in the unifying style of Newtonian mechanics, society consists of 'clouds of sociality' more amenable to a 'pragmatics of language particles'.³² With the demise of totalizing theories of society, the value or even viability of centralized state politics is also brought in doubt. As Hoy puts it, Lyotard questions 'the idea of holding state power rationally accountable for a complex modern society'.³³ The state cannot deal with the irreducible complexity of contemporary society except by resorting to the totalitarian imposition of unity and order.

Lyotard's enthusiasm for diversity even makes him suspect Habermas's 'discourse ethics' of potentially authoritarian implications. Habermas's consensus theory of truth ignores the diversity of language games and seeks to reduce heterogeneity to an oppressive unity. For the mood of postmodernity, 'Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value.'³⁴ Only the diversity and heterogeneity of social and cultural forms can resist the invasive modernist spirit of performativity. It follows that only temporary and local consensus is desirable, only provisional contracts should be sought. The price to be paid for any residue of nostalgia for totalizing theory is 'terror', which is 'the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him'.³⁵ *Artistic modernism*, on the other hand, is an ally in Lyotard's 'war on totality',

but only if it is understood as a constantly renewed challenge to the rules of image and narration, even those rules instituted by earlier modernisms: 'Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.'³⁶ The challenge facing each new avant-garde is how to express through the medium of art something previously inexpressible. At the heart of this conception of art, in other words, is the notion of the sublime as something beyond representation, something 'unpresentable'. Although by definition art cannot represent the unpresentable, modern art can at least 'present the fact that the unpresentable exists'.³⁷ In this way, art should constantly remind us of the limitations of both representational language and calculating reason.

Despite the radical scepticism of these arguments, Lyotard does not endorse ethical or political nihilism. He claims that 'justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect'.³⁸ Far from undermining the value of democracy or justice, which are after all central values of modernity, Lyotard's postmodernism is, on John Keane's reading, a 'vigorous agent of the renewal and deepening of modernity's democratic potential', 'a dialectical intensification of its democratic impulses'.³⁹ The emphasis on the irreducible plurality of language games reinforces the commitment to a diversity of viewpoints and their right to a voice. At the same time, it discourages 'ideological' language games, or in other words 'those which demand their general adoption' and the suppression of all rivals. The sceptical mood of postmodernity makes it more difficult to launch totalizing projects on the basis of claims to universal moral or theoretical truths. Postmodernist principles provide strong arguments for democratic institutions, including 'mechanisms capable of preventing absolute state power' and 'civil associations' beyond the state.⁴⁰ Nor can Lyotard be convicted of producing a universalizing ideology of his own – a universal veto against universalist ideologies – because democracy is founded on the denial of universal reason in a spirit which welcomes 'indeterminacy, controversy and uncertainty'.⁴¹

Not everyone, though, is so sympathetic to the mood of postmodernity. Habermas, for his part, has attacked postmodernism as a new form of conservatism, which has prematurely abandoned the uncompleted project of the Enlightenment. Habermas, in common with other theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, is well aware of the problematic legacy of the Enlightenment project, but he is unwilling to give up its commitment to bring about human emancipation through the application of reason. According to Habermas, postmodernists, like Nietzsche, too easily bid 'farewell to the dialectic of enlightenment', resorting instead to a messianism of art, poetry and

myth beyond reason.⁴² They respond to the one-sided, 'subject-centred' reason of the Enlightenment with an equally one-sided and reductive irrationalism, 'reason's absolute other'.⁴³ Again Heidegger, like Nietzsche an important source of the postmodernist stance, gestures towards 'a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual', but his views are easily reconciled with conservatism and prejudice. Heidegger's 'propositionally contentless speech about Being has, nevertheless, the illocutionary sense of demanding resignation to fate'.⁴⁴ Habermas deals with poststructuralist sources of postmodernism just as harshly. Derrida's deconstructionism falsely universalizes the 'poetic use of language specialized in world-disclosure' and so aestheticizes both language and philosophy.⁴⁵ Foucault's political stance is the 'arbitrary *partisanship* of a criticism that cannot account for its normative foundations'. The critical practice of genealogy is no more than 'the vertical projection of its position', similarly ungrounded.⁴⁶

Habermas proposes instead his own universal pragmatics and discourse ethics as a way of pursuing the Enlightenment project without falling into the problems of the 'philosophy of the subject'. In effect, Habermas thinks that the anti-humanist critique of the philosophy of the subject implies only the abandonment of its 'monological' or individualistic versions. Where a subject-centred reason is based on the monological perspective of the observer it implies, in Rasmussen's words, 'the concept of a completely isolated subject whose relationship to the world can be only instrumentally conceived and not intersubjectively established'.⁴⁷ It is this perspective which underlies both the instrumental, calculating reason of the orthodox Enlightenment and the unattractive face of modernity. By developing the *intersubjective* 'paradigm of mutual understanding' through the theory of communication, Habermas hopes to avoid the impasse of the 'philosophy of consciousness'. It will then be possible to advance further the incomplete project of modernity without falling into the relativist, apolitical and, at least by default, conservative morass of postmodernism.⁴⁸ Habermas is also unconvinced that Lyotard's fears about anything beyond local and provisional consensus are really justified. For Habermas, truth is the outcome of an idealized discourse free from the distortions of power but, as he acknowledges, we can never be certain that the ideal has been fully realized. Genuine consensus is a state that can always only be anticipated. Actual consensus is always provisional and subject to challenge or revision. What is more, without a concept of truth it is not clear how we can challenge an imposed or 'ideological' consensus as something less than truth, and so provoke a renewal of discussion and inquiry.⁴⁹

Jean Baudrillard (1929–), like Lyotard, is a former Marxist who, in his attempts to provide an account of western society, has moved increasingly in the direction of postmodernism. He emphasizes not only novel features of contemporary culture but, more particularly, the transformed role of the cultural sphere in society. His position has analogies both with the Frankfurt School's analyses of the culture industry and the 'situationist' diagnosis of the 'society of the spectacle'.⁵⁰ The transformed state of capitalist society still provides the spur for his theoretical approach, though it is a society no longer amenable to Marxist categories.⁵¹ For Baudrillard, the unprecedented saturation of both economy and society by the 'image' is definitive of contemporary society. In his earlier (still Marxist) works Baudrillard identifies an important shift in the role of commodities in 'consumer society', which he sees not simply as a superstructural outgrowth of capitalism but as 'a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species'.⁵² In this new form of society individuals are indoctrinated into consumption, where previously they were merely made to work: 'Modern man spends less and less of life in production, and more and more in the continuous production and creation of personal needs and of personal well-being. He must constantly be ready to actualize all of his potential, all of his capacity for consumption.'⁵³ To earn pleasure through consumption rather than work is the pre-eminent duty according to the 'fun morality' of consumer society. Advertising, market research, television and other media of communication are designed to produce willing and pliable consumers.

But a fundamental shift in the meaning of consumption is also involved. Within liberal capitalism the production of objects was already determined by monetary profit rather than human need. In Marx's terms, production was determined by the 'exchange value' rather than the 'use value' of things. But in consumer society the object is even more radically detached from use or need, even more radically alienated. The consumption of objects is now determined by their position within a differential system of meanings or 'signs', corresponding to gradations of social status and so on, which are expressed in and reinforced by advertising. According to Baudrillard's evidently structuralist account, 'commodities and objects, like words and once like women, constitute a global, arbitrary, and coherent system of signs, a *cultural* system which substitutes a social order of values and classifications for a contingent world of needs and pleasures, the natural and biological order.'⁵⁴ Marxian political economy is no longer appropriate for the new socio-economic formation, which must henceforth be understood in terms of a 'political

economy of the sign'. Because of the interpenetration of meaningful commodities and the capitalist system of production, culture and economy must henceforth be understood as an indivisible amalgam. In Connor's words, 'it is no longer possible to separate the economic or productive realm from the realms of ideology or culture, since cultural artefacts, images, representation, even feelings and psychic structures have become part of the world of the economic'.⁵⁵

In Baudrillard's later, more apocalyptic writings the image or sign displaces reality altogether. In effect, the arguments of poststructuralism are taken to (or even beyond) their logical conclusion. If, as he takes poststructuralism to imply, there is nothing outside the text, any duality of image and reality, sign and referent, must be superseded. Images can no longer be tied to an external referent or reality. The map, to take Baudrillard's example, no longer corresponds to some real territory but rather precedes and even engenders it: 'Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being of a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory . . . it is the map that engenders the territory . . .'⁵⁶ In Baudrillard's somewhat hyperbolic terms, there is no longer any truth or reality, only universal and inescapable simulations. Soap operas and theme parks are the only reality. Disneyland embodies the 'truth' of America and the American way.⁵⁷ By implication ideology too has become a thing of the past, because ideology is defined as something falling short of undistorted truth, and no such standard is available in hyperreality. The only remaining ideology is the belief in reality or truth itself, the belief that the social spectacle is more than mere performance: 'It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real.'⁵⁸

In 'The Ecstasy of Communication' Baudrillard provides an evocative, if somewhat impressionistic, account of the contemporary world of simulation. It is a world of information and communication, where 'screen and network' are the only ontological essentials and culture is just 'the smooth operational surface of communication'. Television is 'the ultimate and perfect object' for an era, in which everything is invaded by advertising.⁵⁹ We have already seen the essential role played by consumption in this world. But the regime of mass media and isolated consumption does not leave the rest of society unchanged. The very sociality of social life is threatened, to the extent that that depends on meeting and talking with other people: 'we have come to live in less proximity to other human beings, in their presence and discourse, and more under the silent gaze of

deceptive and obedient objects which continuously repeat the same discourse, that of our stupefied (*médusée*) power, of our potential affluence and of our absence from one another.⁶⁰ And not only do we lose access to a genuine public sphere, there is no longer any secrecy either. The distinction between public and private spheres collapses under the weight of information and communication. Because communication makes 'public' what was once secret, it is obscene: 'we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene . . . All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information. That's obscenity.'⁶¹ There is henceforth only the 'promiscuity' of unrestricted connections. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Baudrillard identifies the characteristic pathology of this universe as schizophrenia: Lost amidst 'the immanent promiscuity of all these networks, with their continual connections', the 'schizo' is 'bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion', dominated by 'the feeling of no defence, no retreat', 'a pure screen, a switching centre for all networks of influence'.⁶²

Nor, in this 'cold universe', is there much space for either the 'theatre of the social' or the 'theatre of politics'.⁶³ Society and politics, those two children of modernity, are both either dead or dying. Both society, as the object of conventional sociology, and the collective class agents of socialist ideology are disappearing and, along with them, the relevance of existing models of social analysis and political action. But what are we left with after society, after politics, after the individual? Baudrillard announces the arrival of the 'masses' as counterparts to a world of mass media, isolated consumption and public opinion. This is an 'ensemble', to use Sartre's term, which is collective only in the statistical sense. The masses are the apotheosis of 'seriality'. Like listeners to a radio broadcast or viewers of television, the masses no longer meet or discuss but simply coexist as a dispersed, passive and otherwise unconnected audience.⁶⁴ In a post-modern world dominated by information and communications media, therefore, the masses cannot generate the self-conscious, organized groups required for collective political action. In contrast to the militant collective struggle traditionally expected of the proletariat by Marxism, the resistance of the masses assumes the form of passivity, a stubborn refusal of all incitements to speak, to act or to participate: 'the present argument of the system is to maximize speech, to maximize the production of meaning, of participation. And so the strategic resistance is that of the refusal of meaning and the refusal of speech.'⁶⁵ On Bauman's reading, 'We are now being told that the bovine immobility of the masses is the best form of activity we have, and that their doing nothing is the most excellent

form of resistance.⁶⁶ More sympathetically, Baudrillard's position can be seen as symptomatic of a society in which, as Foucault's writings suggest, human beings are the product of relations of power constituting them not only as objects but also as subjects.⁶⁷ Foucault's diagnosis at least casts doubt on those characteristic ideologies of modernity, liberalism and socialism, which demand 'the liberating rights of the subject'.⁶⁸ Do these demands simply play into the hands of power? Nor, to be fair, does Baudrillard rule out altogether the more active resistance advocated by modern political ideologies. But in the end, Baudrillard's prognosis for traditional politics is not encouraging.

Postmodernity as a Stage of Western Society

Marxism is the dark matter of the postmodernist universe. It exerts greater and more complex effects on postmodernist thought and discourse than are at first apparent. The exit from Marxism by French intellectuals, especially after 1968, is one of the major contributing factors in the emergence of postmodernism, and postmodernists typically see Marxism as a significant manifestation of modernism. Lyotard and Baudrillard both belong to a growing diaspora of formerly Marxist intellectuals in exile from their previous theoretical convictions. However, a number of other theorists attempt to accommodate what they see as the insights of postmodernism within a still recognizably Marxist or, at least, materialist framework. In effect, for theorists like Jameson, Laclau, Mouffe, Lash and Urry, postmodern culture and social relations correspond to contemporary capitalism, just as bourgeois ideology and values were the 'ruling ideas' of nineteenth-century liberal capitalism.⁶⁹ For these theorists, the postmodern is an inescapable feature of contemporary society, which any relevant social theory must deal with. In effect, they are revisionists who agree with other western Marxists, that a substantial rewriting of Marxist theory is necessary. And in fact, although these theorists emphasize different aspects of the transformation of capitalist society, and a number of other important theoretical shifts occur, there are significant analogies with the approach of the Frankfurt School. By the same token, postmodernist Marxism of the kind discussed here is very different from the position of more orthodox Marxists like Calinicos. For him, though postmodern thought and culture do reflect objective features of contemporary capitalism, in the end they must be demystified as ideological diversions and not allowed to distort unduly either theoretical analysis or class struggle.⁷⁰

For a variety of revisionist perspectives, then, capitalism has been fundamentally transformed on a number of dimensions since the nineteenth century. In the first place, the working class is a less homogeneous, less united and seemingly less willing bearer, at least in any foreseeable future, of the revolutionary task allotted to it by orthodox Marxism. Reformist social democracy and trade unionism have remained the favoured avenues of working-class activism and can no longer be dismissed as the 'infantile disorders' of an immature class consciousness. The proletariat's retreat from its allotted role reflects a number of other changes to the capitalist economy. Manufacturing industry has declined relative to the more dispersed and less unionized service sector. Finance and production are increasingly globalized, removing power from national labour movements and even national governments. Ownership has been dispersed through joint stock companies. The 'managerial revolution' has led to a growing gap between ownership and control of the production process. A further set of changes have resulted from technological innovations made possible by the earlier stages of capitalism. Perhaps most important are the rise of mechanized and later electronic mass media and the information and communications revolutions brought about by computerization. These technological changes have had a profound impact in a number of areas. The work process has been transformed, demanding new kinds of technical expertise from the workforce whilst deskilling many traditional occupations. Leisure and consumption have been progressively revolutionized by newspapers, film, television, sound reproduction, computers, multimedia technology and the 'information superhighway'.⁷¹

The rapid development of electronic technologies of information processing and communications is inseparable from other important cultural shifts. The expansion of electronic mass media has allowed an unprecedented saturation of everyday life with the imagery of advertising. This, in conjunction with the development of more flexible, 'post-Fordist' processes of production, has encouraged new patterns of consumption.⁷² Consumption is increasingly an opportunity to assert difference rather than equal social status. Consumers purchase a 'lifestyle', 'image' or 'identity', which has been conceived by product designers, promoted by advertising consultants and supplied by a flexible production process. The fragmentation of production, class membership and consumption is confirmed in the area of politics. In contrast to the monolithic collective agents and norms of solidarity characteristic of socialist politics, there has emerged a multiplicity of struggles, regions of conflict, issues and modes of political action. A plurality of 'new social movements' or 'subject positions'

contribute to an irreducibly pluralist politics of resistance.⁷³ The movements in question include women, peace activists, environmentalists and 'greens', lesbians and gays, anti-racists, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, urban civil rights and citizenship campaigns.

Marxist theorists have discussed these social and cultural transformations in terms of theories of 'advanced' or 'late' capitalism.⁷⁴ Alain Touraine describes basically similar features of contemporary society as signs of a transition from 'industrial' to 'postindustrial' society. By choosing this terminology Touraine both signals his distance from Marxism, as appropriate only to the industrial stage of capitalism, and points to what he regards as the substantial similarities between capitalism and communism as variants of industrial society.⁷⁵ Frederic Jameson (1934-) is closer to the first group of theorists. Although he takes very seriously the various ways in which western society has been transformed, he continues to understand it as a variant of capitalism and so maintains his allegiance to Marxism. Postmodernism is 'the cultural logic of late capitalism': 'postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order (the rumor about which, under the name of "postindustrial society", ran through the media a few years ago), but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself.'⁷⁶ Jameson adapts Ernest Mandel's three-stage model of capitalist development, which relates each stage of capitalism to the dominance of a particular technology. Market capitalism (analysed by Marx) is the stage of steam-driven mechanization and, in the cultural realm, artistic realism. Monopoly or imperialist capitalism (described by Lenin and Luxemburg) is the stage of electrical power, the internal combustion engine and artistic modernism. Finally comes the gradual emergence, from the 1950s in the area of technology and from the 1960s in the area of culture, of 'consumer', 'late' or 'multinational capitalism'. The dominant technologies of this stage are electronics and nuclear power. But this stage of capitalism also has its own 'dominant cultural logic', reflected in the prominence of both cultural and intellectual currents of postmodernism.⁷⁷

The cultural logic of late capitalism has two aspects. In the first place, the cultural forms corresponding to this stage of society have familiar postmodern features. Postmodernism in the artistic sphere involves the 'effacement . . . of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and the so-called mass or commercial culture' and the integration of 'aesthetic production' into commodity production.⁷⁸ Jameson also notes a declining ability to think historically and 'the disappearance of master narratives'.⁷⁹ We are increasingly isolated from our own histories, 'condemned to seek History by

way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach'.⁸⁰ We experience history through theme parks and TV 'mini-series' rather than the historic projects of political movements or ideologies. But the distinctiveness of the contemporary phase of capitalism does not consist only in the prevalence of postmodern cultural themes. A second aspect of the cultural logic of late capitalism is a new relationship between culture and the rest of the social totality. Postmodernism is not just a new cultural form but a 'cultural dominant', which stands in a novel relationship to the economic system. Culture is both less separate and more pervasive. Postmodern culture invades society. Not only is consumption increasingly defined in cultural terms, but culture itself has also been commodified to an unprecedented extent. In the age of mechanical reproduction works of art are more and more subject to market forces. At the same time, commodities in general are advertised as works of art. The consumer is encouraged to fashion for himself a unique identity through individualized acts of consumption, which are made to resemble the creative activity of the artist. The interpenetration of society and culture means both the 'dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture' and the 'prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm'.⁸¹

An important consequence of the distinctive cultural logic of late capitalism is the impossibility of maintaining an effective 'critical distance' from its institutions and values. In effect, here, Jameson incorporates the sceptical conclusions of poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophy, which disqualify Enlightenment attempts to provide objective rational foundations for moral and political values. The universal validity once claimed by such moralizing discourses as Marxism and liberalism is no longer sustainable. Jameson wishes to defend Marxist theory as a critical discourse without pretensions to absolute truth. Marxism remains a 'master discourse', but on terms that remove its absolute status. Marxism is a 'single great collective story' and 'untranscendable horizon', which subsumes other approaches; but its 'imperative to totalise' may not be feasible. Marxism is not the 'affirmation of some place of truth' but 'a perspective and a method whereby the "false" and the ideological can be unmasked and made visible'.⁸² The role of the Marxist literary critic is 'to engage in a symptomatic analysis that reveals and dismantles the covert ideological content of literary texts'.⁸³ However, Jameson is less clear about the practical politics of such a project. He is sceptical of an unmediated pluralism of social movements or subject positions which, he claims, reflects not the disappearance of classes but merely the illusion thereof.⁸⁴ We still need a 'genuine' or 'totalising' politics

that takes in the economic or systemic level, and Jameson is still prepared to name multinational capital and its agents as 'enemy'. But his more constructive remarks are unfortunately vague. Possible strategies would involve 'turning the image against itself' and a 'cognitive mapping' of the space of contemporary capitalism, revealing the need for a 'multilevel strategy'.⁸⁵

Somewhat closer to the anti- or post-Marxist assumptions of philosophical postmodernism are a number of sociologists who see postmodernity as an identifiable stage of society that either has or is destined to succeed modernity, but who see no particular connection between postmodernity and Marx's vision of communism. The sociological critique of modernity and modernization is closer to the philosophical critique of the Enlightenment project than it is to Marxism. According to Zygmunt Bauman (1925–) Marxism and communism are modernity in its purest form. Communism takes even further the limited conception of rationality manifest in the modernization of the West. In comparison to capitalism (for Weber already the 'rationally calculated pursuit of profit'), communism promises to abolish disruptive economic cycles of boom and recession. It promises to replace the chaos of market forces and ruthless competition with planning, to replace politics and class conflict with routine administration in the interests of the needs of the whole community. As Bauman puts it, 'Communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture; modernity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable.'⁸⁶ The Soviet Union, China, Cuba and other communist countries were initially successful in their 'modernizing' programmes of primary industrialization, electrification, education and health care.⁸⁷

By contrast, Bauman describes an emergent *postmodernity* in positive terms, as a 'fully-fledged comprehensive and viable type of social system' in which consumer satisfaction plays a particularly important role.⁸⁸ Anthony Giddens too regards postmodernity less as a condition to be endured than as a political ideal. Giddens's perspective has affinities with other theories influenced by the Frankfurt School tradition of social theory. Like John Keane and Claus Offe, for example, he identifies basic contradictions at the heart of the systems of rationality which structure contemporary societies. These contradictions are the by-product of what Barry Smart calls 'the modern quest for order': 'The idea of order as a task, as a practice, as a condition to be reflected upon, preserved and nurtured is intrinsic to modernity.' But 'ordering interventions seem to promote disorders.'⁸⁹ The attempt to impose order on society inevitably generates resistance or, at the extreme, the irruption of disorder. Giddens emphasizes the close

interdependence between the ordering impulse of modernity and academic sociology. Sociology emerges as a distinct discipline alongside the characteristic institutions of modern society and is, in Giddens's terms, a medium for the reflexivity of society in the service of its quest for order. Sociology contributes to the self-knowledge of society and hence furthers its potential for self-control and transformation.⁹⁰

Logically, then, the crisis of modernity implies both a potential crisis for 'modern' sociology and the possibility of a postmodern approach to the study of society. Giddens argues for a number of changes. For example, as a result of the globalization of finance, production and consumption, communications, culture and so on, the nation-state is no longer an adequate focus for sociological research. Both global and 'micro-social' levels of analysis have been unduly neglected. The prominence of social movements, with the characteristic motto of 'think globally, act locally', is again relevant here. Sociology and theories of development have traditionally been based on the Eurocentric assumption, that western society is the most modern or advanced and that other societies must gradually evolve along the same path. This assumption also needs to be rethought. Developing a similar perspective, Barry Smart argues for a less exclusionary and more imaginative sociology. The perspectives of a diversity of cultures, including those of traditional and religious societies, should be incorporated into a sociology based less on 'modern reason' and more on '*postmodern imagination*'.⁹¹ In other words, the disruption of the philosophical assumptions of modernity implies a fundamental recasting of its social scientific self-image as well, if not, as with Baudrillard, the complete abandonment of both sociology and 'society'.

Politics of Difference and Ethics of the Other

Postmodernism, then, involves a number of divergent currents of thought and a number of disciplinary regions. Its political and intellectual postures range from defiant radicalism to an ironic and, some would say, complacent detachment. Postmodernists provide a number of provocative (if occasionally hyperbolic) descriptions of contemporary western culture and society, which serve to undermine conventional styles of political action. They are most frequently criticized for their relentless negativism and scepticism, their refusal to offer more positive moral or political recommendations. However,

even at the level of scepticism, the value of the postmodernist critique should not be underestimated. The suspicion that this critique touches sensitive spots is confirmed, in the aftermath of the Cold War, by postmodernism's recent 'elevation', in place of communism, to the 'other' of western rationality and freedom, the target of ritualized and unthinking abuse as often as serious engagement. At the very least, the postmodern diagnosis is a salutary reminder of the darker episodes of western history. Twentieth-century totalitarianisms are only the most striking proof of the dangers inherent in modernity. The postmodern mood also reflects a pervasive anxiety, a sense of 'ontological insecurity' (in Giddens's phrase), and widespread dissatisfaction with bureaucratized capitalist society, even if bureaucratic socialism is not regarded as an alternative either. The aftershocks of colonialism and decolonization as well as the resurgence of powerful religious fundamentalisms also tug at the philosophical roots of western self-assurance. Postmodernity may be a useful concept for an understanding of contemporary society and culture, even if the associated philosophical position is not adopted.

In fact, the negative, sceptical stance of postmodernism is most frequently taken to have anti-authoritarian implications. Postmodernists disrupt all forms of discourse (and, of course, not only political discourse) which, however secretly, promote the terroristic suppression of diversity or difference. Derridean deconstruction challenges the 'violent hierarchies' of western reason, and postmodernists, too, oppose any denial of the 'other', any reduction of difference to a devalued otherness for the sake of the security of our own identity. Far from producing some new and grandly unifying theory or inciting organized struggle against the 'system', postmodernists seek to entrench the multiplicity of discourses, knowledges, cultures, struggles and voices. They challenge the claims of all leaders, particularly leaders who claim to be experts or intellectuals, even those who claim to be experts in resistance or Marxist revolution. They even impugn intellectuals like Habermas for claiming authority on the conditions of democratic will formation or 'undistorted communication'. In this respect postmodernists are closer to earlier members of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno, whose 'negative dialectics' resisted the temptations of positive thinking as tenaciously as anyone could.

The critical impetus of postmodernist ideas has found particular resonance in a number of discourses or perspectives previously marginalized within (albeit, of course, not only within) western thought. Especially productive has been an interaction between postmodernism and feminism, in which the writings of Lacan and Derrida have probably been most influential. The deconstructive challenge to all

'hierarchized dichotomies' is applied to the opposition between woman and man, masculine and feminine. Where Simone de Beauvoir remains at least partially under the spell of this dichotomy, retaining traces of a negative view of woman as 'lack' or as the 'other' of man, postmodern feminism celebrates unreservedly the specificity and difference of woman. But the challenge is even more radical than that. Postmodernist doubts about the status of philosophy as an autonomous, self-contained and rigorously rational enterprise provide an opening for feminist critique at the most fundamental level. A number of postmodernist feminists suggest, that the 'malestream' of western philosophy depends on an originary exclusion of woman or the feminine. Crucially, then, it is not only the status of women that is in question. The feminist concern with the position of women interacts with a philosophical critique which, if it can be sustained, demands a far-reaching recasting of western reason.

Grosz expresses the radical nature of the postmodern feminist challenge with some force: 'Destabilising existing forms of writing and knowing is a precondition for the positive assertion of femininity. Without the fissuring of existing intellectual categories and textual norms, there is simply no conceptual space available for women's positive self-representations.'⁹² Grosz discusses three French feminists who, in their different ways, contribute to the destabilizing of existing discursive categories and norms. Perhaps most approachably, Michèle Le Doeuff (1948-) deconstructs the 'imaginary' of western philosophy.⁹³ Although this imaginary turns out to be male or masculine in significant ways, Le Doeuff's interests are wide-ranging. In particular, she points to the way that the institutionalization of philosophy has always involved a certain relationship between power and knowledge. The actual dependence of philosophical argument on officially excluded subjects and forms of discourse is shown in its reliance on metaphors, images or literary figures drawn from these marginalized domains. These elements of a philosophical imaginary 'both reveal and conceal philosophy's conditions of production and self-justification'.⁹⁴ Crucially for the deconstructive case, the philosophical text's imaginary is not just an incidental accompaniment, a lapse from a more rigorous train of argument. Rather the philosophical imaginary is inseparable from the discursive strategies officially recognized within the tradition. In terms of feminist strategy, 'Le Doeuff affirms the position of images, models and metaphors of femininity in masculinist philosophies, seeing them as points of tension and contradiction, points which can illuminate what is at stake in various philosophical positions.'⁹⁵ A persuasive example of this strategy is Le Doeuff's discussion of Bacon's early formulation of the

project of modern science in terms of the relationship between a masterful science and womanly nature.⁹⁶

More exclusively feminist in their concerns, Julia Kristeva (1941–) and Luce Irigaray (1930–) pursue a parallel deconstruction of knowledges and discourses revealed to be covertly male or masculinist in their deepest assumptions and constitution. Both theorists attempt to conceive women in their irreducible difference. They theorize woman from a woman's point of view in order to discover a 'feminine feminine', and so overcome a long tradition of regarding woman as lack, as the deficient and subordinate other of man.⁹⁷ Although Kristeva's early work was influenced by Althusser, the influence of Derrida is apparent in her deconstructive reading of texts. These readings seek to uncover the repressed desires of the 'maternal', to recover the repressed sex of woman: 'She asserts the play of sexual differentiation running within and between all texts, and overflowing their intentions, which always leaves ineradicable, traceable residues in texts which make these texts amenable to different readings and to the play of sexual pleasures they contain.'⁹⁸ In terms derived from Lacan's reading of Freud, Kristeva explores the interplay between the 'pre-symbolic' or 'semiotic' disorder of the unconscious and the 'symbolic' realm of order, which is aligned with consciousness and explicit meaning. The symbolic order incorporates the law of the father, male power and phallocentrism and is 'founded on the repression of the imaginary'.⁹⁹ On the other hand, the semiotic realm, which is repressed when the subject enters the order of language at the Oedipal stage, is associated with the mother and woman as well as with the chaotic psychic pleasures and energies of the pre-Oedipal child.

The subject is normally constituted within the dynamic of a repressive hierarchy of symbolic and semiotic, male order and systematically repressed female imaginary. For Kristeva, on the other hand, 'a liberated person is someone able to acknowledge "the play of semiotic and Symbolic" – the continual vacillation between disorder and order.'¹⁰⁰ This interplay reflects the actual but denied interdependence of symbolic and semiotic: 'The symbolic provides the semiotic with its only possibilities of expression; in turn, the semiotic provides the symbolic with its raw materials and its energetic impetus.' The semiotic is creatively disruptive when it 'erupts and overflows its symbolic boundaries in certain "privileged" moments of "rupture, renovation and revolution"', which Kristeva associates with 'madness, holiness and poetry'.¹⁰¹ In parallel terms, Hélène Cixous (1937–) contrasts masculine 'literature' with a feminine 'writing' of movement, subversion and transformation. Feminine writing is more

closely aligned with desire than with reason, and 'desire, not reason, is the means to escape the limiting concepts of traditional western thought'.¹⁰²

Luce Irigaray works as a psychoanalyst and philosopher who seeks to liberate 'the feminine from male philosophical thought'.¹⁰³ Irigaray is critical of the ways in which psychoanalysis and philosophy universalize an essentially male representation of humanity. Because language, society and culture are all constituted on the basis of this false universalization of male perspectives, interests and desires, women can only gain full representation by means of thoroughgoing social reconstruction. In Grosz's words:

The feminine has thus far functioned in muted, suppressed or unheard ways, obscured by the domination and pseudo-representation of the masculine... For women to be accorded autonomy as women, the entire social fabric requires major reorganisation: only *half* the possibilities, the alternatives, world-views, interests (at best) gain social expression or recognition.¹⁰⁴

In particular, society and culture must recognize their debt to the 'mother'. Like the child who forgets what it owes to its mother, language and society have repressed the feminine in their original constitution as an essentially masculine order. Important strategies for Irigaray's contestation of this order are interrelated explorations of language and the specific and plural sexualities of women.¹⁰⁵ Woman should be understood not in Freud's negative terms of 'penis envy' or the absence of the phallus, but more positively as the presence of the 'two lips' of the vulva. The suppression of woman as an irreducibly distinct sex has meant that sexual relationships have existed not as the 'meeting of sexually different subjects', but as the insipid encounter between a male subject and his reflection in woman. The recognition of genuine sexual difference, on the other hand, would inaugurate a completely different kind of sexual relationship: 'When each sex acknowledges the radical otherness of the other, then mutually rewarding exchanges between them become possible'.¹⁰⁶ Similarly productive exchanges would become possible in other non-sexual forms of sociality, for example in intellectual or ethical relationships.

Other currents of contemporary political thought address identifiably postmodern themes. Iris Marion Young challenges the ideal of community in socialist and some feminist thought. The communitarian desire for 'mutual identification in social relations' is a desire she connects with sectarianism, chauvinism and even racism. The desire for unity, wholeness and identity, here as elsewhere in the postmodernist universe, 'generates borders, dichotomies, and exclusions'.¹⁰⁷

The celebration of otherness and difference, on the other hand, is a potential antidote to these effects of closure and, indeed, an important theme for many contemporary feminists.¹⁰⁸ In analogous terms, Edward Said describes how colonialism devalues other cultures as inferior reflections of western civilization. Subordinated or marginalized groups and cultures can be represented within the discursive regime of colonialism only in relation to western norms. Discourses of resistance against this regime must appeal to a common 'ethico-discursive principle', namely 'the right of formerly un- or misrepresented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined, politically and intellectually, as normally excluding them, usurping their signifying and representing functions, overriding their historical reality'.¹⁰⁹

Taking the deconstructionist strategy one step further, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha question even the characteristically post-modern opposition between excluding subject or identity and marginalized other. They argue 'the need for the careful deconstruction of the very structures of dominant and marginal', in the belief that 'such oppositional models themselves may derive from and reproduce colonial structures of thought – so that to proclaim oneself as a marginalized or silenced people is implicitly to accept and to internalize the condition of marginality.' In fact, Said too aims to focus 'not on the exterior, countervailing strength of a marginal position, but on the internal contradictions within dominant western forms of knowledge'.¹¹⁰ Resistance to a particular order of power and discourse struggles, possibly in vain, to avoid defining itself in terms which derive from and so perhaps reinforce that order. Movements of homosexuals (gays or lesbians), indigenous and Black people all struggle on the basis of identities originating in the discourse of an oppressor. The work of Kristeva and Irigaray confirms the similar position of women. By implication, we should be suspicious of any 'politics of identity' which seeks to contain the 'flux' or 'flight' of resistance within a fixed and almost certainly compromised identity.¹¹¹

For some critics, though, postmodernism is too inclined to identify with the pure intention rather than the unavoidably compromised reality of resistance. Like anarchism, postmodernism is accused of celebrating the pure moment of rebellion or critique at the expense of the necessarily untidy task of constructing a new political order – an order which, perhaps inevitably, will institute an exclusionary regime of its own. This accusation is reinforced by the fact that the positive political agenda of postmodernism remain unclear. How can post-modernists provide an account of justice without violating their own

austere critical principles? In the absence of some account of justice we are left with few options. We may be politically engaged on behalf of our friends, but then we forget our commitment to the 'other', to what is not friendly or familiar or like us. In any case, the postmodernist critique seems to depend on an unarticulated normative framework of its own. As Connor remarks, 'when inspected closely, it becomes apparent that the postmodern critique of unjust and oppressive systems of universality implicitly depends for its force upon the assumption of the universal right of all not to be treated unjustly and oppressively.'¹¹² If some equivalent assumption is not made, then how can universalism or, for that matter, the exclusion and domination of others be condemned? In the absence of some such principle obvious difficulties face an unqualified politics of difference. A viable politics cannot be deduced from the simple denial of universality or an unqualified respect for difference.¹¹³ Not all cultures, religions and worldviews can be respected simultaneously, when they make absolute and incompatible political demands of their own. It is not only Enlightenment universalism that devalues other perspectives. Religious, national and ethnic identities may be just as exclusive and oppressive. Surely fundamentalists (of whatever variety) have more in common with one another than with postmodern advocates of plurality and difference. Postmodernism may not be as far from a conventionally liberal pluralism as some postmodernists suggest. Of course, Rorty for one is happy to admit the connection.¹¹⁴

Silvio Gaggi even sees dangers in the rigorously negative stance of postmodernism – what Allan Megill calls its 'perpetual holding operation'.¹¹⁵ On the one hand, 'the fact that it can *only* be subversive and provides no grounds for arguing in favor of any ethical, social, or political system, progressive, reactionary, or otherwise, is a severe limitation on its potential for aiding in social change.'¹¹⁶ Postmodernism bars itself from systematic and constructive involvement in emancipatory politics and so, in effect, helps to disarm opponents of existing regimes of power. This supports Eagleton's view that postmodernism and poststructuralism encourage an escape from politics and amount to 'conservatism by default'.¹¹⁷ To see no good reason for active political engagement leads to acceptance of the status quo. After all, the self-styled (though by no means conventional) conservative Michael Oakeshott also directs his attack on 'rationalism in politics' against both of the main parties of modernity. He berates not only 'doctrinaire liberal' advocates of universal human rights and liberties but also 'left Hegelian' Marxist protagonists of the 'upstart' classes.¹¹⁸ Even worse, Gaggi suggests, postmodernist scepticism effectively erases the distinction between power and justice and so

offers intellectual solace to fascism. Mussolini was aware of the connection: 'From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are merely fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.'¹¹⁹

Connor, too, is inclined to question the motives behind the postmodernist stance, seeing it as a last-ditch effort by intellectuals to hold on to their positions of privilege in the face of the sceptical onslaught of poststructuralism. The postmodernist bar on explicit criteria of normative critique is just one last desperate ploy by predominantly male critical intellectuals who, in the face of the increasing influence of feminist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic and other forms of critique, seek to retain their traditional monopoly on intellectual opposition. As Hebdige puts it:

Rather than surrender mastery of the field, the critics who promulgate the line that we are living at the end of everything (and are *all* these critics men?) make one last leap and resolve to take it all – judgement, history, politics, aesthetics, value – out of the window with them . . . The implication seems to be that if they cannot sit at the top of Plato's pyramid, then there shall be no pyramid at all.¹²⁰

Postmodernism is part of 'an intellectual-discursive process which simultaneously multiplies critical options and binds them into recognizable and disseminable forms'.¹²¹ Connor's hostile reading is supported by an intellectual sociology of postmodernist culture. Why has postmodernism recently become so popular among intellectuals and academics and why particularly in certain fields? On this view, postmodernism's recognition of difference and the sublime in fact belongs to a strategy of recuperation, which names the unnameable only to bring it more effectively under control.

Said's discussion of the relationship between postmodernism and interdisciplinarity intimates a more sympathetic intellectual sociology of postmodernism. He argues that the present academic organization of disciplinary specializations has deeply conservative implications in the 'era of Reagan'. Postmodernism can be understood as a new way of conceiving the relationship between intellectual disciplines, challenging conventional academic boundaries, for example between literature and philosophy. Postmodernism has also become a topic of discussion within a number of different disciplines: in art, art theory and criticism, cultural studies, communication theory, philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology and geography among others. What Habermas sees as regression behind modernity's necessary differentiation of scientific, moral and aesthet-

ic judgement, Said evaluates more positively. By reproblematising the divisions between faculties of judgement postmodernism reintegrates the aesthetic dimension into life and, perhaps, fulfils Schiller's earlier hopes for a playfully creative resolution of the conflict and alienation characteristic of modern subjectivity.¹²²

Evidently, postmodernism is now one protagonist in an intellectual scene dominated by radically opposed positions, which do not always pay close attention to the arguments of the other side. In a different spirit, Stephen K. White has recently proposed a suggestive synthesis of postmodernism with something more like a continuation of the Enlightenment project. He seeks to reconcile central ideas of Heidegger, who is an important source of postmodernist themes, with those of Habermas, who is the most influential continental proponent of the 'incomplete project' of modernity. According to White, an adequate political response to the postmodern problematic requires both an ethic of 'responsibility to act' and an ethic of 'responsibility to otherness'. Responsibility to act relates to pragmatic concerns of practical or political effectiveness. It has been the predominant concern of western reason. But as a number of critics of Enlightenment and modernity, from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Horkheimer and Adorno, have emphasized, 'This modern orientation toward a reason aimed at enhancing human will and control has no limits.'¹²³ Although it has delivered great power over nature and has permitted a dramatic increase in the complexity of human societies, it is vitiated by a systematic inability to recognize or respect otherness. By contrast, both poststructuralism and postmodernism point stubbornly to what is suppressed or neglected as a result of modern reason's 'will to mastery'. Foucault's genealogies 'incite the experience of discord or discrepancy between the social construction of self, truth and rationality and that which does not fit neatly within their folds'. Postmodernist strategies 'bear witness' to the dissonance at the heart of western reason and so show 'responsibility to otherness'.¹²⁴

According to White, Heidegger is the thinker who shows greatest insight into responsibility to otherness and the 'world-disclosing' as opposed to 'action-coordinating' dimension of language to which it corresponds.¹²⁵ He understands that genuine community depends on a 'radical willingness to hear and experience the difference of the other'. Above all Heidegger's concept of 'nearness' (*Nähe*) embodies recognition of the other in its otherness.¹²⁶ Nearness involves a 'playing back and forth in relation to the other', which brings it closer at the same time as it lets it be in its otherness: 'Attentive concern for otherness means that the gesture of nearing, bringing into one's presence, into one's world, must always be complemented by a letting

go, an allowance of distance, a letting be in absence, thus bearing witness to our own limits, our own finitude.¹²⁷ Our creative 'bringing into presence' or 'disclosure' of the world through language must not displace that sense of otherness or absence, from which presence emerges and to which it must finally be allowed to return.¹²⁸ However, though Heidegger shows a strong sense of responsibility to otherness, his sense of 'responsibility to act' is sadly undeveloped. He is unable to conceptualize 'the normative tension and interconnection between actors in social and political life'.¹²⁹ He is contemptuous of the everyday conflicts and compromises of politics. His critique of modernity is 'totalistic', because it provides no guidelines for its transcendence, only a vague and potentially authoritarian longing for what is to come (*das Kommende*). Postmodernism's understanding of responsibility to act remains undeveloped because of a prevailing mood of 'impertinence', a deep-seated tendency to prefer deconstructive critique to constructive engagement. According to White's diagnosis, 'an over-emphasis on disruption and impertinence creates for postmodern thinking a momentum that threatens to enervate the sense of responsibility to otherness, subtly substituting for it an implicit celebration of the impertinent subject who shows his or her virtuosity in deconstructing whatever unity comes along.'¹³⁰

White's proposed synthesis in effect combines Habermas's discourse ethics with a suitably refreshed Heideggerianism. Discourse ethics provides, for White, a persuasive account of our responsibility to act. But Habermas is still too complacent about our responsibility to otherness, persisting – unjustifiably, according to White – 'in the belief that the problem of otherness can be adequately settled' within his own theoretical framework.¹³¹ White garners from a variety of poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers a number of clues for the required reconstruction of moral and political thought. Derrida usefully distinguishes a responsibility 'to' the particular other from the more generalized responsibility 'before' others, which is conventionally embodied in law and morality. Close to Heidegger's conception of 'closeness' (*Nähe*) is the importance Derrida accords to friendship, conceived in Kantian terms as an 'unstable equilibrium' of love and respect, attraction and repulsion.¹³² Lyotard's 'sublime of everyday life' and Foucault and Rorty's approval of an uncontrolling 'curiosity' point similarly to an attitude of unpossessive care towards others. Feminism, finally, is an important source of insights. Carol Gilligan's discussion of a feminine 'ethic of care', Sara Ruddick's notion of a non-possessive attitude of 'holding' rather than 'grasping' and Seyla Benhabib's emphasis on the 'concrete' rather than 'generalised other' all provide clues.¹³³ Overall, according to White, we

should positively delight in difference without tolerating those who would suppress otherness. The state should actively foster a diversity of communities or associations without succumbing to paternalism. The norms required for contemporary society can be derived from a Habermasian discourse ethic reinforced by more whole-hearted commitment to otherness.

Whatever might be thought of White's attempt to reconcile Habermas's nuanced version of Enlightenment rationalism with postmodern sensibility, responsibility to act with responsibility to otherness, it serves to highlight the point that postmodernism can only be understood as an episode within the post-Enlightenment tradition of western philosophy it is so eager to criticize and deconstruct. The debate between Habermasian critical theory and postmodernism is characteristic of the current state of this tradition. It may not be the most important debate, and it may turn out to have suggested false directions for future work. Certainly, to hope for an eventual reconciliation of the critical insights of postmodernism with other major currents of post-Enlightenment thought is to conceive the quarrel of modernity and postmodernity in terms closer to Habermas's incomplete project of Enlightenment. It can hardly be denied, too, that postmodernism presents a serious challenge to any remaining faith that some combination of reason and politics can be welded into a reliable instrument for the mastery of history in the interest of humanity. Postmodernists may be right in thinking that this faith is no longer plausible. The benefits of this kind of politics have been too meagre and the disasters too calamitous to inspire much confidence. We are left with an uncomfortable dilemma. It is hard to deny that there is continuing need for effective principles of political engagement and critique, if only for the sake of those who have scarcely begun to benefit from the achievements of modernity. On the other hand, this is to assume that modernity does convey some benefit, and one that is not cancelled by a greater loss. Political engagement is unavoidable, its value inevitably in doubt.