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Postmodernism as the sociocultural deconstruction of modernity

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University of New Hampshire, 1991

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**POSTMODERNISM AS THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DECONSTRUCTION
OF MODERNITY**

BY

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DISSERTATION

**Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy
in
Sociology**

May, 1991

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Steven C. Ward

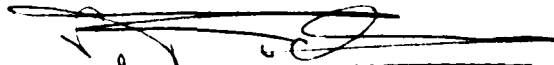
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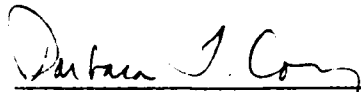
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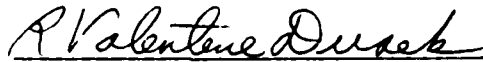
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DEDICATION

To Karen

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ABSTRACT

POSTMODERNISM AS THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DECONSTRUCTION
OF MODERNITY

by

Steven C. Ward
University of New Hampshire, May, 1991

This work seeks to provide a description of the theoretical positions and cultural expressions of postmodernism and to provide a sociological critique of its conclusions. The work uses the writings of the Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, and Baudrillard, as well as arguments in neo-pop art and postmodern architecture, as representatives of the postmodern position on the issues of referentiality, subjectivity, and rationality. Postmodernism is treated as a skeptical theoretical and cultural system which levels all ideational distinctions between belief and knowledge and truth and rhetoric. This work argues that a social or constructivist epistemology can provide a different way of approaching the issues of knowledge and truth, which avoids postmodernism's skeptical and nihilistic conclusions. Postmodernism is seen as making sociological arguments against traditional philosophical distinctions, but drawing idealistic conclusions about the end of all meaning. Using the Neo-Durkheimians orientation towards cognitive style and the constructivist position in the sociology of scientific

scientific knowledge as starting points, it is argued that while pure philosophical distinctions between true and false and knowledge and belief cannot be made, these distinctions remain strong and powerful social distinctions. These distinctions serve to foster group cohesion and identity. Finally, this work examines how postmodernism can be seen as the outcome of the social organization of specific culture-producing and culture-consuming groups in contemporary society.

CHAPTER I

GENERAL INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ON POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is a term that is "at once fashionable yet irritatingly elusive to define."¹ Since the early nineties, when the term first came into widespread use, it has been employed to describe everything from television commercials to post-structuralist philosophy. Furthermore, this eclectic, ill-defined, and all-encompassing term has been surrounded by a virtual sea of controversy, debate, and confrontation. Coalitions have formed, both for and against, each hurling accusations against the other. Critics see it as announcing the end of all meaning and of collapsing all distinctions between belief and knowledge, science and literature, authenticity and fakery, and ultimately, right and wrong. For these critics, postmodernism forbids us from making any type of truth or validity claim. It is essentially a skeptical philosophical system which prohibits us from saying anything definitive about the world. For them, the postmodern movement leads us into an inescapable trap of cynicism and nihilism. On the other hand, proponents claim it marks an end to the hegemonic, confining, and inaccurate philosophical and cultural system of modernity. As such, it is a liberating or inevitable movement in the

¹ Mike Featherstone, "In Pursuit of the Postmodern: An Introduction," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5, 1988, p. 195 (pp. 195-215).

history of philosophy and culture.

With few exceptions, previous discussions of postmodernism have treated it as a purely cultural phenomenon: They have generally failed to connect postmodernism to the broader social context. In this dissertation, we seek to explore the issue of postmodernism from a sociology of knowledge/culture perspective. This work has three primary goals: (1) To provide a description of a general postmodern position or framework. (2) To discuss an alternative to the idealism-based epistemological conclusions of postmodern thought. (3) To illustrate how postmodernism can be seen from within the confines of the organization of social groups. With regard to the first point, we seek to explore some of the important theoretical and cultural manifestations of postmodernism. We will use the term "postmodern" to refer to a series of theoretical and practical changes in such diverse realms as linguistics, philosophy, history, architecture, and art. However, our purpose is not just to provide a description of the postmodern position or framework. We will also discuss what a "social" or "constructivist" epistemology can contribute to the often nihilistic conclusions drawn by some postmodernist philosophers.² The majority of discussions on postmodernism treat it as only an issue of philosophy or epistemology. In

² For one definition of social epistemology, cf. Steve Fuller, Social Epistemology (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

other words, they see postmodernism as either threatening or enhancing our ability to ascertain and describe the "way things really are." Our point of departure is different. In this work, postmodernism will not be seen as either a "correct" or an "incorrect" way of perceiving the world or of acting in the world, but as a "social construct." As such, it is not a matter of truth or lie, but of the ability of a philosophical/cultural movement to define and construct reality, or the lack of reality in the case of postmodernism. Finally, we seek to show how postmodernism can be viewed as a product of social organization. Specifically, we seek to illustrate how postmodernism can be seen as part of the social organization of knowledge producing and cultural-consuming communities.

Before turning to an outline of the chapters in this dissertation, it is important to explore why postmodernism has become such an important feature of the contemporary intellectual landscape and such an issue of debate and controversy. To do this, we will examine some of the uses of postmodernism in various contemporary cultural debates. We will use these discussions to clarify and delimit the type of postmodernism we will utilize in this dissertation. First, we will provide a brief history of the term's use. Secondly, we will examine the debate over postmodernism in social theory. Specifically, we will briefly discuss the dialogue between Daniel Bell, Juergen Habermas, Jean-Francois Lyotard,

and Michel Foucault on modernity and postmodernity. Thirdly, we will discuss the debate between modernists and postmodernists over aesthetic style in architecture and art. Next, we will explore how the assaults on modernity extend into the popular discourse on political foundations. Finally, we use the insights gained from these debates to provide a general definition of cultural and theoretical postmodernism. These introductory treatments are intended to illustrate the different uses of postmodernism in different fields and to "set the stage" for the more detailed theoretical and sociological treatment to follow, that is, in the proposed chapters for this dissertation.

The Etiology of Postmodernism

One means for clarifying the ambiguity of postmodernism is to provide a brief chronology of its use. As we shall see, postmodernism has gone through several stages and redefinitions. Among the first writers to use the term was the historian Arnold Toynbee in his voluminous A Study of History.³ Toynbee saw the "postmodern age," in part, as a result of a rebellion against modern rationality. The modern world, with its emphasis on rationality, science, and

³ Arnold Toynbee, A Study of History, Volume IX (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 559. There is some disagreement on the origin of the term postmodern. For a discussion of this see, Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 267-68.

technological development, had culminated in the two world wars.⁴ Toynbee believed that humanity at the end of World War II was beginning to question the outcomes of modernization. For Toynbee, this questioning of technology and modern existence signaled the beginning of an age of decline in the Western world (i.e., a movement towards irrationality and relativism). This emerging cultural attitude, described by Toynbee, towards modernity was not particularly a new one. Nietzsche, Weber, and others had earlier pointed out many of the problems intrinsic to modernity. What was perhaps new at the end of World War II was that the issues were being received by a larger and a more trans-Euro-American audience.

Toynbee's identification of the coming of the postmodern age did not have much of an impact in the field of history or in the conventional social sciences. However, many poets and writers, while not specifically using the term postmodern or Toynbee's prognosis, began exploring possibilities of "overcoming" the problems of cultural and societal modernism (e.g. the "new" poetry of the 1950's; writers such as Jack Kerouac; and composer John Cage). This era is what Andreas Huyssen refers to as the "first phase" of postmodernism in

⁴ We find a similar anti-Hegelian sensibility in other writings of this period. For example, T. Adorno writes, "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb." Negative Dialectics (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 320.

the United States.⁵ During this period, postmodernism is taken to refer to a "tenacious trope of tendencies" occurring in the humanities.⁶ It is marked by a loosely-articulated protest by younger artists and critics against the bureaucratic confinement of social modernity and the now institutionalized cultural canons of high modernism (e.g., cubism, expressionism, modern literature).

A second phase of postmodernism began in the late 1960's. Here, postmodernism began to turn from its praxis-oriented or "creative" rebellion against modernity to a more theoretical position. It is marked by the introduction of French poststructuralism into the cultural discourse spawned by the creative rebellion of the early anti-modernists. The deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida, the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, and the genealogy of Michel Foucault, as well as renewed attention given to German critical theory and the emergence of feminist theory, gave postmodernism a broader intellectual appeal. All these theoretical approaches shared

⁵ Andreas Huyssen, "From Counter-Culture to Neo-Conservatism and Beyond: Stages of the Postmodern." *Social Science Information*, 23, 1984, p. 617. While helpful in orientation, Huyssen's classifications are somewhat simplistic and perhaps misleading. The division between the political right and left are often blurred in postmodern thought. Cf. Linda Hutcheon's discussion of the politically "double coded" characteristic of postmodernism in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 201-221.

⁶ Ihab Hassan and Sally Hassan, *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives in the Humanities* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p. 6.

an attack on modern epistemology and the role of the modern subject within traditional philosophy and politics. Each approach provided a theoretical "direction" to the growing rebellion against cultural and societal modernity. It was during this period that term postmodern began to move from describing an aesthetic movement to describing a broad and diversified cultural and theoretical movement.

The current phase of postmodernism (post-1960's) is marked by the emergence of three theoretical and political camps. "First, the emergence of postmodernism's alliance with neo-conservatism."⁷ This position sees the fragmented nature of modern culture as being responsible for the decaying moral and economic fabric of modern life.⁸ The neo-conservatives usually call for some type of totalizing system of thought (i.e., an all-encompassing explanation and orientation), perhaps something similar to Medieval Catholicism, to repair the damage done by modernity's fragmentation of value spheres. For this group, history is a source of inspiration and valorization (i.e., the "past as utopia"). The neo-conservatives see the past as a model for repairing contemporary culture and consequently modern society. Secondly, we can identify what may be called a

⁷ Huyssen, "From Counter-Culture to Neo-Conservatism and Beyond," 1984, p. 621.

⁸ For an example of this type of approach see, Christopher Lash, The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (New York: Norton, 1990).

"postmodernism of resistance."⁹ The resistance position shares an attack on the principles of modernity with the neo-conservative position, yet it does not valorize history nor call for a totalizing system of thought. This position seeks to utilize the space created by the emergence of postmodernism to render a critique of the "status quo and historical origins, not a return to them."¹⁰ Thirdly, we can identify the emergence of what might be called a "postmodernism of acceptance." The acceptance position is aware of the theoretical and societal problems associated with modernity, yet it accepts these problems and often celebrates them. The postmodernism of acceptance feels it is impossible to draw distinctions between "high" and "low" art or between commodification (i.e., as objects of exchange) and authenticity. The acceptance position adheres to the socio-political status quo for lack of a better alternative or because new social orders only usher in a different form of social control.

This history provides us with an account of the "evolution" of the term; however, it tells us little about the specific arguments of postmodernists. In the next three sections, we will turn to some of the specific debates between modernists and postmodernists in order to further

⁹ Hal Foster (ed.), The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. xii.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. xii.

clarify the issues at stake.

The Debate in Social Theory

While the "problem of modernity" has been a central theme in social theory since the writings of Marx, Weber, Toennies, and Simmel, it was only in the early and mid-1970's that the issues of postmodernism and postmodernity appeared in the discourse on social thought (and here only sporadically). In the early 1970's, postmodernism was seen as either a romantic form of anti-modernity (e.g., Peter Berger, et al.) or as a further outcome of modernism's fragmentation of culture.¹¹

Daniel Bell, in his influential book, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, takes the latter position.¹² Bell sees postmodernism as a movement of thought "which carries modernism to its furthest reaches."¹³ In Bell's view, modernism, and its extension postmodernism, has ushered in an age of fragmentation. Culture, the system of precepts and predispositions for guiding and interpreting life, has become separated and antagonistic to the social structure. Modernism's and postmodernism's reliance on continual

¹¹ Peter Berger, et al., The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 174.

¹² Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

¹³ Ibid., p. 51. As is evident, Bell views postmodernism as an extension and intensification of the modernistic ethos.

individual innovation is in direct contradiction with the discipline needed for a stable social and economic order. Bell believes that modernism's and postmodernism's emphasis on consumerism and hedonism has destroyed the work ethic and has contributed to the erosion of the rational order required for economic production in a capitalist economy. In Bell's words, postmodernism "demands that what was previously played out in fantasy and imagination must be acted out in life as well."¹⁴ It seeks to replace the Protestant Ethic with the psychedelic bazaar. In this scenario of fragmentation only a totalizing system of theory and praxis can repair the damage. In this respect, Bell calls for a "return in Western Society of some conception of religion" to repair the damage done by the culture of separation.¹⁵

Bell's position on modernity and postmodernity marks one of the important stances in the debate. Bell is certainly an anti-modernist as well as an anti-postmodernist. He laments the fragmentation caused by the privatization of consciousness in modernity. The "cure" in Bell's view is to return to a totalizing value system associated with pre-modernity. Here, society can once again find a firm foundation for deciding the merits of morals, values, and philosophical positions. This, he believes, will solve the problem of moral and theoretical relativism which haunts

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

modernity.

In Europe the modernity/postmodernity debate has pitted Juergen Habermas, a defender of the Enlightenment principles of modernity, against Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard, two of modernity's harshest critics.¹⁶ This debate began in the late 1970's and has been described as "one of the most important debates of this decade, if not of this century."¹⁷ Habermas, in a paper delivered in Frankfurt in 1980, compared the French poststructuralists with the young conservatives (Jungkonservativen) of Weimar-era Germany.¹⁸ Habermas was placed on the defensive with the publication of Lyotard's La Condition Postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir in 1979.¹⁹ In the book, Lyotard claims that the metanarratives of modernity, that is the discourses or meta-theoretical positions which support the modern era, have lost their credibility through changes in science, technology, and art in the twentieth century. These supporting narratives of modernity, such as the belief in human emancipation and the

¹⁶ There are other important figures in this debate, including Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty. I have chosen Foucault and Lyotard only as examples.

¹⁷ Ehrhard Bahr, "In Defense of the Enlightenment: Foucault and Habermas." *German Studies Review*, 11, 1988, p. 97.

¹⁸ Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity." *New German Critique* 22, 1981, pp 3-14.

¹⁹ The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

ability to achieve accurate and totalizing or complete knowledge systems, are no longer possible given changes in science and society. Social change has "opened new ways of life (which) reveal a truth about our basic condition that has been covered over by comforting stories about the cosmos or about history."²⁰ New knowledge and technology have created a world in which we no longer feel the comfort of fixed laws or of mastery over our technological creations. For Lyotard, our current condition prohibits us from finding a transcendent discourse or theory which can avoid the incommensurability of competing language games. Consequently, no discourse can gain enough legitimacy to serve as a foundation for timeless and universal authority.²¹

In Habermas' earlier work, Knowledge and Human Interests (1972), he had sought to ground authority in an "ideal speech situation."²² Habermas agreed that we can no longer accept the modern correspondence theory of truth (i.e., a direct, non-distorted relation between theory and reality). However, even without the correspondence theory of truth, the

²⁰ David Kolb, The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 258.

²¹ Cf. Christopher Norris, Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory After Deconstruction (London: Methuen & Co., 1985), p. 140.

²² Juergen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, trans. by Jeremy Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972).

elimination of power, self-interest, and ignorance remain the socially (lifeworld) defined goals of any communicative act or discourse. For Habermas, truth is derived from a consensus obtained in a forum of open and free communication. From this perspective, knowledge obtains its validity "because it is intersubjectively recognized to be rationally justified in processes of argumentative criticism."²³ This move on Habermas' part allows him to replace one exhausted principle of modernity, the correspondence theory of truth, with another of its central precepts, that of reason (i.e., the theory of communicative action).

Lyotard responded to Habermas' proposals by questioning the ability of any strategy to overcome the heterogeneous nature of contemporary discourses. Lyotard writes:

My question is to determine what sort of unity Habermas has in mind. Is the aim of the project of modernity the constitution of sociocultural unity within which all the elements of daily life and of thought would take their places as in an organic whole? Or does the passage that has to be chartered between heterogeneous language games--those of cognition, of ethics of politics--belong to a different order from that?²⁴

Lyotard contends that Habermas' ideal speech situation is but another example of Western society's quest for totality and certainty. However, the proliferation of competing life forms existing within contemporary society makes it

²³ Stephan Fuchs, "The Social Organization of Scientific Knowledge." *Sociological Theory*, 4, 1986, p. 128.

²⁴ Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 1984, p. 72-73.

impossible for the ideal speech situation to overcome the multiple voicing of competing language games. In this case, it becomes just another "fairy tale" of modernity--another metanarrative that no longer works (We will return to this point in Chapter 6).

Habermas' attack on another important critic of modernity, Michel Foucault, was not precipitated by one particular work. It primarily was sparked by what Habermas felt was a failure on Foucault's part to outline a legitimate form of power or a proposal for discursive or social liberation from the contemporary political condition of society. For Foucault, the transition from the classical period to modernity represented a shift of epistemes.²⁵ Nowhere in Foucault's work does he provide a manifesto for overcoming the preponderance of power in modern society. As one critic argued:

He argues we create delinquents and a criminal milieu with our prisons and our paroles; he tells us that, from the Catholic confessional to the psychiatrist's couch, we have produced ourselves as beings with a sexuality that must be explored and managed....but he does not tell us what we should do. He does not tell us how we could liberate ourselves or what sort of society we should have instead....What kind of power would be legitimate; on what basis can we distinguish

²⁵ Epistemes are defined by Foucault as "the total set of relations that united, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems..." Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972), p. 191.

between acceptable and unacceptable forms of power?²⁶

Foucault does not outline a legitimate form of power because he thinks that is a paradox. In his view, the movement from pre-modernity to modernity does not mean the acquisition of a timeless, universal, and non-power laden discourse on matters of sexuality, crime, or any other issue. Modernity represents a change in epistemes and the acquisition of new discourses (and the elimination or exclusion of others) to articulate these epistemes. In Foucault's scheme, the Enlightenment's, as well as Habermas', most important concepts of rationality and universality become rhetorical strategies of linguistic and social domination (i.e., rationality is power).

It is easy to see why a person raised on critical theory would find Lyotard's and Foucault's work objectionable. Habermas believes Foucault and Lyotard take a Nietzschean turn, thereby negating any firm foundation for critique, including their own.²⁷ By equating power and knowledge, in what Habermas believes to be a totalizing manner, Lyotard and Foucault ignore the possible legitimacy inherent in everyday

²⁶ Keith Gandal, "Michel Foucault: Intellectual Works and Politics." Telos, 67, 1986, p. 121.

²⁷ Habermas refers to this as a "performative contradiction." Cf. the discussion of Habermas in Chapter 6. Habermas also laments what he considers to be the Nietzschean turn of Adorno and Horkheimer in the Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum Books, 1972). Cf. Nancy S. Love, "Epistemology and Exchange: Marx, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory." New German Critique, 41, 1987, pp. 71-94 for a discussion of this.

communicative action. This prohibits them from distinguishing between the intrusion of power in modern social systems and the functioning of everyday speech acts. By viewing power and communicative distortion in such a manner, postmodernists such as Lyotard and Foucault do not provide an avenue for any meaningful (non-power distorted) discourse to occur. Habermas contends that the Enlightenment project (i.e., the principles of modernity) of emancipation and the overcoming of prejudice have not failed. They are only incomplete. He feels it is his mission to salvage the enlightenment from both Bell's anti-modern return to religion and Lyotard's and Foucault's postmodern abandonment of the project altogether.

As we shall see in the next section some of the issues of debate in social theory can also be founded in the debate over modern aesthetic form.

The Debate Over Aesthetic Form in Architecture and Art

In the early 1980's the Polish Movement "Solidarity" released a statement on modern architecture. In the statement, the union condemned modern architecture for being, in their words, "the product of an alliance between bureaucracy and totalitarianism."²⁸ In a similar vein, the "journalistic novelist," Tom Wolfe, commenting on modern

²⁸ Paolo Portoghesi, Postmodern: The Architecture of the Postindustrial City (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), p. 8.

architecture in his 1981 book From Bauhaus to Our House, laments "the whiteness & lightness & leanness & cleanness & bareness & spareness of it all."²⁹ From both of these perspectives, the drive of modern architects to create clean and pure space have resulted in the negation of community and history. Modern architecture has not succeeded in producing a livable environment, but has instead left humanity "surrounded by a sea of endless monotony," filled with "the simplest functionalism."³⁰ In social terms, architecture has become a cultural symbol of the ever-increasing bureaucratization and rationalization of society and the lifeworld, as well as the continual demise of community.

In the realm of art this distrust of modernistic style can also be found. Postmodern art incorporates many of the anti-modern theoretical perspectives that are found in the disdain for modern architecture. Postmodernists see modern art as proclaiming an "auratic" superiority.³¹ Aura "entails that a cultural object proclaims its own originality, uniqueness, and singularity" through the

²⁹ Tom Wolfe, From Bauhaus to Our House (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1981), p. 4.

³⁰ Heinrich Koltz (ed.), Postmodern Visions: Drawings, Paintings, and Models of Contemporary Architects (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), p. 7.

³¹ This term is from Walter Benjamin's, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations, ed. by H. Arendt (London: Fontana/Collins, 1973), pp. 219-54.

socially unrestrained action of artistic creativity.³² Postmodern critics argue that this modern attribute confines art to consumption within the realm of high culture, since the only one capable of achieving the auratic qualities are those with the proper level of cultural capital. Postmodern art attempts to undermine the auratic quality and social function of modern art by deliberately allying itself with various forms of mechanical and electronic reproduction (e.g., Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Barbara Kruger). This alliance or manifestation has the effect of denying a privileged position to the work of art, its producer, or to its consumer. By showing that art can be constructed from the commodified artifacts of everyday life, as pop and neo-pop art do, and by denying the distinction between high culture and pop culture, the postmodernists hope to show that the modern orientation is out-dated and confining and that art needs new, post-modern forms of "expression."

If we explore the above positions on modern architecture and art further we find something more than a disenchantment with a particular aesthetic style. We find embedded in these critiques a disillusionment with many of the theoretical principles and institutional characteristics of the modern world. For the postmodernists, modernity, as well as modern architecture and art, were built on the theoretical

³² Scott Lash and John Urry, The End of Organized Capitalism (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 286.

principles of universality, on a break with history and tradition, and on the centrality of the autonomous creative subject. For critics, these ideational principles are closely related to the often devastating social processes of modernity: progressive rationalization, differentiation and fragmentation of the social world, industrialization, urbanization, and the development and expansion of organized capitalism. For the postmodernists, the theoretical principles, institutional processes, and cultural products of modernity have become problematic in the late twentieth century. The theoretical principles on which modern architecture and art were developed no longer seem adequate for describing the style of the contemporary social world. Modern style no longer seem to capture the experience of the so called post-industrial age or the contemporary social processes we encounter in everyday life. Therefore, new forms of aesthetic expression are required that more closely adhere to the contemporary social and cultural situation.

The Search for Political Foundations

The debate between modernists and postmodernists also extend to the contemporary debate over political foundations. Some, often using Bell as a point of reference, see Enlightenment-based liberalism and individualism as being responsible for the decline of traditional notions of happiness and political virtue. This group sees the return

of a firm socio-political foundation as the only alternative to modern fragmentation and the subsequent loss of meaning. On the other hand, some argue that we need a new type of political consciousness rather than simply a return to a romantically-perceived past utopia.

For both groups, there is no more evidence of the exhaustion of modern political foundations than the decline of the notion of progress. In the American context, modernity's grand concept of progress seems no longer convincing, especially as seen in the after-light of the Vietnam War or the growing environmental crisis. Robert Wallace has written:

Even the advocates of nuclear power, the builders of the latest McDonald's, and the investigators of recombinant DNA, thought they may still occasionally apply the word "progress" to these projects, define them not as being themselves beneficial but merely as generating jobs, or ultimately as being "inevitable"³³

Progress and the optimistic, future-oriented attitude of modernity no longer seem adequate for defining our experience of the contemporary socio-political situation. The idea of progress, like foundational truth for Lyotard, has become another metanarrative of modernity, one that no longer seems to encompass our current social and political condition.

For the German critic Peter Sloterdijk, the fading of the political metanarratives of modernity is akin to

³³ Robert Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Lowith-Blumenberg Debate." *The New German Critique*, 22, 1981, p. 63.

Nietzsche's description of the void created by the death of God (and man)--we have succumbed to nihilism. Sloterdijk sees this political fading as resulting in the rise of the cynic as the modal personality of contemporary society.³⁴ As the master cynic Diogenes refused to accept the principles of Platonic thought or the "virtues" of Athenian politics, the modern cynic no longer accepts the absolute promises of science or the liberation possibilities offered by Marxism or the New Social Movements. Sloterdijk describes our current state as "enlightened false consciousness:"

It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and unsuccessfully. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered.³⁵

Sloterdijk is describing a social and academic environment where ideas and theories are immediately deconstructed and dismissed. Any program for liberation or perhaps even amelioration becomes susceptible to the "blank stare" of the cynic who has heard these promises before. Sloterdijk goes on to provide a very apt description of the manifestation of enlightened false consciousness in everyday life:

We do our work and say to ourselves, it would be better to get really involved. We live from day to day, from vacation to vacation, from news show to news

³⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

show, from problem to problem, from orgasm to orgasm, in private turbulence and medium-term affairs, tense, relaxed. With some things we feel dismay, but with most things we can't really give a damn.³⁶

The key to understanding this statement is the word can't. Modern political consciousness is numb. It has seen the promises of Marxism turn into the Soviet Gulag, the New Social Movements turn into state-directed political action committees, the counter culture being absorbed into the culture industry, and Enlightenment rationality turn into the iron cage. In such a social environment, the only avenue which seems open is a protective cynical retreat into our private orbits. Sloterdijk believes that the only type of left politics that is possible is one based on a anarchistic cynicism. We must somehow forge a new micro politics of resistance.

The theme of modernistic "homelessness" is also echoed in a recent work by Robert Bellah, et al., on individualism in middle-class American life.³⁷ Bellah's description of the isolation brought on by ontological and utilitarian individualism is similar in some respect to Sloterdijk's cynicism. Bellah's individual has pulled inward, trying to

³⁶ Ibid., p. 98-99.

³⁷ Robert Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). There are important differences between Bellah's and Sloterdijk's positions on modernity. Sloterdijk's position is a Weberian-inspired account which sees modern life as being too bureaucratic and confining. Bellah's description is a conservative-inspired view which sees modern life as being too individualistic.

find meaning through material success or ontological escape.

Bellah, et al., write:

The inner tensions of American individualism add up to a classic case of ambivalence. We deeply feel the emptiness of a life without sustaining social commitments. Yet we are hesitant to articulate our sense that we need one another as much as we need to stand alone, for fear that if we did we would lose our independence altogether.³⁸

In Bellah's view, the excesses of modern individualism make it difficult for us to come to terms with social problems or our general social condition. Instead of confronting our problems as a group, we seek refuge in our private orbits. The "first language" of American individualism, focused on asserting independence, further complicates the situation by limiting our ability to express our feelings of commitment or desire to engage in a discourse on our socio-political direction.

What we find in Sloterdijk's and Bellah's descriptions are attempts to extend some of the approaches in social theory to the larger political conditions in Europe and the United States. Bellah's approach is a fusion of Bell's diagnosis of modernity and Habermas' treatment plan. He wants Americans to recognize the depth of their differences but still manage to draw from old cultural orientations and engage in a political discourse to reach a consensus on common goals. Bellah's solution to the problems of modernity resembles what was referred to earlier as the "neo-

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 150-151, emphasis added.

conservative development" in the critique of modernity. His solution rests on the creation of a "social ecology" consciousness to repair modern society.³⁹ This can be interpreted as a somewhat tempered call for a totalizing system of thought. Sloterdijk, with his roots in the German Green Party, would not see this as a possibility, given the fragmented nature of competing language games and the association between knowledge, discourse, and power. His position is an example of the "postmodernism of resistance," described earlier (p. 8). Sloterdijk's political solution seems to rest on a non-romantic form of micro or local politics--that is a politics that cynically resists the status quo, centralization, and individualism.

The Postmodern Framework

The proceeding discussion of some of the debates between modernists and postmodernists perhaps confuses the situation more than it clarifies it. As we can see, postmodernism means different things to different people. All the groups we discussed see postmodernism as a rebellion against social and cultural modernity. However, from this agreement the discussions tends to go in a variety of different directions. In this section, we will present our "working definition" of postmodernism. This will be the version of postmodernism

³⁹ Bellah borrows this idea and many of his ideas on postmodernism from Stephen Toulmin's, The Return to Cosmology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

that we will develop and utilize throughout this work

First, we begin with some of the central ideas of modern thought. The modern perspective can be seen as encompassing at least three overlapping philosophical principles; universality, egocentrism, and logocentrism.⁴⁰ These principles serve, not only as the foundation for modern science and philosophy, but also for modern aesthetics and modern agency. Universality refers, in part, to the attempt to construct timeless and cross-cultural laws of natural or human action based on a timeless and universal method. Embedded within this idea of universality is a belief in the progress of knowledge or "scientific accumulation." This position sees accurate knowledge as self-evident to all rational individuals and is thus universally applicable. Egocentrism refers to locating the source of knowledge, imagination, or practical agency in the condition of human subjectivity. Here, rationality and creativity is thought to be a product of some inherent condition of human subjectivity. Finally, logocentrism refers to the quest to find a foundational truth (the logos, the "Word"). The modern discourse has continually sought to develop the one correct theory or method that was capable of apprehending the world as it really exists. It sought the "final word" on matters of truth, justice, and knowledge.

⁴⁰ Richard Kearney, The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 161.

At a general level, we see postmodernism as a position which seeks to deconstruct (i.e., break down or expose) modern theoretical and cultural principles. It seeks to illustrate how these modern theoretical principles are culturally and historically constructed within the confines of a power dynamic and how practitioners act as if these principles were reflective of reality. To accomplish this, postmodern thought tends to highlight modernity's paradoxical or self-defeating qualities. Postmodernism often focuses on the hidden or overt metaphors on which the modern philosophical principles rests. This is often done by pointing out modernity's disregard or avoidance of problems, such as language or the negation of the excluded "other" (e.g., issues such as non-rationality and power or social groups such as Women, the "mentally ill," or the Third World). The deconstruction process thus undermines the foundations of the philosophical discourse of modernity, leaving it as a contingent form of rhetoric. The modern narrative becomes just one narrative among others and not the foundation for all narratives. In other words, the modern discourse has no privileged access to truth.

The above discussion aids us in making a distinction, not only between modernism and postmodernism, but also between postmodernism and anti-modernism. Anti-modernist are critical of the Enlightenment based ideology of modernity, yet they seek a new totality to recover the loss of meaning.

Postmodernists do not make that move. They agree that the Enlightenment is exhausted, but that do not think that any new or old system can replace it. We must accept the incommensurability of various life forms and language games (and the subsequent leveling of meaning). We cannot hold out hope for a position to repair fragmented value spheres. We must live with fragmentation and undecidability.

Consequently, we may conclude that postmodernism, in both theory and cultural production, can be seen as a self-conscious skepticism--a disbelief in the supporting metanarratives of modernity. The modern attempt to ground its thought and action in a universal and subject-centered method is revealed as having a mythical, fictional, or merely rhetorical quality. In such a questioning environment, the modern theoretical distinctions between subject and object, rationality and non-rationality, speech and writing, or between "high" and "low" culture become insupportable.

Now that we have some conceptualization of what postmodernism is about, or at least our version, we can turn to the outline of the chapters to follow.

Plan of the Chapters

This work is concerned with identifying some of the underlying themes and issues which unite the "postmodern turn" in theory and culture and how these issues may be seen sociologically. In this connection, it is perhaps helpful to

see this dissertation as having three sections. The first section is concerned with both discussing the Enlightenment philosophical foundations of modernity and the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century critiques of this position. The second section seeks to identify the cultural and theoretical positions of postmodernism (i.e., to develop a postmodern framework). In addition to discussions of the theoretical views of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and others, this sections contains an examination of neo-pop art and postmodern architecture to further illustrate how the ideas of postmodern theory are incorporated into the cultural production of the late twentieth century. Our final section is concerned with discussing what a sociology of knowledge position can contribute to an understanding of postmodernism. This sections contains both an discussion of social or constructivist epistemology and an examination of the relationship between postmodernism and the social organization of knowledge production and cultural consumption. Below, we will discuss the specific organization of the chapters.

In order to examine postmodernism as a cultural process, we first must develop a theoretical view of modernity. The second chapter seeks to provide a foundation for this dissertation by exploring some of central ideational characteristics of modernity. This will be accomplished through an examination of the writings of the French

Enlightenment, specifically, Condillac, Condorcet, and Rousseau. These figures exemplify some of the dominant ideas of modernity, such as the optimistic attitude towards rationality, knowledge accumulation, societal progress, and emancipation.

In chapter three, we turn to late nineteenth and early twentieth century critiques of modernity. This period, it is argued, is a key for understanding the rise of postmodernism as an intellectual and cultural movement. In this chapter, we will focus on the ideas of modernist movements in art and the writings of Nietzsche, Weber, and Simmel. Their critiques certainly do not exhaust the complexities of cultural and social modernity, but they do provide an interpretation of its paradoxes--one which has influenced many postmodern writers.

In chapter four, we begin a discussion and elaboration of the postmodern framework. Here, we will explore the general postmodern orientation towards language and referentiality (i.e., the "linguistic turn"). Linguistics is the area where many of the original ideas of theoretical postmodernism were forged. We are concerned with the internal transformation of the linguistic model from the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure to the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida. Language to many modernists was seen as an unproblematic instrument for communicating the social and physical world. The modernists

saw the world as a "fixed object of analysis quite separate from the forms of discourse by which men speak of it and by which they represent their thoughts."⁴¹ For the postmodernists, this modern position ignores the way in which language itself structures or shapes reality.⁴² This sensibility towards language as a definer of thought marks one of the most important distinctions between modern and postmodern discourse. We will specifically explore how this critique of language fits into the overall reexamination of modern correspondence or referential epistemology.

In chapter five, we discuss the attack on the timeless and universal humanist ego in thought.⁴³ Here we consider the writings of Foucault and Jacques Lacan where the "de-centering" of the subject (i.e., removing the subject as the center of knowledge) is an important theme. Following in the line of Nietzsche, these writers seek to illustrate that the "subject is not something given, it is something added and

⁴¹ Timothy Reiss, The Discourse of Modernism (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 24.

⁴² F. Mauthner has stated, "If Aristotle had spoken Chinese or Dakotan he would have had to adopt an entirely different logic." Quoted in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds.), The Social History of Language (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 14.

⁴³ Fredric Jameson has referred to this as the attack on the pretensions of the Cartesian cogito. Cf. Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 135.

invented and projected behind what there is."⁴⁴ Foucault maintained that "man is an invention of recent date....and one perhaps nearing an end."⁴⁵ We will examine in detail the meaning of this statement for both social thought and culture-at-large. Also, this chapter seeks to link the decentering of the subject with the death of the notion of the "creative artist" in postmodern art.

Chapter six examines the postmodern orientation towards rationality, progress, and emancipation. Modernists typically saw the past as a continuous overcoming of irrationality, myth, barbarisms, etc..⁴⁶ Traditional views of the social and physical world were to be replaced with modern "scientific" and rational ones. However, recent works, which can be labelled as postmodern, take a different orientations toward the past. The past is something which is discontinuous and can't be willfully overcome. We can never escape the structural characteristics which mark the history of our language or the historical situation of our existence. In other words, we can never gain a timeless "God's eye view" of ourselves or the social world.

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 267.

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Pantheon, 1970), p. 387.

⁴⁶ An example of this would be William Robertson's, The Progress of Society in Europe: A Historical Outline from the Subversions of the Roman Empire to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1972 (1769)).

In chapter 7, we begin the explication of a sociological approach to postmodernism. Specifically, we will explore the challenges posed by postmodern philosophy for contemporary social science. As part of our explication, we will discuss the recent work of Jean Baudrillard and his "end of the social thesis." Finally, we will use Durkheim's discussion of American pragmatism as a means for rethinking postmodernism's collapse of meaning and leveling of discursive formations.

In chapter 8, we will further elaborate upon on the social epistemological framework by examining recent developments in the sociology of knowledge, specifically the so-called strong program and the constructivist thesis in the sociology of scientific knowledge. We will use these developments as examples of how a sociology of knowledge framework can respond to the often epistemological nihilism of postmodernism.

In Chapter 9, we will use our previous discussions of social epistemology and the sociology of knowledge to examine postmodernism. Specifically, we will utilize the Durkheimian and Neo-Durkheimian description of the social organization of groups. We seek to relate postmodernism to the group structure and cognitive style of culture producing and consuming collectivities. Borrowing from the work of Mary Douglas, Richard Whitley, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, we will explore how group organization may be responsible for

the dissemination and reception of postmodern culture.⁴⁷

Finally, we will end our discussion in chapter ten with an overview of the central points of the dissertation and an explication of some of the important issues and problems raised by this work.

⁴⁷ Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

CHAPTER II

THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY

In this chapter, we will examine some of the classical statements of modern thought as presented by its leading proponents; the eighteenth century French Philosophes. In the writings of the French Philosophes we find not only the origins of much of modern philosophical thought, but also many of the ideas representative of cultural modernity. Specifically in this chapter, we will explore the writings of Etienne de Condillac, the Marquis de Condorcet, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. We will use their writings to construct a general modern philosophical framework. In order to accomplish this, we will focus upon three important modern ideas; 1) the relation between language and knowledge and their role in obtaining and perfecting reason (Condillac), 2) the evolutionary unfolding of history (Condorcet), and 3) the role of the universal, inner directed "self" in making moral and political decisions (Rousseau). The eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophers were not, unlike their seventeenth century predecessors, content with the construction of abstract systems of knowledge. Enlightenment philosophers sought to connect theory and practice in order to provide a means for criticizing conventional standards and institutions. Their philosophy "attributes to thought not merely an imitative function but the power and task of

shaping life itself."¹ The treatments of Condillac, Condorcet, and Rousseau are intended to provide a paradigmatic background for the modern way of perceiving the world and humans' role within it. It is also provided in order to build a framework for understanding postmodern theory's "deconstruction" of these basic premises. First, however, a discussion of the social conditions that set the stage for modern philosophical discourse.

Modern Thought and Social Change

The term modern is derived from the Latin word "modo," meaning "just now" or "in this time." However, the term has produced another widely held definition. Since the early nineteenth century, modernity is a term that has been used to encapsulate the social and cultural entirety of a historical period of time. The modern world, perhaps above all previous societies, recognized itself to be "new" and unique. Modernity, defined within its own terms, claimed a radical break with traditional ways of perceiving the world and acting in the world. In general terms, modernity saw itself as a period built on the foundations of rationality (i.e., a belief in the ability of humans to ascertain the real), universality (i.e., the construction of ahistorical and cross-cultural laws), progress (i.e., scientific accumulation

¹ Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, trans. by F. Koelln and J.P. Pettegrove (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. viii.

and teleological social change), and the enlightened control of nature and society (i.e., the harnessing of nature and the societal betterment). At the center of these foundations was a thinking and acting Cartesian subject capable of accurately comprehending the world and purposefully acting on the world. The dogmas of religious authority and traditional lifeways, as well as the canons of antiquity, were open to rigorous rational scrutiny, reevaluation, and often rejection. The modern human being did not need the traditional authority embodied in a church or a monarch to make the appropriate political, economic, philosophical, or aesthetic decisions. Decisions could be made on the basis of a rational methodological comparison of means and ends performed by the thinking and acting subject.

While our primary concern in this chapter is with the ideational features of modernity, it would be a mistake to view it only in these terms. Modernity entails more than a specific nexus or mode of thought and culture. Modernity also encompasses a "historically specific series of complex social forms and institutions."² These social forms, institutions, and processes are often collapsed under the categories of industrial capitalism, rationalization, societal differentiation, the (forced) division of labor, urbanization, and the development of the modern state, to

² John Rundell, Origins of Modernity (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 1.

name but a few. These social forms and processes both draw their legitimation from the modern nexus of thought and give this nexus of thought its meaning. These institutional characteristics have produced a society markedly different from those of the past. Traditional economic and political arrangements had given way to new institutional forms and social organizations: Industrial capitalism dramatically differed from feudalism in its distribution of resources, its class system, and its power relations. The differentiated society of modernity was in direct contrast to the unified society of Medieval Europe. These social forms provide the backdrop for the discussion on the Enlightenment origins of cultural modernity that follow.

Condillac: Reason and the Problem of Language

The writings of Etienne de Condillac (1715-1780) were directed towards refining, synthesizing, and revising major positions of seventeenth century philosophy and science. Condillac thought that the rational spirit of seventeenth century thought, expressed most poignantly by Descartes (1596-1650), had overemphasized the role of deductive reason performed by an innately rational subject. In Condillac's view, the rationalists had ignored the induction of empirical experience and observation. With the development of empiricism as an important philosophical and scientific movement, represented in part by the writings of John Locke

(1632-1704), the importance of the empirical in guiding the acquisition of knowledge could no longer be dismissed.³ In addition, the advent of Newtonian physics and its subsequent success in building predictable systems of knowledge had forever altered any purely non-empirical or speculative acquisition of knowledge, a point that was later advanced by Kant.

However, Condillac, like many of his Enlightenment counterparts, did not want to completely dismiss the central role of a thinking and acting subject in the construction of knowledge. Condillac simply wanted to make the subject a recipient of knowledge rather than a producer. Specifically, it was Condillac's goal to unite the analytical and the synthetic in the manner of Newton. Condillac recognized that "Newton's general law of attraction was not the exclusive result of theorizing nor of sporadic experimentation or observation unguided by theory..."⁴ Newtonian science represented a perfect balance between the rational and the empirical. It was a model of how to build valid and reliable systems of knowledge. By synthesizing elements of Cartesian rationalism with Lockian empiricism, Condillac wanted to provide and reinforce a method capable of gaining access to

³ Cf. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

⁴ Irving Zeitlin, Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), p. 6.

all realms of the unknown. He sought to prove that empirical "facts" and human rationality were compatible and necessary elements for the acquisition of universal knowledge, as long as empirical facts were given a primary role.

For Condillac, the new reliance on empirical facts would enable knowledge to accumulate and progress. This progress first required a rejection of the abstract system-building rationalism of seventeenth-century thought. In its place we must substitute a method which gives primary value to well established facts. For Condillac this meant returning to the origin of empirical experience. Condillac writes,

The more the mind appears to make progress, the more it goes astray, and errors accumulate from generation to generation. When things have come to this point, there is only one means for putting order back into thought; that is to forget everything we have learned and take our ideas back to their origin, to follow the generation of them, and to remake them...⁵

By returning to the simple sensations of experience, a method of inquiry could be developed and extended which was capable of providing timeless and universal knowledge. Ultimately, this would allow the advancement of science and philosophy to accelerate greatly.

There was, however, a problem haunting the ultimate fulfillment of the perfection and expansion of knowledge; the problem of language. Condillac once described his

⁵ Etienne de Condillac quoted in Charles Frankel, The Faith of Reason: The Idea of Progress in the French Enlightenment (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), p. 47.

philosophical mission as "unraveling the chaos into which the abuses and vices of language have plunged the moral and metaphysical sciences."⁶ For Condillac, language was a central problem for all systems of knowledge, specifically the seventeenth-century rationalism of Descartes of which he was so critical. In specific terms, the ordinary language of previous metaphysical systems lacked precision. In Condillac's view, if knowledge was to progress the impasse caused by the inappropriate use of language must be overcome. This was to be accomplished by developing a direct relationship between the signified (idea, concept, object) and the signifier (symbols, verbal utterances). Since ordinary language is an historical given and consequently poorly composed and imprecise, it is not capable of providing a simple, direct relation between signified and signifier. Condillac writes,

(We) think according to the habits which languages cause us to acquire. We think by means of them: as rules of our judgments, they produce our knowledge, our opinions and our prejudices; in a word, they produce all that is good and bad in our judgments.⁷

What was needed was a way around this impasse in the progress of knowledge.

Condillac's mission was both to explore the weaknesses of ordinary language and develop a symbolic code which

⁶ Quoted in Etienne de Condillac, Logic (New York: Abaris Books, Inc., 1980), p. 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

connected the signifier with the signified. The solution was to be found in the "well made" and simple language of algebra.

Algebra is very striking proof that the progress of the sciences depends solely upon the progress of their languages; and that well-made languages alone could give to analysis the degree of simplicity and precision of which it is capable in each area of our studies. Well-made languages could do this, I say: for in the art of reasoning as in the art of calculating, everything is reduced to compositions and decompositions; and it must not be thought that these are two different arts.⁸

Algebra's symbolic code held out the possibility of avoiding the errors of common language-based, human reasoning. "Reasoning is perfected only to the extent that languages are themselves perfected."⁹ Ultimately, the perfection of language allows us to have "empire over our imagination."¹⁰ In other words, the imprecise nature of ordinary language causes a flight of imagination. This flight results in error and faulty knowledge. Consequently, for knowledge to progress language must give way to the timeless and universal logic of mathematics.

With this movement towards a "perfect" language, all realms of inquiry, both natural and social, are open to the advancement of reason. As Condillac maintains in the above

⁸ Ibid., p. 305.

⁹ Ibid., p. 303.

¹⁰ Condillac quoted in Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 198.

quotation, the advancement of reason unleashed by empiricism and the perfection of language means no realm of understanding is out of the reach of human comprehension and understanding. Once methodologically foundational reason has become a dominant mode of understanding, its domain expands into social considerations. In the social realm the institutional and social attributes of traditional society become open to scrutiny and rejection. Describing this process Ernst Cassirer wrote,

As soon as the power of thought awakens in man, it advances irresistibly against this (social) form of reality, summoning it before the tribunal of thought and challenging its legal titles to truth and validity. And society must submit to being treated like physical reality under investigation.¹¹

While Condillac was not particularly concerned with bringing objective knowledge to politics and society, his views would be influential for others seeking to develop a science of society or history (e.g., the "social physics" of A. Comte and the "scientific history" of Leopold von Ranke).

Condillac must be seen as a central figure in the Enlightenment's attempt to bring all forms of knowledge under the control of pure reason, logic, and empirical experience. While he does reject, in part, the rationalism of Descartes, he nonetheless wants to refine a method capable of constructing reliable knowledge of the social and natural world that includes a role for human intellectual activity.

¹¹ Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, 1951, p. 18.

In order for this method to be effective, it must return to the basic sensations of experience. Knowledge can accumulate only if we dispense with the purely rational or speculative construction of knowledge and turn to empirically pure data. This process also requires a refinement of language. Language, as a carrier of tradition, is a major obstacle in the development of systematic knowledge. Once all ideas have been reduced to algebra, all forms of knowledge can finally progress beyond the confines of tradition.¹²

Condorcet and the Progress of the Human Spirit

Marquis de Condorcet's (1743-94) L'Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progres de l'esprit humain, published in 1795, remains today a manifesto of modernity.¹³ Its optimistic attitude towards the growth of rationality, the linearity of history, and the capacity of humans to control the "uncertainties" of the natural and social world influenced many early nineteenth century thinkers, including the founders of social science Saint-Simon and A. Comte. It is ironic that this optimistic work of the enlightenment was written at the height of the "reign of terror" and while

¹² For a postmodern treatment of Condillac see, Jacques Derrida, The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac, trans. by John P. Leavey, Jr. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1980).

¹³ Marquis de Condorcet, Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, trans. by J. Barraclough (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955).

Condorcet himself was in hiding from Robespierre and other Jacobins who wanted him dead.

Condorcet's plan in The Progress was to, "show by appeal to reason and fact that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite...".¹⁴ Echoing Condillac, Condorcet believed that the discoveries made possible by the Newtonian method was capable of affecting every domain of inquiry. As we continue to accumulate facts we move closer and closer to ultimate understanding.

As the number of known facts increase, the human mind learns to classify them and to subsume them under more general facts, and, at the same time, the instruments and methods employed in their observation and their exact measurement acquire a new precision...the language that fixes and determines ideas will acquire greater breadth and precision...the methods that lead genius to the discovery of truth increase at once the force and the speed of its operation.¹⁵

For Condorcet, the scientific method had unchained the human mind from the dogma of tradition. Now, the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge did not have to rely on untested speculative philosophies. Hence, it was only a matter of time until everyone becomes "enlightened." Condorcet's aim in The Progress was to transfer the optimism in the progress of the natural sciences into considerations on history and society. He related the unfolding of what he considered to be the natural law of historical progress. The

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

idea of underlying laws of history, would lead Condorcet to proclaim the ever growing capacity for human beings to control their world and to ultimately obtain moral perfection.¹⁶ For Condorcet, humanity had evolved through nine stages of development and was on the verge of the tenth and ultimate stage. These stages could be viewed as steps, leaps, and temporary steps backward towards the inevitable goal of the fulfillment of the human spirit. Condorcet's ten stages were marked by,

1. The union of humans in tribes.
2. The rise of agricultural societies.
3. The invention of the alphabet.
4. The Greek division of the sciences.
5. The decline of Greek science.
6. The restoration of knowledge with the Crusades.
7. The early progress of science and the invention of printing.
8. Science's revolution against traditional authority.
9. The progress of knowledge from Descartes to the French Republic.
10. The future progress of the human mind.

The "progress of the human spirit" had begun with the uniting of people into tribes. It had culminated with the rise of science and the French Republic. Condorcet felt that humanity, at the time of his writing, stood before the final

¹⁶ Condorcet's views on progress were influenced by early writers including Voltaire and Turgot.

stage of historical evolution. With the method of Newton and the destiny of history as guides, the modern individual finally could obtain the before elusive "moral perfection." With moral perfection, history would effectively end, since it would reach a plateau where it would not longer be moving toward fulfillment. Condorcet rhetorically asks,

If man can, with almost complete assurance, predict phenomena when he knows their laws, and if, even when he does not, he can still, with great expectation of success, forecast the future on the basis of his experience of the past, why, then, should it be regarded as a fantastic understanding to sketch, with some pretence to truth, the future destiny of man on the basis of his history?¹⁷

Just as Newton had described the laws of nature based on observation and reason, humankind could, with the aid of Newtonian method and reason, learn to discern cause and effect in the processes of history. This would enable humankind to harness the laws of history in a manner similar to the harnessing of the natural world. With this harnessing, the world has the potential of becoming "perfected." In this new rational society, "everyone will have less work to do, will produce more, and satisfy his wants more fully."¹⁸

It is evident that for Condorcet the unfolding of history was not a chaotic flux. History, like the Newtonian natural world, succumbed to certain underlying laws of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 173.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 188.

progress. Humans, with their ability to reason, could harness and control these laws in order to improve and ultimately perfect society.

The time will come when the sun will shine only on free men who know no master but their reason... How consoling for the philosopher who laments the errors, the crimes, the injustice which still pollute the earth and of which he is often the victim, is this view of the human race, emancipated from its shackles, released from the empire of fate and from that of the enemies of progress, advancing with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue and happiness.¹⁹

Once humanity had been "released from the empire of fate," it could create a world based on reason. The dogmas and injustices of contemporary institutions would fall aside as reason progressed and created a new and just social order. Condorcet felt that "nature has set no limit to the realization of our hopes."²⁰ Humanity had within it the capacity for perfecting the individual and society.

Condorcet, perhaps beyond all other Enlightenment philosophers, exudes an extraordinary confidence in rationality, progress, and control. The injustices and superstitions of existing society were to be swept away as humanity reached the plateau of reason. His and other similar views of time and history would become extremely important in the justification of scientific and historical

¹⁹ Marquis de Condorcet quoted in W.T. Jones, Kant and the Nineteenth Century (New York: Norton, 1952), p. 2-3.

²⁰ Condorcet, The Progress of the Human Mind, 1955, p. 175.

change. When these components of progress were coupled with the ideology of the emerging bourgeoisie, one of most enduring ideas of modernity was born.

Another important figure in Enlightenment discourse is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As we shall see, Rousseau provides us with an understanding of another important aspect of the dominant discourse of modernity--the reflexive self.

Rousseau: Modernity and the Self

In the work of Rousseau (1712-78) we find a "two-edged" reaction to the processes of modernization. On the one hand, Rousseau, like his Enlightenment counterparts, is a champion of an optimistic attitude toward the "natural goodness" or "perfectability" of humankind. However, we also find in Rousseau's work the seeds of a romantic or counter-Enlightenment discourse. This discourse questions the very idea of a linear "advancement of civilization"²¹ Rousseau was at once a champion of the Enlightenment spirit and one of its greatest detractors.

For Rousseau, human beings naturally are capable of good and limitless personal growth. It is civilization which corrupts this inner goodness and marks the regression of humankind. In the opening to Emile, Rousseau writes,

Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things; everything degenerates in the

²¹ Cf. J.B. Bury, The Idea of Progress (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982 (1932)). pp. 178-79.

hands of man. He forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruit of another....He wants nothing as nature made it, not even man; for him, man must be trained like a school horse; man must be fashioned in keeping with his fancy like a tree in the garden.²²

Modern civilization is marked by an acute disdain for the natural aspects of humanity. Civilization demands that everyone be transformed from their natural state into obedient social beings. In this demand, civilization is perceived as being the corruptor of the naturally occurring inner moral goodness of humanity. Part of Rousseau's mission is to undermine this ideology of social training. The negative consequences of civilization require Rousseau to search for redemption from within. In doing this, Rousseau rediscovers the inner nature of the "self," which was somehow lost or masked in the civilizing process. In this connection, much of Rousseau's intellectual project can be seen as an attempt to defend this inner experience or the "self" from the onslaught of modernization.

While it is true that contemplations on the individual have held a special place in the history of Western thought, premodern views, such as Plato's idea of "self mastery" and St. Augustine's "tortured soul," are significantly different from the conception of the self and individuality in modernity. The modern self, which can be traced to the work of Descartes in the seventeenth century, emphasized the

²² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile or On Education, trans. by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 37.

innate rationality of human beings. Humans were endowed with an innate or God-given ability to discover the essential workings of the world around them. Humans' internal capacity for disengaged rationality would enable humankind to discover the true nature of things-in-themselves. Descartes succeeded in raising inner experience to the level of universal objectivity. Later, with the work of John Locke, the modern self begins to lose its inner directed rationality. As an empiricist, Locke conceives the self to be but the result of life-long sensate experiences.

With Rousseau, there is a movement beyond the rational self of Descartes and the empirical self of Locke. There is the discovery of a deeper and more complex self. Rousseau's self is rational, like Descartes'; however, it is also "expressive, projecting into the world and the future."²³ . The inner, expressive self is counterpoised to an outer self (i.e., empirical) faceted and corrupted by society and history. In this regard, Kant wrote of Rousseau,

As Newton was the first to discern order and regularity in the nature...Rousseau was the first to discover beneath the varying forms human nature assumes, the deeply concealed essence of man and the hidden law in accordance with which providence is justified by his observation.²⁴

²³ Robert C. Solomon, Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 18.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant quoted from Ernst Cassirer, Rousseau, Kant, and Goethe, trans. by J. Gutmann, P.O. Kristeller, and J.H. Randall, Jr (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 18.

Beneath the masks of the social existence lies the universal essence of humankind. As Kant points out, this essence is perceived as being "deeply concealed" underneath the "forms of human nature." Through self reflection this inner essence could be revealed for all of humankind. Furthermore, this essence was available, not through Cartesian logic, but through emotion, feeling, and intuition.

In The Confessions, Rousseau comments on how his version of the self came to him while walking in the woods near Saint-Germain.

Deep in the heart of the forest I sought and found vision of those primeval ages whose history I bravely sketched. I denied myself all the easy deceits to which men are prone. I dared to unveil human nature and look upon it in its nakedness, to trace the course of times and of events to which have disfigured human nature. And while comparing conventional man with natural man, I pointed out the true source of our misery in our pretended perfection.²⁵

What Rousseau "discovered" walking in the forest was not simply his own inner, subjective experience, but the objective essence of humanity itself. Beneath the corrupting affects of society, the essential goodness of humanity awaits release. By reflecting inward at the nakedness of our being, humanity can find an escape from the hegemonic confines of civilization.

Oh man, draw your existence up within yourself, and you will no longer be miserable. Remain in the place which nature assigns to you in the chain of being... Your freedom and your power extend only as far as your

²⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

natural strength, and not beyond. All the rest is slavery, illusion, and deception.²⁶

Self reflection becomes both a means of salvation from the influence of society and a method for discovering the true meaning of existence. "All that was needed was for the inner voice to cut loose from its yoke-fellow and declare its full moral competence."²⁷

From Rousseau we obtain two modern ideas of the self: "first, the remarkable inner richness and expanse of the self; and secondly, the consequent right to project from the subjective structures of one's own mind, and ascertain the nature of humanity as such."²⁸ Rousseau deepens and expands the purely rational self of seventeenth century rationalism. He inaugurates a particular version of the modern self--a self that is both rational and expressive. Rousseau is the point of origin of "the philosophies of self-exploration, as well as of the creed which make self-determining freedom the key to virtue."²⁹ This view would be particularly influential for subsequent philosophers and artists. The inner self of Rousseau would, in the century to follow, provide a means and a language for resisting the purely rational and instrumental drives of philosophy, science, and

²⁶ Rousseau, Emile, 1979, p. 83.

²⁷ Taylor, Sources of the Self, 1989, p. 362.

²⁸ Solomon, Continental Philosophy Since 1750, 1988, p. 2.

²⁹ Taylor, Sources of the Self, 1989, pp. 262-63.

society that come from outside. For the romantic poets, as well as many today, the Rousseauian self was a haven from the ravages of modernity. For Rousseau and many subsequent writers the rational/expressive self was a "truer" representation of what it was to be human.

Summary: Janus-Faced Modernity

As alluded to in the early part of this chapter, modernity must be seen as a complex array of forms of knowledge and social institutions. In some instances these forms and institutions are (or appear to be) in direct contradiction with one another. Often this Janus-faced aspect is where problems with the classification of cultural modernity arises. For instance, how is one to reconcile the rational, "progressive" ideas of Condillac and Condorcet with the expressive, "degenerative" ideas of Rousseau? To begin to answer this question, we first must dispense with the tempting strategy to collapse aspects of a society or historical period into one set of organizing categories, as defined by its political, economic, or cultural attributes. It is perhaps more productive to recognize that all historical periods have contradictory tendencies and discourses. Secondly, it is also important to recognize that these discourses often compete with one another for power, influence, and domination in society. The "better idea" does not necessarily rise to the top.

Condillac, Condorcet, and Rousseau's views on humanity are all modern. The optimism of Condillac and Condorcet would be influential in shaping a discourse which would have its most crucial impact in the realms of science and analytical philosophy. This discourse of optimism would also be influential in establishing the class ideology of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie and later the orientations of certain modern professions and groups. It would spawn series of discussions encompassing such topics as; the unfolding of the human spirit, the positive effects of industrialization, the progress of science, and the socially managed end to inequality. The Rousseauian view would inspire another related but distinct discourse. This discourse would have its most important impact upon artists, poets, continental philosophers, "mandarin intellectuals," and in an "alternative science" (i.e., the "gay science" of Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century and the "anarchistic science" of Paul Feyerabend in the late twentieth century). The Rousseauian discourse would inspire discussion of the loss of meaning in the world, the fragmentation and instrumentalization of society, the commodification of everyday life, and so forth.

We must recognize that these rational and romantic discourses are both aspects of the modern sensibility. Both have held sway over the modern imagination. Both have been used as ideologies to justify social institutions and certain

sets of social practices. By accepting the contradictory faces of modernity, we can gain a better understanding of both modernity and postmodernism.

In the chapter to follow, we will examine how these ideas of the French Enlightenment fared approximately one-hundred years later. By this time the optimism in rationality and progress expressed by most of the Enlightenment philosophers had begun to fade in many intellectual circles, particularly in Germany. The period of high modernism in art and literature and the age of Nietzsche, Weber, and Simmel in philosophy and social theory experienced new problems about what came to be called the "fate of modernity." In their encounter with modernity, we find an avenue for understanding the development of a postmodern discourse in philosophy and social thought.

CHAPTER III

MODERNITY AND ITS CENTRAL PARADOXES

In the previous chapter, we discussed the contributions of the French Philosophes to the dominant discourse of modernity. By the late nineteenth century this optimistic discourse had begun to fade somewhat. Various commentators began to question the Enlightenment's enthusiastic linkage of rational and expressive selfhood with societal progress and emancipation. Some began to see recent philosophical movements, not as a culmination of a trend towards perfectability, but merely as a different historical period. Furthermore, these commentators began to conclude that this historical period was as problematic as those of the past.

In this chapter, we will attempt to gain an understanding of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century critiques of modernity. This will be done by focusing on several artistic movements and social commentators who sought either to take advantage of the "crisis" created by modernity or explore the "dangers" of being modern. These various movements and writers do not agree on the causes of the crisis, but they all experienced the maelstrom of modernity and felt compelled to render an explanation and in some cases a diagnosis. Specifically, in this chapter we will identify some of the emerging philosophical and social paradoxes which accompany the modern era. These paradoxes, it will be argued, provide an avenue

into postmodern culture and society. We will begin with a discussion of the early understanding of modernity. This will be followed by an examination of the Western "cultural attitude" which prevailed in many intellectual and artistic circles before World War I. Specifically, we will examine the positions on art and modernity of the Italian Futurists and the German Expressionists. Afterward, we will begin a selective discussion of the work of Nietzsche, Weber, and Simmel. These individuals, perhaps more than any others of their time, sought to explain the meaning and problems associated with being "modern."

The Recognition of Modernity

Marshall Berman has rather poetically described modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as "a mode of vital experience--experience of space and time, of self and others, of life's possibilities and perils."¹ However for Berman, the dominant feature of this vital experience, and one which separates it from other historical experiences, is modernity's "maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal."² The development and expansion of industrial capitalism, the division of labor, the break-up of traditional unities, and the rationalization

¹ Marshall Berman, All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 15.

² Ibid., p. 15.

process had all contributed to a society-in-flux. The promises of the Enlightenment philosophers, the accomplishments of science, and developments in the arts had spawned a culture which prized continuous individual innovation.³ Together these societal and cultural processes fused into a paradoxical period of continuous upheaval and change. This period, where "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned," has come to represent the zenith of modernity.⁴ By the mid nineteenth century the various ideational and material changes dating to the sixteenth century and finding their most systematic expression in eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy (e.g., rationalism, progress, the rise of industrial capitalism, urbanization, etc.) began to become recognizable as an important movement of society and as a distinct historical moment. This recognition spawned a series of cultural and societal writings that sought to analyze and explain what was happening in and to Europe. The German writer Henerick Heine first used the word "Modernitat" to capture the essence of this movement of society and culture in his 1826 work, Reisebilder. Here, Heine equates Modernitat with the "victory of the British" and

³ Cf. J.B. Bury, The Idea of Progress (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), p 198-79.

⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in The Marx-Engels Reader, ed. by R.C. Tucker (Boston: Norton, 1978), p. 338.

industrialism. In Heine's view, modernity had "dispossessed belief, rendered Romantic inwardness impossible, and extinguished the great traditions."⁵ Heine's perspective is negative and romantic. It is part of a developing counter Enlightenment discourse of modernity, which would become particularly important in the late nineteenth century. This counter-modern sensibility, first encountered with Rousseau, was shared by many social commentators and writers of his period ranging from the Utopian Socialist to the Romantic poets. Modernity had spawned a crisis that left many longing for a more stable moment from the past.

Others, however, sought to take advantage of a sense of excitement created by the dissolution of tradition. This approach is perhaps best exemplified in Charles Baudelaire's 1863 essay, the "Painter of Modern Life." Baudelaire, through his discussion of Monsieur G. (Constantin Guys), sought to identify the challenge posed by modernity for artists. Baudelaire described modernity as "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent."⁶ Monsieur G. was Baudelaire's example of an individual who was courageous enough to attempt the transfer of the maelstrom of modernity onto the canvas.

⁵ Albrecht Betz, "Commodity and Modernity in Heine and Benjamin." *New German Critique*, 33, 1984, pp. 181-82.

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 13.

In the next section we will consider how the reconition of this new historical period served to spawn a new sensibility in the content and meaning of art and literature.

December, 1910

According to Virginia Woolf, "on or about December, 1910 human character changed..."⁷ The historical processes described earlier by Heine and Baudelaire were heard in the early part of the twentieth century as "the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction."⁸ Throughout the West traditional forms of social life were crumbling as the forces of rapid social change associated with modernity began to increase in intensity and to incorporate more aspects of everyday life. For many intellectuals the crumbling of traditional forms of life signaled a renewed commitment to innovation. This commitment was supported by new discoveries in science (i.e., Einstein, Bohr, and Mach), by a new philosophy (i.e., Bergson, Whitehead, and Ortega), and by dramatic social change (i.e., the influence of industrial capitalism and the emerging bureaucratic order).⁹ Together, these social and cultural changes meant that art and

⁷ Virginia Woolf, The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 96.

⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

⁹ Ricardo J. Quinones, Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 120.

literature no longer had to adhere to canons of the past nor did they have to accept the previous label of "romantic escapism." Art, which was removed from center stage by science and rationality, now could resume its former intellectual status.

In describing the sense of rebellion which was felt by modern consciousness in the early twentieth century, Mabel Dodge wrote in 1913:

Nearly every thinking person nowadays is in revolt against something, because the craving of the individual is for further consciousness, and because consciousness is expanding and bursting through the molds that held it up to now.¹⁰

The revolt described by Dodge signals the maturation of aesthetic modernism as a cultural force. The period from the late nineteenth century until after World War I teemed with cultural movements which in one way or another sought to take advantage of the "crisis" created by modernity. Most of these movements wanted to use the crisis of modernity to regenerate society. Some of these movements were "nostalgic" in their outlook while others were "imaginative."¹¹

The "nostalgic" movements followed Heine's line of thinking about modernity. They longed for a return to what

¹⁰ Mabel Dodge, Camera Work (June 1913): 7. Cited in Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1913 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 182.

¹¹ Cf. Allan Megill, Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 114-115. This is a somewhat simplistic, but useful dichotomy.

they saw as the pristine state of premodern society. The nostalgic position can be seen in wide array of movements, as far ranging as the Boy Scouts of America and the "high romantics." T.S. Eliot "with his idealization of the past utopia represented by royalism and Catholicism" is perhaps representative of the nostalgic type of thought.¹²

However, most cultural movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were "imaginative." Groups such as the Italian Futurists, German Expressionists, and Cubists, welcomed the disintegration of tradition while enthusiastically embraced the "new." The Futurists provide an especially vivid example of one particular mode of this modern "imaginative" sensibility. The Futurists announced their formation in 1909 publication entitled, "The Founding and Manifesto Of Futurism."¹³ The futurists sought to develop art and literature in the image of the machine. They wanted to transfer the power and speed of technology into the aesthetic realm. Their vision of the role of art and literature in society is captured in their original manifesto.

1. We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.
2. Courage, audacity and revolt will be essential elements of our poetry.

¹² Ibid., p. 114.

¹³ Charles Russell, Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde From Rimbaud Thought Postmodernism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 87.

3. Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap.
4. We affirm the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath--a roaring car that seems to ride on graeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.

.....

10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.¹⁴

The Futurists presented a particular pro-modern sensibility towards art and society. They saw the machine as the model for transforming both art and society. They deplored any individual or movement which continued to cling to the past and which therefore did not accept the vitality of their artistic experiment. Any institution, such as the museums, libraries, and academia, which was perceived as clinging to past modes of thought and action were targets of their scorn.

Charles Russell writes,

Worshippers of force in 'what ever form it occurs,' they defined their activities in extreme forms. Their targets, and the victims of this tirade, were individuals or institutions which represented the culture's ties to the pasts: the passeits, the church, the monarchy, the bourgeoisie, the schools and art establishments, pacifists, and women.¹⁵

For the Futurists, modernity opened up a new set of

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 88-89. Some of these ideas were incorporated by the Italian Fascists.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 89.

possibilities for the arts and the conduct of life. Art or life no longer had to adhere to tradition. The model provided by technology allowed for a rethinking of the nature of artistic experience and personal freedom. The Futurists saw their movement to be both as artistic avant-garde and as a political movement which would shake and eventually undermine the confines of traditional authority.

The desire of the futurists to capture the "raw energy" of modernity and transform it into a social and artistic movement was met with both enthusiasm and skepticism. Antonio Gramsci wrote of the Futurists,

(They) have grasped sharply and clearly that our age, of big industry, of the large proletarian city and of intense and tumultuous life, was in need of new forms of art, philosophy, behavior, and language....In their field, the field of culture, the Futurists are revolutionaries.¹⁶

Others saw Futurism, with its denial of the past and worship of force and power, as an extremely problematic artistic experiment which represented all that was negative about modernity.

Another important artistic movement which responded to the conditions created by social and cultural modernity were the German Expressionists. The German Expressionists were a loosely affiliated group of writers, poets, artists, and film makers who sought to bring emotional, existential, and

¹⁶ Antonio Gramsci, Selections from Cultural Writings, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 51.

subconscious elements of individual experience into the realm of art. They, like the Futurists, sought to take advantage of the perpetual upheaval and change associated with modernity. Writing in 1914, the Expressionist Franz Marc wrote, "The world gives birth to a new age: there is only one question: has the time yet arrived today in which the old world will be dissolved? Are we ready for the vita nova? This is the most anxious question of our day."¹⁷ It was clear for the Expressionists that modernity marked a new era of history. This new era required different modes for the conduct and expression of life. The "new life" of the modern era meant for the Expressionists new art, literature, poetry, and politics.

In forging the new life of modern existence, the Expressionists rejected both classicism and realism with their models of "objective representation." The Expressionists wanted art and literature to reflect "personal emotional perceptions" rather than some outer reality.¹⁸ This orientation towards art also reflected a political vision. By exploring and portraying the depths of subjectivity, the Expressionists wanted to contribute to "improving the world

¹⁷ Franz Marc, quoted in Frederick Levine's, The Apocalyptic Vision: The Art of Franz Marc as German Expressionism (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 138.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

and the life of man within."¹⁹ The explosive nature of the inner world of subjective experience was seen as providing the materials for the destruction of well-ordered bourgeois society and the construction of a radically new social order. Particularly important for the Expressionists was the potential of repressed sexuality to provide the means for undermining bourgeois culture. Gottfried Benn in his 1917 poem "Synthesis" writes,

Reticent night. Reticent house.
But I am of the stillest stars,
and I thrust out my self-made light
out into my self-made night.

I have returned home in brain
from caves, heavens, filth and beast.
Even what is still bestowed on woman
is dark and sweet onanism.²⁰

Benn, like other Expressionists, wanted to restore an atavistic vitalism to modern culture. The power of latent sexuality was one means for accomplishing this goal.

In social and political terms, the Expressionists, like many other individuals and groups of this period, saw subjectivity as protection against epistemological uncertainty, the encroachment of rational, industrial capitalism, and the sterility of bourgeois society. Describing this sanctity of subjectivity in Expressionism, Douglas Kellner writes,

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁰ Gottfried Benn, "Synthesis," trans. by R. Allen in, German Expressionist Poetry (Boston: Twayne, 1979).

Expressionism arose in a period in which analyses of the alienation, reification, and dehumanization of the individual, and the fragmentation of the human personality, had become widespread. As a reaction to the crisis of subjectivity, Expressionism contained passionate reaffirmations of individuality.²¹

The Expressionists, like Rousseau and the romantics, thought that inner experience had the potential of providing the modern individual with a haven in a rationalized world. This haven also had the capacity for a radical social renewal.

The Italian Futurist and the German Expressionist represent but two artistic movements which tried to take advantage of the crisis of modernity. The disintegration of traditional society and authority meant the cultural slate had been wiped clean. Intellectuals and other culture producers, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, felt the time was right for the creation of a new culture. However, as will be seen in the following discussion, these movements and the general intellectual mood, were to face several unresolvable paradoxes which would eventually mark the end of cultural modernism.

Nietzsche, Nihilism, and Modernity

The critique of modernity rendered by Frederick Nietzsche must be considered one of the most important and influential attempts to establish an anti-modern (and postmodern)

²¹ Douglas Kellner, "Expressionism and Rebellion," in Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner (eds.), Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1983), p. 13.

discourse in the wake of the Enlightenment. Nietzsche's self-stated goal was to "philosophize with a hammer." This hammer, as will be seen, was aimed at everything valued by Enlightenment and modern thinkers. However, Nietzsche wanted to be more than a critic of Occidental culture and its latest historical form: modernity. He also wanted to develop a means to solve the problems of modern existence. However, Nietzsche, like the other writers discussed in this chapter, finds modernity and any attempt to correct its mistakes to be extremely paradoxical.

Much of Nietzsche's critique of modernity focuses upon the advent of nihilism in European society. In a prophetic note assembled at the beginning of the Will to Power, Nietzsche states:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism...For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.²²

Nihilism, for Nietzsche, is more than the result of the death of God and the demise of Christianity in the West. Nihilism marks a historical period when the highest values become devalued. God and religion certainly are dead, "but also everything that, in rapid succession, has tried to takes its

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. by W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 3.

place--e.g., the ideal, consciousness, reason, the certainty of progress, the happiness of the masses, culture, etc."²³ Nihilism then is a historical moment marking a turning point in Western history. It is a time when the foundations of European society, were they theological or scientific, are revealed as myths. Myths which, for Nietzsche, ultimately are connected with an unsatiated "will to power." Nihilism, is the result of a series of "unmaskings" set in motion by the enlightenment ideals of science and rationality and culminating in a final unmasking of these very ideals.

Nietzsche's primary strategy for undermining the Enlightenment is to attack one of its most cherished principles--that of a foundational truth. In his essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873) and in Human All Too Human (1878), Nietzsche seeks to find a way out of modern thought through a "radicalization of its own innate tendencies." Nietzsche concludes that the modern desire to uncover the nature of "things in themselves" (the will to truth) inevitably leads to the discovery that truth is constructed through the use of metaphors and anthropomorphisms which do not correspond to "reality," but merely reflect the dynamics of social relations. In other words, the "will to truth" associated with modern rationality leads to the rational conclusion that truth is an illusion. Rationality

²³ Maurice Blanchot, "The Limits of Experience: Nihilism," in David B. Allison, ed., The New Nietzsche, 1986, p. 121.

taken to its radical conclusion undermine its own premises.

In an often quoted excerpt, Nietzsche writes,

What, then, is truth? a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms--in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically....truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coin.²⁴

The coin analogy is particularly revealing. The historical origin of truth in the domain of power and social relations has worn away and been forgotten. However, the canons of epistemology continued to dominate the discourse on truth. These canons matter now only because they have come to be historically recognized to be true. In other words, what makes these epistemological canons true is not their correspondence to some external truth, but because they have been designated and embellished by the power brokers and power configurations to be "great works."

With this realization, the idea of truth, as well as the distinction between truth and lie, become diluted. Truth, for Nietzsche, is not something awaiting discovery by philosophers and metaphysicians, but a reflection of the power configurations of human relations. Beneath the masks of the Enlightenment's foundational truth, Nietzsche finds the ever present elements of rhetoric and power. The collapse of truth

²⁴ Frederick Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" in W. Kaufmann (ed.), The Portable Nietzsche (New York: Penguin Press, 1976), pp. 46-47.

as a cultural goal provides an arena for escaping from the confines of Enlightenment rationality and its ceaseless search for the illustrious foundational truth.²⁵

One of Nietzsche's goals in attacking Enlightenment reason is to provide an avenue for the birth of a new culture. Through the realization that the truth portrayed by Greek philosophy or the Enlightenment is merely a reflection of the art of rhetoric and the will to power, we are freed from the illusion of truth. We need no longer feel the compulsion to find the mysterious underlying truth awaiting discovery. We can become willing nihilists, capable of forging a new culture built on mythical narrative!

Once the cultural goal of a foundational truth, either in theology or philosophy, has been destroyed or merely withers away, we enter the historical stage of nihilism. At points in Nietzsche's writing he approaches the advent of nihilism with a sense of apprehension. He, like many of his contemporaries, was somewhat fearful of the sense of loss which begins with nihilism's appearance. For instance, when writing about modern institutions, particularly marriage, Nietzsche laments, "Our institutions are no longer fit for anything: everyone is unanimous about that...but the fault lies not in them but in

²⁵ This is related to the position of Hans Vaihinger's "philosophy of the as if." Vaihinger, like Nietzsche, claims that man creates illusions and calls them facts; he/she treats them as if they had physical existence of their own. Humans forget that these are merely ideational constructs. Vaihinger, Die Philosophie des Als Ob (Tuebingen University, 1912).

us.²⁶ However, overall Nietzsche approaches nihilism with a heightened sense of enthusiasm.²⁷ Nietzsche sees nihilism as an opportunity for creating a new set of values and a new culture. In The Gay Science (1882) Nietzsche writes,

Indeed, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel, when we hear the news that "the old god is dead," as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectations. At long last the horizon appears free to us again once more...our ships venture out again, venture out to face any danger...perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea."²⁸

For Nietzsche, the death of the old god allows us a sense of freedom, play, and gaiety. The "open sea" of nihilism allows us the freedom to become accomplished nihilists or "supermen," capable of welcoming and celebrating the devaluation of the highest values.

Nietzsche's celebration of the death of the old god and foundational truth is one he shared with many other modernist writers. However, part of Nietzsche's work suggests that the desire expressed by many modern individuals and movements to transcend the modern value system and escape from nihilism may be a problematic enterprises. The nature of this problem involves modernity's complex attitude towards and relationship with the past. This "problem of history," as it has been called, is the issue Nietzsche treats in several of his

²⁶ Frederick Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) p. 93.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

²⁸ Frederick Nietzsche, The Gay Science, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 280.

important works, particularly his 1874 essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life."²⁹ In this essay Nietzsche, like some of his modernist counterparts, views history as a burden that prohibits modern individuals from creating their own history. The past is like a ball and chain which continuously limits the freedom of humankind. This "historical sickness" can be cured, in Nietzsche's view, through the suprahistorical elements of myth, art and music. These elements provide an avenue for the (re)discovery and projection of truly new culture--free from the burdens of tradition.³⁰

However, there is a problem in trying to find a cure for the "historical sickness" of modern culture in suprahistorical myth. Modern culture is also haunted by the legacy of lineal historical change (e.g., a belief that historical change is the unfolding of some set of underlying evolutionary laws). The belief in lineal historical change is a result of the emphasis placed on progress and "overcoming" by industrialists and enlightenment philosophers, particularly Condorcet's

²⁹ Frederick Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History" in The Philosophy of Nietzsche, trans. by Geoffrey Clive (New York: Mentor Books, 1965), pp. 218-238.

³⁰ This is a particularly modern position on culture. These statements have helped fuel the debate on the classification of Nietzsche as a modernist or postmodernist. For a discussion of this see, Robert Gooding-Williams, "Nietzsche's Pursuit of Modernism," *New German Critique*, 1987, 41, pp. 95-108. It can also be added that American culture has a strong emphasis on escape from the past and celebration of the present and the future, or a new beginning for the mobile and the rootless.

historiography and Hegelian metaphysics. Thus, modernity poses a paradox for those seeking to overcome it. This paradox involves the inability to escape or "overcome" modernity. Modernity itself is an era typified by "progress" and the perpetual "overcoming" of tradition. Thus, each new theoretical or cultural innovation which seeks to overcome modernity is simply a repeat of the transcendent element of modernity and consequently remains modern in character.³¹ Any individual or movement which self-consciously seeks to change society is but part of the form of modern thinking and action.

Nietzsche's strategy to combat progressive thinking is the concept of the "eternal return" found in Thus Spoke Zarathustra.³² The idea of an eternal return serves for Nietzsche as a narrative weapon against the notions of progress and linear evolution in history. By seeing the movement of time as the repeat of the ever same, history loses its evolutionary quality. In the voice of Zarathustra, Nietzsche writes:

Behold this moment! From this gateway, moment,
a long, eternal lane leads backward: behind us lies
an eternity. Must not whatever can walk have walked
on this lane before? Must not whatever can happen

³¹ Cf. Gianni Vattimo, The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture, trans. by Jon Snyder (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 164-181.

³² Frederich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969).

have happened, have been done, have passed by before?
....And are not all things knotted together so firmly
that this moment draws after it all that is to come?

Nietzsche recognized that the narrative of eternal return was as much myth as the narrative of progress. However, it has the advantage of undermining Occidental culture's reliance upon teleological history, such as Condorcet's evolutionary historical progress. Just as the accomplished nihilist has discarded the illusion of truth, we also need no longer feel the need to "progress." For progress too is an illusion. The myth of eternal return forces us to treasure the here-and-now, rather than projecting ourselves towards some state of ultimate perfection. The demise of progress, Nietzsche hopes, will put us in the position to now forge our own values and systems of mythically-based knowledge, free from the confines of the Occidental heritage and modernity.

Nietzsche provides us with an understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of modernity. Nietzsche wants to rid culture from the entire legacy of Western thought and its most systematic expression in eighteenth-century Enlightenment. To accomplish this, Nietzsche attacks the Enlightenment's sacred desire to find a foundational truth. Once this project is underway, he turns his attention to constructing a vitally new culture. It is at this stage that the problem of history emerges (i.e., history as linear progress). Nietzsche wants to lift the burdens of history and progress from humanity, but he realizes that any attempt to

overcome history is merely part of the spirit of modernity. Nietzsche's recognition of the inadequacies of this type of progressive thinking "designated the moment of the birth of post-modernity in philosophy."³³ The inadequacies of Enlightenment notions of progress forces him, and the line of thinkers which lead from Heidegger to Derrida, into devising a new strategy for finding a "way out" of modernity and nihilism.

Weber: Modernity-as-Rationalization

Max Weber's organizing concept of rationalization has, perhaps beyond all others, come to be the word most often used to describe the process of modernization. For Weber "the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all by the 'disenchantment of the world.'"³⁴ In Weber's view, rationalization involved both a universal process of demystification and systematization embodied in all world religions and a particular form represented by Protestantism and the modern bureaucratic organization in Occidental culture.³⁵

³³ Vattimo, The End of Modernity, 1988., p. 167.

³⁴ Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," in H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 155.

³⁵ Cf. Mark Shields, "Rationalization, Differentiation, and Universalism: Weber, Parsons, and Habermas on Modernity." Unpublished work presented at the 1989 meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco.

The appearance of rationalization in Western culture was identifiable in the ascetic attitude towards life found in early Calvinism.³⁶ Specifically, Calvinism contained three ascetic constructs: (1) "The interpretation of the world as merely creaturely," (2) "The idea of the world as object of fulfillment of duty through rational control," and (3) "The compulsion to develop an ethically integrated personality, a compulsion that also demands an ethical commitment."³⁷ Since the world was seen as "creaturely," it was perceived as being void of spiritual or "Godly" influence. Initially, this results in a devaluation of the world and a (re)turn to the spiritual. However, once acted upon by individuals, the world becomes an exclusively human realm. Consequently, the world becomes profane. It becomes a realm exclusively open to human activity and manipulation. When this profane realm is coupled with the demand for a self-controlled sense of duty or "calling," the modern sensibility is forged. Calvinism aided in stripping the world of spirituality or mysticism and replacing it with a worldly ethos emphasizing individual commitment and action.

These aspects of Calvinistic doctrine, specifically as manifested in the doctrine of predestination and the

³⁶ Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

³⁷ Guenther Roth and Wolfgang Schluchter, Max Weber's Vision of History: Ethics and Methods (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 42.

importance of a "calling," inevitably led to self-denial and an emphasis on a controlled, rational mastery of the world. Calvinism succeeded in linking value or ethical rationality with instrumental rationality in such a way as to "deeply and intensely penetrate so many areas of life for believers."³⁸ Calvinism, as a religious movement, had the effect of bringing together individual rationality with the forces of societal rationalization imbedded in early capitalism. Calvinism, when combined with the force of early capitalism, succeeded in making rational, calculative thinking a norm of thought and action in the modern world.

The rationalization process, however, did not limit its impact to the spheres of religion or the economy. Due to the compatibility of Calvinism with early capitalism and the emerging bureaucratic state, the ascetic attitude towards life became embedded in the conduct of everyday life and the organizational structure of all modern institutions. "When asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order."³⁹ However as we will discuss below, Weber believed that the cost for this transformation was very high, that is,

³⁸ Shields, "Rationalization, Differentiation, and Universalism: Weber, Parsons, and Habermas on Modernity," 1989, p. 2.

³⁹ Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 1958, p. 181.

in the loss of meaning.

By the end of the nineteenth century the ascetic way of life, manifested in the vocational ethos, had become separated from its religious foundations. However, it continued to prowl "about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs."⁴⁰ This situation produced an unresolvable paradox in modern culture. Formal religion was losing its sway over life, but the residue of religious beliefs continued to influence our thought and action. Removed from its religious moorings, the ascetic attitude was without foundation and consequently meaningless. Nonetheless, it remained a necessary mode for the conduct of life in the world. Asceticism had become an institutionalized standard for the conduct of life, yet it lacked any ideational foundation to give it meaning. Describing this situation in the case of the meaningless pursuit of wealth in the United States, Weber writes,

In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.⁴¹

Weber believed the stripping of action from religious belief produced "mundane passions." We become "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" trapped in the meaningless

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 182.

"iron cage" of instrumental rationality.⁴² It was this situation which was the "fate" and the unresolved paradox of modern culture.

The paradox of modern culture resulting from the secularization of asceticism and the resulting penetration of the life-world by the rationalization process left the individual in a state of ethical confusion. The modern individual, in Weber's view, was forced to choose between "life abnegation" or "world affirmation" as possibilities for the conduct of life.⁴³ In a 1908 letter to Robert Michels, Weber distinguishes the two possibilities,

There are two possibilities; either 'my kingdom is not of this world' (Tolstoy, or syndicalism thought to its conclusion, which is nothing more than the sentence 'the goal means nothing to me, the movement everything') or affirmation of culture (that is, objective culture, expressing itself in technical and other 'achievements') through adaptation to the sociological conditions of all technique, whether it be economic, political, or whatever else.⁴⁴

By choosing life abnegation the individual "must be prepared to live with 'fictions' in order to achieve ethical unity of belief." In choosing life affirmation one must be willing to "live with 'antinomies' or 'tensions' in order to achieve

⁴² Ibid., p. 182.

⁴³ Lawrence Scaff, Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 98. This discussion of the ethical dilemmas of modern life is inspired by Scaff's discussion.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Scaff, p. 97.

clarity about the world as it 'is.'⁴⁵ Weber believes the modern individual is placed in the position of choosing between utopian narratives which provide a unified, but fictive world-view, or accepting the contradictions of everyday life, which is void of the promise of ethical unity. The choice between life abnegation and life affirmation also leaves the individual in the position of choosing between value spheres. The individual is forced into accepting an ethics of brotherliness, which seeks to end domination, or an ethics which is supportive of the socio-political status quo.

The individual and cultural dichotomy between abnegation and affirmation was employed by Weber to understand both the ethical dilemma of the modern individual and the various social movements of his day. In Weber's view, the modern individual either retreats into the realm of the subjective, where life itself becomes a point of contemplation, or s/he seeks to find ethical unity in a utopian movement which promises liberation, or s/he accepts the monotony, contradictions, and meaninglessness of everyday life. The rationalization process has produced both social and ethical over-differentiation in modern culture. Ethically there is no longer one set of unitary guidelines for the conduct of life. Ethical life, like society has been differentiated into many irreconcilable realms.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

These insights on the ethical dilemmas facing modern individuals were used by Weber to understand the attempts to alter collectively the fate of modernity and humanity. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by a series of social movements which abnegated the world (i.e., those movement that sought to turn away from the world-as-is towards some type of idealized goal). These movements, such as syndicalism, pacifism, and socialism, created the hope of an ideal society, void of the problematics of modernity. The fragmentation, meaningless, and dislocation of modernity were to be corrected by movements which promised a "unity of being." However, the incongruities between the "ideals" of the movement and the "realities" of contemporary politics produced a deep sense of ambiguity in the movement and its members.⁴⁶

Weber can be seen as among the first social commentators to link systematically rationality with repression. Instead of reason affecting the liberation of humankind, it becomes the bars of the iron cage. This "dark side" of rationality calls into question the optimistic attitude represented by the Enlightenment philosophers (e.g., Condillac and Condorcet) and post-Enlightenment (e.g., Comte and Marx). Weber saw the "rosy blush" of the Enlightenment as "irretrievably fading"

⁴⁶ This parallels the experience of left intellectuals in France after the failure of the 1968 attempt at revolution.

from modern life.⁴⁷ The ideology of the Enlightenment was being usurped by its own devices. Its praise of the unlimited opportunities opened up by rationality for the moral, economic, and political perfectability of humankind were being undermined by rationality's intrusion into and domination of every domain of social existence.

In the next section, we will explore the reaction to modernity by one of Weber's students, Georg Simmel. In Simmel, we find a particularly acute sensibility towards the effects of modern culture.

Simmel and "The Conflict in Modern Culture"

Perhaps more than any other theorist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was Georg Simmel who sought systematically to explore the contradictions of modern life and the cultural meaning of the various modernist intellectual and artistic movements of his time. Simmel's explorations of the contradictions encountered in modern life and by the various modernist cultural movements led him, particularly in his later work, to a position which strongly resembles the contemporary postmodern position on culture.

Simmel's attitude towards modernity is first encountered in his most famous work, The Philosophy of Money, particularly

⁴⁷ Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 1958, p. 182.

in the concluding chapter.⁴⁸ In the work, Simmel argues that money--which he calls "fluid property"--has, in part, enhanced personal liberation. The depersonalization of social relations which accompany the use of money weakens the bonds of traditional forms of social control.⁴⁹ Money opens the door for the development of trade, urbanization, and the formation of cosmopolitan associations. However, there are negative consequences to the advent of a money economy. Money has the effect of reifying and rationalizing life and individual experience. Simmel writes:

This psychological feature of our times which stands in such decisive contrast to the more impulsive, emotionally-determined character of earlier epochs seems to me to stand in close causal relationship with the money economy. The money economy enforces the necessity of continuous mathematical operations in our daily transactions. The lives of many people are absorbed by such evaluating, weighing, calculating and reducing of qualitative values to quantitative ones.⁵⁰

In conjunction with the rationalization of life, money contributes to the societal tendency of objectification. A monied economy contributes to the separation of objects from their creators. Qualitative or subjective values become

⁴⁸ Georg Simmel, The Philosophy of Money, trans. by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, 1900).

⁴⁹ For a more detailed analysis of this aspect of Simmel see, Stephan Fuchs, "From Theory to Critique of Modernity: The Development of Simmel's Sociology." Paper presented at the 1989 meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, Reno, Nevada.

⁵⁰ Simmel, The Philosophy of Money, 1978, p. 444.

transformed into quantitative or objective "realities." Money therefore aids in the development of an "objective culture;" separate and distinct from the individual and his/her subjective life experience. The separation of objective society from subjective experience ultimately leads to alienation. It "exemplifies the tragic tendency of objective culture to separate itself from its creators and then subject human life and experience to its abstract and impersonal laws."⁵¹

For Simmel, life is experienced as an individual, unique, non-fragmented totality. However, objective culture is impersonal, banal, and fragmented. The artist creates what is part of his/her individual totality. However, once the artist's creation leaves the hands of the individual it becomes part of an anonymous, impersonal culture or style. Simmel writes:

Style, as the manifestation of our inner feelings, indicates that these feelings no longer immediately gush out but take on a disguise the moment they are revealed. Style, as the general form of the particular, is a veil that imposes a barrier and a distance in relation to the recipient of the expression of these feelings.⁵²

This, for Simmel, is one of the central paradoxes of modernity. We must create on the basis of our individual life experiences, however the original intent of our creation loses

⁵¹ Fuchs, "From Theory to Critique of Modernity: The Development of Simmel's Sociology," 1989, p. 19.

⁵² Simmel, The Philosophy of Money, 1978, p. 473.

its subjective value once it enters the realm of objective culture or pure form.

From Simmel's discussion of the consequences of a monied economy we gain an understanding of the dual nature of modernity. While modernity had liberated certain aspects of individuality from the confines of tradition, it had also imprisoned individuals in specialized role-sets and created an impersonal objective culture. From this general theoretical framework, Simmel explored the meaning of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cultural movements.

Simmel saw the modernist cultural movements, as well as Post-Christian religiosity and post-metaphysical philosophy (e.g., Lebensphilosophie and pragmatism), as attempts to break free of the limitations of objective culture. These movements represented "a passionate desire for the expression of life, for which traditional forms are inadequate, but for which no new forms have been devised...."⁵³ In Simmel's view, modernism represented a unique turn in the ongoing conflict between the creative endeavors of the human spirit and the societal forms they take. In other words, with modernism there is strong conflict between the attempt at cultural innovation and the routinized social organization which these innovations are bound to spawn and become embedded within.

⁵³ Georg Simmel, "The Crisis of Culture" in Peter Lawrence's Georg Simmel: Sociologist and European (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976), p. 257.

Prior to the nineteenth century, Simmel argued, cultural movements had simply replaced one another in sequence. Each new cultural movement "commanded obedience as an objective imperative and then ceded to others after a struggle."⁵⁴ In other works, creative endeavors inevitably became reified into an objective cultural form. However, in the later part of the nineteenth century this conflict changed. Beginning with the "life philosophy" of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Simmel argued, "life began to take itself as its own object of meaning."⁵⁵ This advent of culture produced an acute awareness of the confining nature of forms. It marked a unique cultural rebellion against form itself (i.e., against social organization).

The rebellion against form, represented by modernism, produced a paradoxical situation for both Simmel and modern culture. On the one hand, Simmel realized that the desire to transcend all forms is an impossibility.

...The process of thinking, wishing, and forming can only substitute one form for another. They can never replace the form as such by life which as such transcends the form. All these attacks against the forms of our culture, which align against them the forces of life "in itself," embody the deepest internal contradictions of the spirit. Although this chronic

⁵⁴ Deena Weinstein and Michael Weinstein, "Simmel and the Theory of Postmodern Society," Paper presented at the 84th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, 1989, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 11. Also see Chapter I of Georg Simmel's, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, trans. by H. Loiskandl, D. Weinstein, and M. Weinstein (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

conflict between form and life has become acute in many historical epochs, none but ours revealed it so clearly as its basic theme.⁵⁶

However, Simmel concludes that formlessness itself may be the most appropriate "form" for the conduct of modern life. In a Nietzschean tone, Simmel writes,

The bridge between the past and the future of cultural forms seems to be demolished; we gaze into an abyss of unformed life beneath our feet. But perhaps this formlessness is itself the appropriate form for contemporary life.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, formlessness remains a form. Modern life and culture, or any historical existence, cannot escape from form, objectification, or organization. In this case, formless becomes the way social and cultural life becomes organized and subjectively understood.

Simmel's comments reveal the deep ambiguities and paradoxes that exist in modern life and culture. While such modernist movements as the Futurists and Expressionists seek to transcend form, they remain within its grasp. Since "life can only enter reality....in the form of form," all the modern intellectual movements remain prisoners of their self professed enemy.⁵⁸ As such, cultural modernism remains but a romantic, Rousseauian dream of the absence of authority and societal confines. A dream, that Simmel maintains, will

⁵⁶ Georg Simmel, The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays, trans. by K. Peter Etkorn (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), p. 25.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

remain forever unfulfilled.

From Simmel's discussion of the conflict in modern life and culture, we can derive his general ontological aim. Simmel wants to preserve individuality from the threat of the depersonalizing forces of modernity in the form of a monied economy and objective culture. Like his mentor Weber, Simmel is deeply troubled by the "fate" of modern culture. He, like Weber and Nietzsche, advocates a type of heroic individualism as a partial remedy for the tragedy of modernity. If unity and totality were impossible at the societal and cultural level, they could be found in a unified subjective life--a retreat into inner life.⁵⁹

Summary

We began with a discussion of the "cultural mood" which was dominant in many intellectual circles prior to World War I. The aim of these early twentieth-century movements, such as Futurism and Expressionism, was to construct a vitally new cultural and social order on the ruins of traditional society. We find similar hopes in Nietzsche's writings. Nietzsche wanted to construct a new culture, free from the burdens of Occidental reason, however, he recognized the inherent problems of this reconstructive project. Modernity could not be "overcome." It had to be destroyed or simply replaced from

⁵⁹ The retreat into a subjective holism is reflected in Simmel's turn to the "heroic individualism" of Goethe and Rembrandt in his later works.

within. In Weber, we find a more systematic treatment of the advent of modernity and its social and cultural consequences. Weber is rather ambivalent about the possibilities of a new social order. In Weber's view, modern culture is extremely paradoxical. In a world stripped off its original religious meaning, we are forced to accept the world as it is or create idealistic movements which promise some type of cultural and individual unity. In Simmel, we find a similar view. For Simmel, the conflict in modern culture is one between subjective experience and objective culture. Subjective experience is continuous and holistic. Objective culture is discontinuous and fragmented. For Simmel, in modernity there is little hope of uniting the subjective and objective into a coherent, unitary framework.

It can be argued that Nietzsche's, Weber's, and Simmel's critiques of modern culture point to the contradictions which would lead to the collapse of the spirit of the Enlightenment and modernism as cultural movements. We find in their writings traces of a particular view of modernity and its social and cultural paradoxes which would be influential in forming a postmodern discourse. Caught between the desire to transcend form (i.e., organization) and the inability to do so, the modernist attitude would soon give way to a postmodern one. The postmodern attitude, as will be seen in the coming chapters, would accept the inevitability of "broken form, failed mediation, and a subjectivity decentered by

irreconcilable motives."⁶⁰

These late nineteenth and early twentieth-century critiques of modernity opened modern thought up to further delineation and provided a pathway for rebelling against its philosophical and epistemological positions. In the next three chapters, we will take up the specific ideas that have come to represent the postmodern orientation or framework. We will first turn our attention towards the issues of language and referentiality. Specifically, we will examine the way postmodernism questions the unproblematic modern view of language as tool of rational representation.

⁶⁰ Weinstein and Weinstein, "Simmel and the Theory of Postmodern Society," 1989, p. 13.

CHAPTER IV

LANGUAGE, REFERENTIALITY, AND POSTMODERNISM

In this chapter, we will focus on the importance of language in the movement from modern to postmodern thought. Specifically, we will focus on a line of inquiry that originates with the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, leads through the anthropology of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Claude Levi-Strauss, and culminates in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. This line of thought has proven to be instrumental in the shaping of contemporary linguistics and philosophy. Undoubtedly, there are other individuals that could be included in the development of linguistic thought. Consequently, the account to follow is admittedly partial and incomplete. However, for the sake of simplicity and economy we will focus on the Saussure to Derrida connection while down-playing the role of individuals such as C.S. Peirce, M. Heidegger, and L. Wittgenstein.

Ernst Cassirer once wrote that "in the whole history of science there is perhaps no more fascinating chapter than the rise of the 'new science' of linguistics." Cassirer concluded that, "in its importance it may very well be compared to the new science of Galileo which, in the seventeenth-century, changed our whole concept of the

physical world."¹ This dramatic declaration by Cassirer is one that was shared by many other twentieth-century theorists. For Cassirer and others, the new science of linguistics represented a profound change in the outlook of philosophy and the epistemology of the human sciences.

As part of the rise of the science of linguistics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we see a profound movement from an epistemology where objects are seen as atomistic entities with their own true essences to a position where objects are viewed in relation to one another. In the first position, objects are believed to have their own true meaning apart from discourse and thought. In the second position, the supposed meaning of an object is predetermined or shaped by language or a relational structure. These developments and others in the study of language are often called the "linguistic turn."² The linguistic turn "signifies" the transition of humans from being the "rational animal" of the Enlightenment to the "language animal" of the twentieth century.³ This transition it will be argued, while seemingly subtle, marks an important point in the development

¹ Ernst Cassirer quoted in Jonathan Culler, Ferdinand de Saussure (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 147.

² Cf., Richard Rorty (ed.), The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

³ Cf. Charles Taylor, Human Agency and Language (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 217.

of postmodernism. As will be seen in the forthcoming pages, the idea of humans as the language animal works to undermine the description of humans as the rational animal in the eighteenth century. Pure rational consciousness, as conceived in the Enlightenment, is incompatible with the non-rational effects of language. For pure rationality to exist it must be able to remove the influence of tradition and myth from the accounts of the social or natural world (cf. the project of the logical positivists). With the development of linguistic theory, this type of pure rationality is called into question. We will begin with a discussion of Saussure.

Saussure and the Arbitrary Nature of the Sign

When Saussure gave his series of lectures which would later become the posthumous work, Cours de linguistique generale, he encountered a study of language which had remained virtually unchanged for several centuries.⁴ Prior to Saussure's unique and ground-breaking approach to the study of language, three overlapping ideas were dominant in linguistics and comparative philology, as well as modern philosophy and theory. These ideas can be summarized as: (1) nomenclaturism, (2) the separation of language and thought, and (3) theories supporting the idea of a world of independent objects. Saussure can be seen as directly or

⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959 (1915)).

indirectly undermining each one of these foundations of Occidental thought. We will discuss each of these ideas separately.

First, "nomenclaturism" can be viewed as an approach where language is seen as an act of naming. In this position on language, either God in biblical accounts or humans in Plato's Cratylus are seen, in some original state, as correctly linking sound with objects.⁵ To find the true meaning of these spoken words, we must turn to what could be called a "hermeneutics of recovery." This project of recovery will enable investigators to find the true relations of words and ideas which was somewhere lost in historical evolution. The process of hermeneutical recovery will enable humans to locate the exact relationship between sound and referent.

Secondly, Occidental philosophy, particularly as manifested in the Enlightenment, assumes a division between the ideas of thought and the everyday words of language. "Language was an activity with words and thought was an activity with ideas: words depended on ideas, but ideas did not depend on words."⁶ In this view, thought is not influenced by the structure of language. It is a non-linguistic or pre-linguistic realm. Thought is a private

⁵ Plato, Cratylus, trans. by H.N. Fowler (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1926).

⁶ Roy Harris, Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games With Words (London: Routledge, 1988), p.2.

collection of ideas internally contained and interacting in the mind of the individual. Language comes into play only when we try to communicate our ideas to someone else in a discursive situation. Thought is a non-discursive activity and consequently not susceptible to the distortion of interactive speech and writing (i.e., language is a neutral medium).

This division between language and thought leads to the third position which Saussure encountered. In this position another layer is added to the division between ideas and words. We are left with a structure which makes distinctions between objects, language, and thought. Here the world is seen as a "fixed object of analysis quite separate from the forms of discourse by which men speak of it and by which they represent their thoughts."⁷ This structure reveals a realm of objects which is distinct from our idea of the objects and our discourse on the objects. Objects have their own true essences or meanings apart from our internal ideas about the objects and discourses on the objects. One of the central problems in Western philosophy has been how to capture these objects in thought and discourse. In modernity, the mind was seen as a mirror of reality or a "mirror of nature."⁸ Language was seen as a tool to communicate this reality. The

⁷ Timothy Reiss, The Discourse of Modernism (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 23.

⁸ Cf. Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

true nature of objects can be captured and conveyed through extensive observation and classification as exemplified by Newtonian science. This view is represented by Condillac's efforts to perfect language through the use of algebra, as discussed in the second chapter. From this perspective, language is seen as allowing for the accumulation of knowledge. We will return later to a discussion of how Saussure undermines each of these premises. However, first we must discuss some of Saussure's general views on language.

In order to develop and refine a scientific discipline of linguistics, Saussure thought it was important to define its primary realm of inquiry, language. Saussure defines language as a system of signs. The sign is defined as a union of signifier (verbal utterances, morphemes, word) and signified (concept, idea, object). Further defining this union Saussure writes,

The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression, it makes on our senses. The sound image is sensory...⁹

Here, Saussure counters nomenclaturism's claim that language is merely the act of connecting a name to an object. The sign connects a mental concept and a verbal image together into one linguistic unit. The sign only has meaning in its appeal to a psychologically imprinted structure. In this connection, signs unite concepts and sound, not an object and

⁹ Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, 1959, p. 66.

its "correct" or "incorrect" name.

With the sign identified as the connection of a signifier with a signified, Saussure introduces his "first principle of linguistics;" the arbitrary nature of the sign. By this, Saussure means that there is no natural link between the signifier and the signified. In other words, there is no natural relationship between the verbal utterance and the concept or idea it defines. The utterance could be anything as long as it is recognized and understood in a discursive community. For example,

The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-o-r which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the existence of different languages.¹⁰

This is an obvious characteristic of language which, according to Saussure, "no one disputes."¹¹ However, there is "more to the arbitrary nature of the sign than the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified."¹² When one engages in comparative linguistics, one quickly comes to the conclusion that not only do signifiers vary from culture to culture and from situation to situation, but also signifieds. Concepts, ideas, etc. are contingent upon the structure of a particular language. They vary from culture

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 68.

¹² Jonathan Culler, Ferdinand de Saussure, 1986, p. 30.

to culture and time to time. They have an arbitrary character similar to the signifiers. For example, the process of translating from one language to another does not entail simply the substitution of one signifier for another. Different languages have concepts which are not immediately translatable. For example, "the French 'aimer' does not go directly into English; one must choose between 'to like' and 'to love.'"¹³ In this regard, it can be concluded that each language "articulates or organizes the world differently."¹⁴ Consequently, languages can be seen as creators of reality rather than instruments to convey the mind's mirror-like reflection of reality.

If signifiers and signifieds are both arbitrary, the questions arise, what defines a sign and gives it meaning? For Saussure, the sign is defined in terms of its relationship with other terms in a total system or structure. Saussure writes,

When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is being what the others are not.¹⁵

Consequently, in languages there are only differences.

Difference is what gives the sign its meaning. Meaning,

¹³ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁵ Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, 1959, p. 117.

then, is a result of a linguistic system, which organizes signifieds based on phonetic differences. In this respect, different languages have different types of differentiation. Each language can be seen as an independent system which organizes reality through unique types of signified differentiations.

For the individual, language provides a system of rules and forms (*la langue*) from which we construct everyday speech (*parole*). *La langue* is a social creation. It is prior to the individual and consciousness. It is not within our conscious will and ability to deviate from its rules. From the structural rules of *langue*, we construct our individual *parole*. The structure of *langue* is concrete and immutable. It is not simply chosen by the individual speaker. For Saussure, "language furnishes the best proof that a law accepted by a community is a thing that is tolerated and not a rule to which all freely consent."¹⁶ We are contained within what Nietzsche had earlier referred to as the "prison house" of language.

The implications of Saussure's thought are both paradigm shattering and paradigm forming. It has relevance far outside the fields of linguistics or semiotics. Saussure's work can be seen as indirectly forcing a reevaluation of much

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

of modern philosophical thought and epistemology.¹⁷ Each of the three overlapping views of language and philosophy we encountered in the beginning of this discussion are called into question. First, the idea of nomenclaturism is no longer viable, since Saussure has shown that language encompasses more than link between a sound and an image. The sign unifies a concept and a sound. The sound or signifier is arbitrary. It makes no difference what sound is announced as long as the sound is recognizable and is meaningful within a speech community. Also, the concept or signified is contingent, since other languages have different concepts and because signs change may shift their meaning across time and space. In other words, reality is not immutable; it is mediated through language.

Another consequence of Saussure's work is that the important distinction between thought and discourse is challenged. By showing how la langue structures the use of parole, the idea that thought is somehow disconnected from language becomes implausible. The rules of language structure both discourse between individuals and individual thought. Thought cannot take place outside the confines of language. This is an important move away from private

¹⁷ This revaluation was not put forward by Saussure himself. Philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, have taken up the task of exploring and explicating the meaning of Saussure's work for the Western theoretical heritage.

consciousness to what can be called the public sign.¹⁸

Finally, the idea that objects are separate entities with their own essence is undermined. The distinction between thought, discourse, and objects become blurred.

Within the Saussurian framework, objects cannot have their own essences or independent reality. These perceived essences are provided by a community of language. The nature of an object is a reflection of la langue. In Fredric Jameson's words, "You can see only as much as your model permits you to see."¹⁹ Objects have no meaning apart from their connection to a linguistic community which defines and shapes their meaning. Furthermore, the idea that the true nature of objects can be captured through an appropriate method, performed by a thinking and acting subject is challenged. Parole is structured by la langue prior to the individual's encounter with objects. Thus, the classification of objects by an individual is a result of the rules of la langue. The thinking and acting subject is a passive recipient of la langue and cannot escape to give some "god's eye view" of the object. The object's meaning is already determined before its encounter with individual consciousness.

¹⁸ Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Modernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-Francois Lyotard," *New German Critique* 33, 1984, p. 110.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 14.

Saussure's only published work was influential in the development of three important theoretical movements of the twentieth century: structuralism, semiotics, and deconstructionism. Two of these, structuralism and deconstructionism, will be discussed in forthcoming sections.

Language and Anthropology: Whorf and Levi-Strauss

In the United States, the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf can be seen as a complementary, yet distinct, contribution to what was described earlier as the "linguistic turn." Whorf, who was a student of the eminent linguist, Edward Sapir, although unfamiliar with Saussure's work, gave anthropological support to the arbitrary nature of the sign and its theoretical and epistemological implications in ethnolinguistics. Sapir had argued that "the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group."²⁰ From this insight, Sapir reached the conclusion that "the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached"--distinct in human relations, view of the sacred, and emotional expression.²¹

Working from Sapir's assumptions, Whorf's work succeeded in providing empirical support for Sapir's observations.

²⁰ Edward Sapir, Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality, ed. by David Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), p. 162.

²¹ Ibid., p. 162, emphasis added.

Whorf's insights on linguistics came, in part, from fieldwork he conducted with the Hopi Indians of Arizona. Through a careful analysis of their language, Whorf concluded that the Hopi language have no words to express the movement of time.

After long and careful study and analysis, the Hopi language is seen to contain no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expression that refer directly to what we call "time," or to past, present, or future, or to enduring or lasting, or to motion as kinematic rather than dynamic...²²

In Saussurian terms, it may be said that the Hopi language has a different set of signs. As a result, the Hopi have not only a different language, but a different metaphysics and cosmology. No word in the Hopi language is capable of expressing the Western idea of the perpetually flowing realm of time (i.e., a flow of past, present, and future). Instead, the Hopi see time in terms of manifested and manifesting. Manifested includes "all that is or has been accessible to the senses."²³ Manifesting refers to what we call future and "all that we call mental--everything that appears or exists in the mind."²⁴ For the Hopi, the manifesting does not represent the flow of time from future

²² Benjamin Lee Whorf, "An American Indian Model of the Universe, in Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, ed. by John Carroll (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956), p. 57. With regard to the development of modern Western conceptualizations of time, cf. Jerome H. Buckley, The Triumph of Time (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

²³ Whorf, "An American Indian Model of the Universe," 1956, p. 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

into present into past. Manifesting represents something that is "already with us in vital and mental form."²⁵

From Whorf's encounter with the structure of Hopi language, he concludes that "concepts of 'time' and 'matter' are not given in substantially the same form by experience to all men but depend upon the nature of language or languages."²⁶ In turn, language is the result of the cultural formations of different peoples. Socially produced languages give us our particular view of space, time, and objects. There is no such thing as pure experience unencumbered by the effect of language. The community in which language is embedded shapes and molds experience. Language provides the inner structure by which we experience the world. This view, like Saussure's, stands in complete contrast to the Enlightenment's view of language as a mirror of reality.

Levi-Strauss: Language, Structure, and Myth

In a statement reminiscent of Cassirer's, Claude Levi-Strauss once predicted that the advent of structural linguistics would "play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics has played for

²⁵ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁶ Benjamin L. Whorf, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language," in Ibid., p. 158.

the physical sciences."²⁷ In Levi-Strauss' view, the structural linguistics inaugurated by Saussure and refined by the Russian Formalists provided the human sciences with the material for the construction of a rigorous new method. This new method was capable of revealing not only the phonetic and syntactical makeup of various languages, but more importantly for Levi-Strauss, the underlying structures or general laws of culture. In general, Levi-Strauss' work attempted to fuse together the linguistic insights of Saussure, and other structural linguists such as N. Troubetzkoy and R. Jakobson with the sociology of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss into something that came to be called "structural anthropology." With Levi-Strauss, structuralism as a method expands and becomes further refined. As the structural method progressed, Levi-Strauss felt it would eventually succeed in bridging the gap between the exact and social sciences.²⁸

Just as Saussure had stressed the importance of understanding words (signifiers or morphemes) in negative relation to other words and in terms of the larger system of language (la langue), Levi-Strauss wanted to understand the cultural whole based on the inner relationship of a society's elementary parts. These elementary parts did not have meaning by themselves, but only as part of larger system of

²⁷ Claude Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, trans. by Clair Jacobson (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 33.

²⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

relations. Particularly important in this method was the identification of binary categories, an idea borrowed from the Russian Formalists. Binary categories or oppositions provided the unconscious material on which a culture constructs its understanding of the world. Identifying the underlying and unconscious binary scheme would inevitably lead to a deep understanding of the culture. The "truth" of a culture was to be found in the unconscious structure which in turn provided the rules for everyday practice, discourse, and ritual.

By employing the structuralist method, a seemingly meaningless endeavor such as comparing the cuisine of two cultures becomes a means for determining the unconscious inner structure of a society. Levi-Strauss writes,

Like language, it seems to me, the cuisine of a society may be analyzed into constituent elements, which in this case we can call 'gustemes,' and which may be organized according to certain structure of opposition and correlation. We might then distinguish English cooking from French cooking by means of three oppositions: endogenous/exogenous; central/peripheral; marked/not marked.²⁹

English and French cuisines are distinguishable by their binary oppositions. English cuisine emphasized staple food with ingredients that are national and prepared in a bland manner. Conversely in French cuisine, the distinctions between endogenous/exogenous and central/peripheral are blurred. French culture makes a distinction between marked

²⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

and non-marked (i.e., those with and without particular spices added). What is of paramount importance here is that the unconscious constituent elements of a society's cuisine provides a means for understanding the structure by which the society categorizes and organizes, not just food, but the world.

Much of the structural method of Levi-Strauss was directed at some of anthropology's most persistent areas of confusion, specifically kinship systems and mythologies. Understanding the logic of kinship systems had been an important methodological problem throughout the relatively short history of anthropology. However, using the structural method Levi-Strauss argued,

Like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems. Kinship systems, like phonemic systems, are built by the mind on the level of unconscious thought....Although they belong to another order of reality, kinship phenomena are of the same type as linguistic phenomena.³⁰

From the insights of structural linguistics, kinship systems were to be understood in relation to one another and as part of the logic of an entire system of kinship rather than as isolated elements. For Levi-Strauss, this inquiry revealed that "the kinship system is a language."³¹ By treating kinship as a language, it was possible to uncover a deeper logic of a culture under examination. Essentially, Levi-

³⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

³¹ Ibid., p. 47.

Strauss concluded that when each member of a society was placed within the context of the distinctions that make-up kinship terminology and role distinctions, the entire logical system of that culture could be determined. As such, general laws of culture could be developed.

The explanation of myth had also been a methodologically problematic enterprise for anthropologists. Unlike language or kinship systems, myths seemed to lack an overall logic and continuity. Myths seemed to vary from myth teller to myth teller and from situation to situation. However, myths also have the characteristics of being timeless and universal. There exists an "astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions."³² The seemingly arbitrary nature of myths and myth telling coupled with their apparent universality made it extremely difficult to grasp the meaning of myths in a cultural setting. In order to understand myths, Levi-Strauss felt it was important to employ and transcend the Saussurian distinction between langue and parole. Myth, like language, has a part that "refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago."³³ However, it also "explains the present and the past as well as the future."³⁴ Myth is at once an explanation of

³² Ibid., p. 208.

³³ Ibid., p. 209.

³⁴ Ibid., p.209.

historical phenomena and a timeless philosophy of life. This dual nature of myth requires that it be seen as a special case of language. Levi-Strauss writes,

It is that double structure, altogether historical and ahistorical, which explains how myth, while pertaining to the realm of parole and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of langue in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute entity on a third level which, though it remains linguistic by nature, is nevertheless distinct from the other two.³⁵

From this distinction of myth, Levi-Strauss comes to the conclusion that "myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling."³⁶ With this view of myth-as-language as a foundation, Levi-Strauss proceeds to examine several myths appearing in different cultures. The myths he explores, such as the Oedipus myth, the Zuni origin and emergence myth, and Plains mythology reveal a deep structure of meaning. The structure can be found by examining the bundles of relations within a mythology. The bundles or mythemes can be revealed by examining only the elements of a myth which are necessary

³⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 210, emphasis added. In some ways this parallels Alfred Schutz's phenomenological notion that language is a hidden treasure, partly not even accessible to some members of the in-group. Denotations of words, connotations, idioms and dialects relate at a semi-conscious level that interlinks the historical experience of a group. Cf., Schutz essay on the "Stranger" and the "NewComer" in Collected Papers, Vol. 2 (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff: 1964), pp. 91-119.

to tell the story. The mythemes reveal an even deeper code than that of langue. "Behind the individual telling or parole, and behind the langue from which that parole derives," there exists "a kind of super-langue, which emits a fundamental message."³⁷ For Levi-Strauss, primary among these mythemes is a search for the resolution of oppositions, such as the distinction between nature and culture.

The inner structure of myth is as logical as any in contemporary Western science. Levi-Strauss concludes that "the same logic processes operate in myth as in science, and that man has always been thinking equally well..."³⁸

It was Levi-Strauss' goal to show, "not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact."³⁹ Following the lead of the structural linguists, Levi-Strauss concluded that "if the human mind appears determined in the realm of mythology, a fortiori it must also be determined in all its spheres of activity."⁴⁰

One of the founders of structural linguistics, N. Troubetzkoy, reduced the importance of structural linguistics

³⁷ Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 44.

³⁸ Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, 1963, p. 230.

³⁹ Claude Levi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

to four basic positions:

First, structural linguistics shifts from the study of conscious linguistic phenomena to study of their unconscious infrastructure; second, it does not treat terms as independent entities, taking instead as its basis of analysis the relations between terms; third, it introduces the concept of the system...finally, structural linguistics aims at discovering general laws...⁴¹

These positions, with minor revisions, also can be used to summarize the importance of the work of Levi-Strauss. Structuralism, in all its varieties, is part of an important shift away from emphasizing the importance of consciousness towards that of structure. For the structuralist the "truth" of a language or a culture resides in the deep unconscious structure which is prior to individual consciousness. In many ways the structuralists extend the project which began with the sociological writings of Marx and Durkheim in the nineteenth century by elaborating the notion of structure exterior to the individual. Marx, Durkheim, and the structuralist all seek to treat humans as part of larger system of determination. The coherent ego of the Enlightenment, inaugurated by Cartesian rationalism, becomes suspect. Behind the back of this ego resides a structure which molds its everyday speech, modes of expression, and action. The outcome is that the system or structure, whether

⁴¹ Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, 1963, p. 33. As we shall see in the next section, the ability to discover "general laws" is one of the central distinguishing features between structuralism and poststructuralism.

conscious or unconscious, is placed above individual elements and the rational ego.

However, the structuralist position was not free from critiques or revisions. As we shall see with the work of Jacques Derrida, in the 1960's there arises a post-structuralism which, although informed by structuralism, seeks to rethink some of structuralism's central positions on language, such as the search for general laws of language or culture. This movement, it will be argued, constitutes the most radical break with modern thought and marks the movement into the postmodern.

Derrida: Language and Presence

Jacques Derrida begins one of his most important works, the 1967 book Of Grammatology, with the declaration that the problem of language "has invaded the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses."⁴² The so-called "problem of language" expressed by writers such as Nietzsche, Saussure, and Heidegger, had by the early 1960's, infiltrated almost every domain of inquiry. Few intellectual domains remained untouched by the revolutionary insights associated with the "linguistic turn." Particularly affected by the emphasis on language were the areas of philosophy and literary theory.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. by Gayatri Chakravory Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 6.

In Derrida, we encounter the most radical treatment of language in contemporary thought. Furthermore, we find language used as a means for reassessing the project of philosophy and the entire Western theoretical tradition.

As discussed earlier, structural linguistics sought to make explicit the system of relations embedded in language. The goal was to identify the structural elements which make speech or culture possible. However, for Derrida this is a highly problematic project. In Derrida's view, Saussure and the structuralists are guilty of presenting the signifier and signified as being clearly distinguishable parts of the linguistic sign. Essentially, in the structuralist's view of the sign, there is a clear and definable distinction between signifiers and what they signify. The signified is a phoneme or morpheme, while the signified refers to a referent somewhere "out in the world." However, according to Derrida there exists no such clear delineation between the signified and the signifier. Signifiers and signifieds are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to draw a distinction between these two aspects of the sign. Signifiers often serve as signifieds. Likewise, signifieds can serve as signifiers. Summarizing this phenomenon of the sign, Madan Sarup writes,

Suppose you want to know the meaning of a signifier, you can look it up in the dictionary; but all you will find will be yet more signifiers, whose signifieds you can in turn look up, and so on. The process is not only infinite but somehow circular; signifiers keep transforming into signifieds, and vice versa, and you

never arrive at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself.⁴³

For Derrida, this means that language is much more unstable and problematic than had been recognized by Saussure, and the structural linguists and anthropologists. The basic elements of a language or a culture cannot be clearly defined, since they are in continuous movement and transformation. Thus, the structure or basic elements, which serve as the foundation for structuralism, become extremely hard to locate, "pin-down," and analyze. As a result, the search for general laws of language and culture becomes suspect.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly in Derrida's overall philosophical project, this view of language implies that meaning is never totally present in a sign. The sign, which is marked solely by its difference from other signs, is influenced by traces of these other signs which are absent from the original sign. These traces, although absent, affect the sign's meaning. The sign "is always inhabited by other signs which do not present themselves as such; there is always a deferral to something absent."⁴⁴ For example in ordinary language,

The sound sequence bat is a signifier because it contrasts with pat, mat, bad, bet, etc. The noise

⁴³ Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 35.

⁴⁴ Gayatri Spivak quoted in Keith C. Pheby, Interventions: Displacing the Metaphysical Subject (Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1988), p. 57.

that is 'present' when one says bat is inhabited by the traces of forms one is not uttering, and it can function as a signifier only insofar as it consists of such traces...what is supposedly present is already complex and differential, marked by difference, a product of difference.⁴⁵

As a consequence of this differentiation and its traces, "meaning is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers; it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign..."⁴⁶ Signs are composed of a series of signifiers and signifieds which are never fully present in the sign. As a consequence, meaning is never fully present in a sign. Describing this process, which Derrida refers to as differance or difference (to defer and to differ), he writes,

This concept can be called gram or differance. The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself....no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element' being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system....There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.⁴⁷

Meaning can never be fully present since it is constructed through signifiers which contain traces of other signs not

⁴⁵ Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 96.

⁴⁶ Sarup, Introductory Guide to Poststructuralism and Postmodernism, 1988, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, Positions, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 26.

present.

The implications of this view of the sign are very important for the discipline of philosophy and Western thought in general. Despite the insistence in Western thought that the true meaning of an object or a text can be summoned before the investigating subject, meaning, in Derrida's view of language, is always deferred or suspended. Since the sign is differential and is filled with traces of signifiers which are not immediately present, meaning can never be fully present to consciousness. Western thought, particularly as manifested in the Enlightenment, felt the essence or true meaning of an object was graspable. The outcome of this position on language is an undermining of the idea that objects can be immediately present and, as a consequence, grasped by the ego.

With this particular understanding of language as the play of deferring and differing as a backdrop, Derrida develops his most famous device for reading a text. It also becomes a powerful device for rereading the history of Occidental thought. This process of reading or rereading has come to be known as deconstructionism. Describing one of the "steps" in the process of deconstruction, Derrida writes,

...In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy

at a given moment.⁴⁸

To a large degree Western thought has been governed by binary conceptual oppositions such as rationality/irrationality, signifier/signified, sensible/intelligible, nature/culture, speech/writing, subject/object, etc. In these oppositions one of the terms has been given a privileged position in the conceptual hierarchy. However, what this ignores, in Derrida's view, is that if the distinctions are pushed far enough they collapse. The position of the other term relies on the subordination of the other. The dominant term has a trace of the subordinate within its signification. Without this difference in the system of language the higher term would not have meaning since meaning is given by difference. As a consequence of this deconstruction, the privileged concept loses its superior position in the conceptual hierarchy. For example, rationality does not exist as a clearly distinguishable sign from irrationality. Irrationality is contained with the definition of rationality.

The goal of deconstructionism, like semiotics, is to "transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains...and thereby to produce new configurations."⁴⁹ In the deconstruction process the privileging of one term in a

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

hierarchy is revealed as being a rhetorical strategy more than a true representation of some reality "in the world." As an early example of deconstructionism, one can point to one of Derrida's intellectual predecessors, Nietzsche, and his deconstruction of causality. In Nietzsche's perspective, cause comes in a sequence after effect, rather than the traditional view otherwise. It is only after we discern an effect that we look for a cause. Temporally, it can be illustrated that effect precedes cause. Only through a topological operation is it reversed into the received scheme of causality. "If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin."⁵⁰ The deconstruction of causality and the context of discovery illustrates that effect can serve as a foundation in the same manner that cause has. The deconstruction reveals that the elevation of cause over effect is a matter of rhetorical positioning. This has the affect of "causing" the privileged term to lose its position in the conceptual hierarchy. "If either cause or effect can occupy the position of origin, then origin is no longer originary; it loses its metaphysical privilege."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism, 1982, p. 88, emphasis added. The example of Nietzsche's deconstruction of causality is taken from Culler's discussion.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 88.

For Derrida, one of the most important binary distinctions in the history of Western thought is the one between speech and writing. In the history of Western thought, speech has had the privileged position over writing. Writing was seen as something derivative, and consequently profane. The Western tradition has seen the written signifier as being "always technical and representative." Unlike speech, writing "has no constitutive meaning."⁵² Speech, on the other hand, provided the most reliable means to consciousness and truth since it has represented immediate presence and a direct pathway from thought. Derrida writes,

From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself. When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious also of keeping as close as possible to my thought, or to the 'concept,' a signifier that does not fall into the world, a signifier that I hear as soon as I emit it...⁵³

In Derrida's view, this positioning of speech over writings is indicative of Western thought's search for immediate presence. Since writing has been seen as derivative of speech, Western thought has seen it as a place for misunderstanding, ambiguity, and ultimately the absence of "presence to consciousness." Conversely, speech represents a form of communication where "the words bear a meaning and the listener can in principle grasp precisely what the

⁵² Derrida, Of Grammatology, 1976, p. 11.

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, Positions, 1982, p. 22.

speaker has in mind."⁵⁴ However, Derrida argues that the privileging of speech over writing is an opposition that can be deconstructed.

Derrida's deconstruction of the speech/writing hierarchy is developed primarily through a reading of Saussure. In the Course in General Linguistics, Saussure, in keeping with the Western tradition, warns other linguists against treating writing as a primary foci of inquiry of linguistics. For Saussure, "writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise."⁵⁵ Furthermore, for Saussure, "the tyranny of writing" precedes "by imposing itself upon the masses, spelling influences and modifies language."⁵⁶ However, the irony of the position is that Saussure is forced to present his most important concept of language, that of the differential linguistic system, through the example of writing. "Thus writing, which Saussure claimed ought not to be the object of linguistic inquiry, turns out to be the best illustration of the nature of linguistic units."⁵⁷ Saussure

⁵⁴ Culler, On Deconstruction, 1982, p. 101. Today, this orientation towards speech is represented by the work of Jurgen Habermas, one of the most important critics of poststructuralism. For Derrida, Habermas' notion of an "idea speech situation" is build on the privileging of speech over writing and is thus consistent with the Western metaphysical heritage. Cf. Jurgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (Boston, 1971).

⁵⁵ Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, 1959, p. 30.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁷ Culler, On Deconstruction, 1982, p. 101.

undermines his own privileging of speech over writing. His argument brings about a reversal of his position on the speech/writing division. Despite Saussure's intentions, speech becomes a form of writing.

Saussure position on speech and writing, Derrida argues, is part of Western metaphysical thinking, particularly its division or binary distinction between mind/body.

Saussure points at the inversion of the natural relationship between speech and writing. It is not a simple analogy: writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos.⁵⁸

However, as Derrida attempts to show, if this division between speech and writing, as well as the division between mind and body, are pushed far enough they fall under their own weight. Saussure is not able to present a description of speech without recourse to writing. The deconstruction of speech/writing reveals that the hierarchy is a construction of the Western metaphysical heritage which places supreme value on presence rather than a reflection of any "real" or absolute distinction. Speech represents a logocentrism, where the privileging of one term over another serves as a foundation for a system of knowledge (e.g., rationality over irrationality).

Derrida's deconstructionism, although primarily aimed at philosophical works, has had its most important impact in the

⁵⁸ Derrida, Of Grammatology, 1976, pp. 34-35.

area of literary criticism. In literary criticism, deconstructionism has become a tool for reexamining the literary work. It has had the effect of removing the author as the primary vehicle for uncovering the text's "true meaning." Likewise, it has had the effect of elevating the critic to the same level as that of the author of a text. This stands in complete contrast with the New Criticism of the 1950's, which saw the author's intentions as a primary focus of critical inquiry.

Deconstructing a literary text is done in a manner similar to the deconstruction of philosophical work. By showing how an established hierarchy eventually undermines the work's initial strategy, the work's rhetorical play is brought to the forefront. The outcome of this, in a broad sense, is that the interpretation rendered by a critic is as "valid" as the author's "original intentions."⁵⁹ There is no need for the critic to engage in a search for the author's "original meaning." Original meaning is not that central, since it is no closer to the "truth" about a text than critical interpretation.

One of the most important implications of deconstructionism for literary criticism and other allied disciplines is its ability to level any privileged access to

⁵⁹ This conclusion is similar to the one in Gadamerian hermeneutics. Cf., Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, trans. by G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

truth. In other words, no individual (lay or professional) has the ability to determine the true nature of meaning. If the play of difference in the sign makes it impossible for meaning to be immediately present or "nailed down," philosophy and all forms of communication simply become texts. These philosophical texts are as much "fictional" as literary works. This prohibits the elevation of philosophy, or for that matter social science (or any discourse), over literature as a superior form of discourse. The final outcome of this is that the world is revealed as being a text, which, unlike in depth hermeneutics, must undergo endless interpretation from different perspectives. Each of these perspectives are potentially as "valid" as the other.⁶⁰

For Derrida, "there is nothing outside of the text." This is because "beyond the text there are only more texts and traces of texts," where meaning is never fully present.⁶¹ In this regard, "external reference can only be a matter of intertextuality."⁶² In other words, no form of discourse can escape the interweaving of language to find and

⁶⁰ By "potentially as valid," I mean that the interpretation of text (which includes everything) is still limited by the social credentials of the interpreter. We will return to the epistemological idealism of postmodernism in chapters 7 and 8.

⁶¹ Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (eds.), After Philosophy: End or Transformation (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 122.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

capture a transcendental signified. Thus, from the Derridean perspective, all we have are discursive formations or texts about the transcendental (reason, truth, etc.), not the fully present idea or concept. Consequently, objective knowledge about the world is impossible.

What is the outcome of all this deconstructing? Is Derrida offering an alternative to the Western tradition? Or have we, as one interviewer of Derrida once remarked, been led into a labyrinth.⁶³ First of all, we can conclude that for Derrida meaning is something that is constructed rather than something that is given. Furthermore, the differential structure of language means that the signifier shapes the meaning of the signified. With this view of the sign, language becomes a tool for a reconsideration or rethinking of Western thought. The search of Occidental thought for immediate presence is revealed as being an impossible dream. Language and its system of differences will always defer (i.e., delay) the idea of presence. The outcome of this is not a new system of knowledge as such. Derrida is not proposing a new system of knowledge, which, for example, treasures absence over presence or writing over speech. Rather, he is showing that all systems of knowledge, while they must rely on certain distinctions, are susceptible to being undermined by the very distinctions that make the

⁶³ Cf. Henri Ronse's remarks in Jacques Derrida, Positions, 1981, p. 5.

system possible (e.g., science reliance upon the binary hierarchy of rationality and irrationality or belief and knowledge). Derrida illustrates "the necessity of regarding the distinction of signifier and signified as functional and provisional rather than substantial..."⁶⁴ In other words, the hierarchy that makes a system of knowledge possible is perhaps necessary for the validity of the system, yet it cannot be grounded by some transcendental signified. This realization, it can be argued, calls for a very sensitive reappraisal of current discourses and the Western theoretical tradition in general.

Postmodernism and the Linguistic Turn

If we can say that the modern way of knowing was built on the distinction between objects, discourse, and thought, then it is clear that the developments in twentieth-century linguistics have seriously questioned these distinctions. In twentieth century thought, there exists a marked shift from seeing language as a tool to capture the essence of reality to viewing language as a means by which that reality is pre-structured. This movement, which began with the attempt of Saussure to establish linguistics as a science, culminates with Derrida's use of language to rethink the entire Western philosophical tradition. Language and its ability to refer has unquestionably become, in this century, one of the most

⁶⁴ Culler, Ferdinand de Saussure, 1986, p. 144.

important topics in the human sciences and one of the primary issues in the rebellion against cultural modernity.

In summary, we can say that the linguistic turn helped bring about three related ideas that are central to postmodern thought: (1) consciousness is predetermined by structure (a point further developed in the next chapter), (2) thought and discourse are determined by language, and (3) objects have no essences apart from those given by language. In regard to the first idea, the insights of Saussure, Whorf, Levi-Strauss, while certainly diverse, all share the conviction that language structures consciousness. Despite Descartes' claim that consciousness is the center of knowledge, developments in linguistics point to the fact that consciousness is already predetermined by language. Consequently, the subject is displaced as the center of knowledge by an immutable structure. The second point proceeds from the first. If consciousness is predetermined by language, there can be no thought which takes place without language, or some form of symbolic communication. Thought, unlike its Enlightenment descriptions, is not a separate and unique realm. It is a product of language and linguistic differentiation. Thirdly, this means that objects do not have their own independent essences. Any supposed essence attributed to objects are merely products of a particular language that arranges and describes the world in a certain way. When this view is taken to its extreme, as

with Derrida, there literally can be nothing outside of language or in Derrida's terminology, "the text." The nature of objects, societies, and the cosmos are all given by the language. They do not exist without the mediating effects of language.

At this juncture it is important to discuss in more detail what makes Derrida postmodern. Why does his work mark a break with the modern and a full-fledged movement into the postmodern? From the earlier discussion, we can see the influences of Saussure and Levi-Strauss upon Derrida. What separates Derrida from his predecessors is the degree of his radical stance toward language. The linguistic insights of Saussure were directed at developing the sciences of linguistics and semiology (semiotics, i.e., the sciences of signs). For Saussure, as well as Levi-Strauss, language provides the scientific base or basic elements for the exploration and understanding of the "superstructural" components of speech or culture. Derrida's stance on language makes this search for the basic elements of language or culture a highly problematic enterprise. Derrida's view that language defers meaning is such a radical approach that it makes the search for basic elements or foundations an impossibility. The idea of presence, on which most systems of knowledge rely, is always deferred by the characteristics of language. Derrida's poststructuralism also closes the possibility of finding a point outside of language from which

to make objective or scientific claims and construct general laws of society or culture. Unlike the structuralists, Derrida's position on language makes it impossible to have objective views about the world. To summarize the deconstructionist point, all we have are "texts" and all knowledge producers are engaged in literary criticism. In Nietzsche's words, "We are prisoners of our grammar."⁶⁵

In the next chapter, we will explore another one of postmodernism central tenants--that of the decentering of the subject. As we shall see, this issue is closely related to the issue of language and referentiality. However, we will discuss it as a separate and unique part of the postmodern framework.

⁶⁵ Frederick Nietzsche, quoted in Keith Pheby, Interventions, 1988, p. 43.

CHAPTER V

THE DECENTERING OF THE SUBJECT IN POSTMODERN THOUGHT

In the last chapter, we discussed the postmodern orientation towards language and referentiality. One of the implications of the postmodern treatment of language is that the all-knowing or expressive subject of modernity comes to be view as embedded within a system of signification that structures his or her ability to know and feel. In other words, the subject becomes "decentered" as the source of knowing and feeling. In this chapter, we will further explore the issue of the decentering of the subject. By "decentering" it is meant that the subject, which served as the center piece of much of modern thought, has been undermined or displaced as a firm foundation for epistemology and creativity.

Specifically in the following discussion, we will consider how the works of Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault have contributed to the postmodern project of decentering the subject. In addition to a consideration of these writers, we will explore how the decentering of the subject has manifested itself in other areas of culture. In this regard, this chapter contains an examination of recent developments in the cultural production of what is labeled "pop art" and "neo-pop art." We will explore how the phenomenon of pop art may be seen as part of

decentering process. First, however, we will examine the meaning of the modern subject.

The Meaning of the Modern Subject

The grounding of knowledge and creativity in the conditions of subjectivity has been manifested in at least three related forms. First, in philosophical discourse there is a Cartesian derived notion of the subject as both an instrument of, and condition for, the creation and accumulation of knowledge. Within Cartesian thinking, rational consciousness is "the guarantor of certainty and knowledge."¹ The second form of the modern subject, is the Rousseauian idea of the romantic or expressive self. As discussed in Chapter 2, this Rousseauian self is thought to be "deeper" and "truer" than the fully coherent, rational ego of Cartesianism. The final form of the modern subject is manifested in the universal subject of the human sciences. This version of the subject can perhaps be viewed as a combination of Cartesian and Rousseauian formulations. It is evident in various biological, psychological, and sociological theories which seek to locate a universalistic and ahistorical human nature or essence. The purpose of this search for a human nature is to construct a general theory of humankind. This search

¹ Keith C. Pheby, Interventions: Displacing the Metaphysical Subject (Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1988), p. 17.

for a foundational human nature has appeared in such diverse forms as; utilitarianism, Marx's labor theory of human nature, the biological body, behaviorism, ego psychology, and developmental psychology, to name but a few.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the modern subject, in either its Cartesian or Rousseauian form, began to come under considerable scrutiny, reappraisal, and in some cases, attack.² In part, this reassessment was directed at what some writers believed were the pretensions and theoretical failings of the autonomous modern subject. Since the writings of Descartes in the seventeenth century, philosophy had held that the conditions of subjectivity were responsible for the acquisition of knowledge. Other forms of reassessment of the modern conceptualization of the subject were the result of the unintended outcomes of various lines of theoretical investigations found in such disciplines as linguistics and psychoanalysis.

For Nietzsche, from whom many of the early critiques of the subject originate, "the 'subject' is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is."³ For Nietzsche, as well as

² Some critiques predate this. Hume and G. Lichtenberg had rendered critiques of the self in the eighteenth-century.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. by W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 267.

contemporary postmodern theorists, the Cartesian subject is a rhetorical construct--a product of a particular cultural and linguistic orientation. In a fragment from The Will to Power, Nietzsche elaborates his attack on the modern, Cartesian subject;

'There is thinking; therefore there is something that thinks': this is the upshot of all Descartes' argumentation. But that means positing as 'true a priori' our belief in the concept of substance--that when there is thought there has to be something 'that thinks' is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed.'

For Nietzsche, the concept of the subject in philosophical discourse is a subjectification or anthropomorphism created by a creature which "can only prosper through a relative rightness..."⁵ In other words, the autonomous subject of modernity is a supreme fiction. However, this fictionally constructed subject has nevertheless, managed to serve as the foundation for much of modern thought.

As we shall see in the forthcoming discussion, the modern desire to ground knowledge of the world in either a coherent, deep, or natural subject is attacked in postmodern thought as being inaccurate, fictional, or at least highly problematic.

⁴ Ibid., p. 268.

⁵ Ibid., p. 266.

Freud, Lacan, and the Unconscious

It is perhaps an understatement to say that the totality of Freud's work constitutes one of the most influential doctrines of thought in the twentieth century. The view of the subject provided by Freud calls for a reappraisal of many modern and Enlightenment notions of the subject and the conditions of subjectivity. Paramount among these Freudian notions is the concept of the unconscious. For Freud, the unconscious was a vast, unchartered "region" which contained the raw, essential energy of humankind. While consciousness may be the outcome of a culturally-specific reality-order, the unconscious contains the essential material of human nature itself. In other words, the unconscious contains the foundational characteristics of all humankind. Freud's aim was to bring this foundational material into the realm of scientific investigation and classification, thereby revealing the hidden elements which unite all individuals in all places and times.

In a much discussed example from the annals of psychoanalysis, Freud relates the story of "Rat Man." This example can serve as an avenue into the Freudian understanding of the unconscious and its relationship with the conscious subject. Freud describes the case of Rat Man as follows:

One day when he was away on his summer holidays the idea suddenly occurred to him that he was too fat

and that he must make himself slimmer. So he began he began getting up from the table before pudding came round and tearing along the road without a hat in the blazing heat of an August sun. Then he would dash up a mountain at the double, till, dripping with perspiration, he was forced to come to a stop...Our patient could think of no explanation of this senseless, obsessional behavior until it suddenly occurred to him that at that time his lady had also been stopping at the same resort; but she had been in the company of an English cousin, who was very attentive to her and of whom the patient had been very jealous. This cousin's name was Richard, and, according to the usual practice in England, he was known as Dick. Our patient, then, had wanted to kill this Dick.⁶

In this case the unconscious desire to kill Richard is manifested in the surrogate form of losing weight. The reality principle makes it impossible for the conscious contemplation of Richard's murder to become an actual possibility. Consequently, this desire is relegated to the unconscious where it "is associatively related in some way to the its original presentation" (i.e., the relationship between the English signifier "Dick" and the German signified "losing fat").⁷

In this example, and at various other points throughout his work, Freud reveals two important ideas about the functioning of the human mind. First, is the obvious illustration of the workings of the unconscious. The unconscious is understood to be a central, yet vastly

⁶ Sigmund Freud, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. X, ed. by J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 188-89.

⁷ David Archard, Consciousness and the Unconscious (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1984), p. 26.

different, aspect or realm of the human psyche. For Freud, this realm was capable of being "mapped" with the use of proper psychoanalytical methods. In Freud's work, the unconscious, is shown to be the harbinger of symbols, images, and impulses which have a direct effect upon conscious behavior. What this reveals is that the unconscious is the most essential part of the individual which "speaks most truthfully...in slips of the tongue and other errors..."⁸ The unconscious speaks the truth, not the rational consciousness.⁹ For Freud, the subject (i.e., the human being as a focus of understanding) is split into two irreconcilable parts, the rational conscious and the non-rational unconscious. Freud's development of the dual nature of the subject has important ramifications for Cartesian inspired thought. If the fully coherent, rational subject of Descartes, is shown to have another action initiating realm, of equal importance, the conditions of subjectivity (i.e., consciousness) cannot be solely responsible for the conditions for the acquisition of knowledge. In other words, the rational subject is not a complete master of his/her patterns of thought and action.

⁸ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 3.

⁹ There are some general similarities between this treatment and Rousseau's.

The second important point revealed in Freud's discussion of the case of Rat Man (and the most important for postmodern thought), points to the importance of signs and symbols in the manifestation of the unconscious. While all relations in the unconscious are not as straightforward as the one between "Dick" and Richard, the example of Rat Man does reveal how language is an important feature of the unconscious and the analysand's translation and interpretation of it.

This relationship between language and the unconscious was not systematically developed by Freud. Generally, Freud employed nineteenth century biological metaphors in describing the unconscious and was unfamiliar with the formulations being developed in linguistics. With the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, we encounter one of the first systematic attempts to fuse the insights of Freudian psychology with Saussurian linguistics. The implications of this union of Freud and Saussure provided psychoanalysis with a dramatically different and controversial vision of the human subject. First of all, this union strengthened the Freudian inspired critique of the coherent, fixed, and foundational subject which had served as the basis for post-Cartesian Philosophy and much of modern psychology. Secondly, it undermined the Freudian view of the unconscious as a natural, universal, and essential human entity (i.e., the unconscious as a

harbinger of truth).

Ironically, Lacan proclaimed his project as a "return to Freud." Lacan wanted to free Freud's ideas from "the litter of banalising glosses and explanations that later writers have heaped upon them."¹⁰ Lacan's target in his return to Freud was the international psychoanalytic movement and American ego psychology. For Lacan, these movements were responsible for an erroneous, overly ego-oriented, and consequently one-dimensional treatment of Freud's work. Lacan believed that these movements represented an "effort to purge Freud's writings of elements that are accused of having no empirical basis" (i.e., the unconscious).¹¹ As a fundamentalist Freudian (i.e., returning to Freud's original interpretation of the unconscious), Lacan wanted to revive the radical insights of Freud in relation to the unconscious and fuse them with some of the recent terminology and methodology of linguistics.

Lacan's contribution to psychoanalysis and philosophy revolved around three related propositions. First, the idea that the unconscious is structured like a language. Secondly, the notion that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other. And finally, the idea that language is the

¹⁰ Malcolm Bowie, Freud, Proust and Lacan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 101.

¹¹ Ragland-Sullivan, Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of the Psychoanalysis, 1986, p. 5.

condition (i.e., the cause) of the unconscious.¹² Of these contributions, it is the latter one which is the most significant for our current discussion. In order to explore the importance of this last proposition we will begin with Lacan's discussion of the "mirror stage" of childhood.

In July of 1936, Lacan presented his first views on the mirror stage at the Fourteenth International Psycho-Analytical Congress in Marienbad, Czechoslovakia.¹³ For Lacan, the first six months of human life is a pre-linguistic or "Imaginary period" where images are undifferentiated and "the infant experiences its body as fragmented parts and images."¹⁴ For Lacan, in the "pre-mirror phase the child has a "lack of coordination of his own motility...intra-organic and relational discordance."¹⁵ The child does not have the linguistic capacity to perceive himself or herself as an autonomous individual. This is due to the fact that it is only

¹² Cf. David Archard, Consciousness and the Unconscious, 1984, p. 60.

¹³ Lacan failed to submit a written text to the proceedings. The written portion discussed here is from John Muller and William Richardson's, Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to Ecrits (New York: International Universities Press, 1982), pp. 26-41.

¹⁴ Ragland-Sullivan, Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis, 1986, p. 18.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), pp. 18-19.

through language that we are provided with the differentiations between self and other and self and world.

Beginning somewhere in the six to eighteenth month maturation period, the child is able or has the opportunity to view itself in a mirror or through a mirror-like reflection from a significant other. The image the child perceives is one of a connected whole. The experiential body which is fragmented and uncoordinated is counter-transposed to a body that is whole and non-fragmented. The gap between the experiential body and the perceived body creates a sense of insufficiency and anticipation. The child develops a sense of desire for the unity reflected in the mirror or through the significant other. Through the other reflected in the mirror, the child desires the state when a fully coherent body will be possessed. The importance of this for Lacan is that in the mirror phase the child encounters and develops a desire for the "other" reflected in the mirror. The "child assumes itself to be the 'other' it sees reflected, and models itself upon its image."¹⁶

By the time the mirror-stage has come to a close, somewhere around eighteen months, the child has passed from treating images as real to representing them in verbal signifiers. The mirror phenomenon is the mechanism which

¹⁶ Kate Soper, Humanism and Anti-Humanism (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Press, 1986), p. 125, emphasis added.

gives rise to language and the subsequent acquisition of the symbolic order. Describing this transition, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan has written,

Symbolic elements--the ability to name things--replace Imaginary ones in an identificatory reshaping of the subject. The imagistic and fantasmatic subject of identifications continues, nonetheless, to coexist with the subject of language and cultural codes throughout life.¹⁷

Through the mirror stage and resulting acquisition of language, the child has become a social and cultural being.¹⁸

One of the important aspects of the mirror stage is that it points to the beginnings of identity. The unity of the body "has been found outside and, accordingly, the destiny of humans is to (re-) experience themselves only in relationship to others."¹⁹ In other words, the "other" is the model upon which the subject is constructed. Another important point to be found in Lacan's formulation of the

¹⁷ Ragland-Sullivan, Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis, 1986, p. 29.

¹⁸ Although theoretically distinct, this Lacanian insight parallels those made in symbolic interactionist social theory, specifically Cooley's notion of the "looking-glass self" and G.H. Mead's discussion of the development of the "self." Cf., Charles Horton Cooley, Human Nature and Social Order (New York: Scribner's, 1902) and George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1934).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27, emphasis added. As a point of contrast, it is noteworthy to add that the Kanji symbol in Japanese for the human being is "among people," that is, in Japanese society the person is a relational entity.

mirror phase is that it marks the child's entrance into the symbolic and linguistic order. With this entrance, the child replaces the imagistic with signification. The outcome of the acquisition of the symbolic order is that the child's imagistic world is relegated to a secondary realm. For Lacan, this secondary realm is the unconscious. The unconscious is that which is sacrificed or "murdered" by signification. Essentially, the unconscious is the scar left by language and the symbolic order.

The importance of Lacan's reformulation of Freud is that it reveals that the unconscious is not a biological or natural entity that is born into the subject, but is a condition that is acquired through the learning of language. The unconscious, a realm of the psyche which is partly responsible for behavior, is revealed to have its origins in the linguistic and symbolic order. Its source is society not biology. The implication of this is that there are not developmental or biological first principles: Development and "maturation" are always conditioned by the symbolic order. There are no essential human characteristics outside of language and culture, including that mysterious realm known as the unconscious.

In Freud and Lacan we encounter two ideas which call for a reformulation of the modern subject. First, Freud revealed that the unconscious is a unique, separate, and action causing realm. This means that the fully coherent,

rational ego of Cartesianism coexists with a non-rational entity. In other words, the subject has a dual nature. This duality makes the acquisition of complete rationality unobtainable. However, Freud felt that the unconscious was a biological entity, and as such could be mapped with precision. With Lacan, we encounter the idea that the unconscious is not an outcome of biological or genetic makeup. It is not an essential element that exists before culture, language, and society. Society and its linguistic order is responsible for the unconscious. For Lacan, the unconscious is what is left over after the immersion into signification. In Lacan's reformulation of Freud, there is no human essence, which awaits examination and classification. The "human essence" exists only as a result of society. The Freudian inspired search for the universal characteristic or first principle of human nature is shown to be in vain.

In the next section, we will explore another important attack on the modern all-knowing subject--the work of Michel Foucault.

Foucault and the Genealogy of the Subject

In an attempt to distance himself from the emphasis of traditional historiography on continuity and certainty, Foucault, in the Introduction to The Archeology of Knowledge, declares, "Do not ask who I am and do not ask me

to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order."²⁰ Several years later in an interview conducted in the Fall of 1982 at the University of Vermont, when asked to define his academic position and intellectual function at the College de France, Foucault responded, "I don't feel it is necessary to know exactly what I am."²¹ These seemingly innocuous remarks reveal more about Foucault and his position on the subject than would be first recognized. Foucault's entire intellectual goal was, in his words, "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."²² For Foucault, like Nietzsche before him, the subject is not something given. The subject is a social construction. Specifically, for Foucault, the subject is a historically-contingent product of power, discourse, and institutional practices. The subject is defined by, and enmeshed within, a complex network of power and discursive practices. This network is unstable and can never be fully coherent or

²⁰ Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 17.

²¹ Michel Foucault in Technologies of the Self, ed. by L. Martin, H. Gutman, and P. Hutton (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p.9, emphasis added.

²² Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 208.

visible to the individual subject. Consequently, for Foucault to engage in discussions where he provided a definitive declaration of his own subjectivity would have been a violation of his entire theoretical orientation towards the subject and its historical contingency.

Foucault divided his work into three "modes of inquiry," each of which took the historical construction of the subject as its central theme of investigation. These modes of inquiry do not represent a stage like evolution in Foucault's thinking, but point to certain themes which recur throughout the corpus of his work. Despite the changing nature of Foucault's work during his life course, each of the modes of inquiry sought to explore the "modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects."²³ The first theme in Foucault's work examined the "modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences."²⁴ Specifically, Foucault was concerned here with the ways in which the human sciences, which include biology, psychology, and the social sciences, create the subject as an object of classification and analysis, and hence, of social control. The second theme in Foucault's work explored "the objectivizing of the subject in... 'dividing practices'."²⁵ Here, the focus is

²³ Ibid., p. 208.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 208.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 208.

on the ways the subject is divided "inside himself or divided from others."²⁶ These dividing practices are part of institutional classification strategies in which the subject is divided between mad and sane, criminal and non-criminal, normal and pathological, etc..²⁷ Finally, Foucault, particularly in his late work, focused on "the way human beings turns him- or herself into a subject."²⁸ The focus in this mode of inquiry is on the discursive practices in which human beings come to understand and enunciate their subjectivity. For Foucault, this discursive/power creation of a speaking subject (i.e., as a user of discourse) is best exemplified by various techniques associated with the religious or professional confessional. The first two processes are concerned with the different matrixes of power that produce a subject capable of being classified and manipulated. The third process is concerned with the historical creation of a speaking subject which is capable of creating, enunciating, and explaining his/her own "deep" subjectivity.

It is evident from Foucault's description of his work that his main object of examination is discourse. However, it is not discourse alone, but one which is enmeshed within

²⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

²⁷ In some ways this parallels Derrida's deconstruction of philosophical dicotomies in language, see Chapter 4 in this dissertation.

²⁸ Foucault, "Afterword," 1983, p. 208.

complex power configurations or regimes. Like Levi-Strauss, who sought to explore "not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds," Foucault, despite important methodological differences from Levi-Strauss, sought to examine not how humans use discourse and power, but how discourse and power operate on humans.²⁹ Foucault does not consider whether or not these discourses are true reflections of reality, rather he is concerned with how various discourses are used within specific power arrangements to create, classify, and transform humans into subjects. In the following discussion we will focus briefly on each of the three themes in Foucault's examination of the subject and how they contribute to Foucault's overall treatment of the subject.

In The Order of Things, Foucault tackles two related issues: the historical transformation of classification schemas, schemata, and systems (epistemes) and the emergence of the human sciences.³⁰ Specifically, Foucault is concerned with how these related issues produce a subject which can be the object of scientific classification and examination. In order to accomplish such an examination, Foucault employs one of his most

²⁹ Claude Levi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked, trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 12.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, trans. by (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

important early concepts, the episteme. Foucault defines the episteme as,

...the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possible formalized systems...its aim is not to reconstitute the system of postulates that governs all the branches of knowledge of a given period, but to cover an indefinite field of relations...the episteme makes it possible to grasp the set of constraints and limitations, which, at a given moment are imposed on discourse...³¹

Epistemes may be thought of as underlying codes of cultural organization. These codes make certain types of knowledge and cultural production possible.

Foucault argues that in the transformation from the Renaissance, through the Classical Age, to Modernity we have seen profound shifts in epistemes. The Classical episteme (17th and 18th century) centered itself on developing an "exhaustive ordering of the world."³² This ordering worked towards "the discovery of simple elements and their progressive combination..." At the "center they form a table on which knowledge is displayed in a system contemporary with itself."³³ The Classical age aimed at the "project of constructing a universal method of analysis which would yield perfect certainty by perfectly ordering representations and signs to mirror the ordering of the

³¹ Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge, 1972, pp. 191-92.

³² Foucault, The Order of Things, 1970, p. 74.

³³ Ibid., p. 74.

world..."³⁴

However, Foucault's main concern is not with the Classical episteme, but with the rise of the modern episteme. According to Foucault, somewhere at the end of the eighteenth century an important epistemic shift took place. This epistemic shift began to order and classify the world differently from the classical representational episteme. The modern episteme removed representation from the center of its system and replaced it with the human being (man). It is at this point that "man becomes the subject and the object of his own understanding."³⁵

Foucault writes,

When natural history becomes biology, when the analysis of wealth becomes economics, when, above all, reflection upon language becomes philology, and Classical discourse...is eclipsed, then, in the profound upheaval of such an archaeological mutation, man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, and object of knowledge...³⁶

For Foucault, this "archeological mutation" marks the beginning of modernity. Unlike the Classical episteme, which ordered humans within a larger classification system, the modern episteme depicted human beings as being the center of knowledge. Humans become the core of knowledge. The critical aspect of this epistemic upheaval was that

³⁴ Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, 1982, p. 19.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

³⁶ Foucault, Order of Things, 1970, p. 312.

humans came to be viewed as being both a determined empirical product and a knowing transcendental subject (cf. the discussion of Condorcet in Chapter 2 and an earlier discussion in this chapter). Foucault refers to this dual ordering as the empirico-transcendental doublet:

Man, in the analytic of finitude, is a strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since he is a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible...
...The threshold of our modernity is situated not by the attempt to apply objective methods to the study of man, but rather by the constitution of an empirico-transcendental doublet which was called man.³⁷

The empirico-transcendental doublet is the modern subject as we understand it today. He/she is seen as being an empirical outcome of structure but nevertheless capable of grasping his/her own true essence or nature within this structure.

According to Foucault, prior to the eighteenth-century "man did not exist."³⁸ The human sciences could not have developed as they did without the construction of man-as-doublet. The framework provide by the modern episteme allowed the human sciences to emerge. Disciplines (and discourses) such as political economy, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, criminology, and biology all emerged and operated within the framework provided by the modern order of things. Each discipline operating on the

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 318-19.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 344.

dual view of the subject sought to create and establish a particular foundational view of humans. Each discipline sought to capture, describe, and explain what they felt was the true nature of being human. In doing so they each inscribed a certain definition of humans and created different variations on the modern empirical subject.

With the development of the modern episteme, the human sciences were given the idea of an empirical subject, which was capable of being understood by the transcendental subject. With the modern subject in place, the human sciences could begin the process of defining and labeling this newly acquired idea of man as object and subject. Paradoxically, they located the subject within the empirical environment, yet preserve subjectivity as a privileged means for access to this knowledge of the empirical.

Foucault saves some of his more critical remarks on the human sciences for his work, Discipline and Punishment.³⁹ For Foucault, coercion and control go hand-in-hand with the rise and development of the objectifying human sciences. The human sciences provided the "serious discourse" which was used to coerce and transform the human being by new modalities of power. For Foucault, the birth of the human sciences are to be found in the "ignoble

³⁹ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison, trans, by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

archives, where the modern play of coercion over bodies, gestures and behavior has its beginnings."⁴⁰ The institutions of power (hospitals, prisons, bureaucracies, etc.) "needed new, more refined and operationalized discourse and practices," which the human sciences were capable of providing.⁴¹ Foucault writes,

I am not saying that the human sciences emerged from the prison. But, if they have been able to be formed and to produce so many profound changes in the episteme, it is because they have been conveyed by a specific and new modality of power: a certain policy of the body, a certain way of rendering the group of men docile and useful. This policy required the involvement of definite relations of knowledge in relations of power...⁴²

Foucault is pointing out that the human sciences cannot separate their generation of knowledge from the power configurations of modern society. They are part of modern technologies of discipline and control. Like Nietzsche, Foucault would caution that "knowledge works as a tool of power" therefore, "it increases with every increase of power."⁴³ The human sciences' schemes of classification are completely involved in the various processes of coercion and control. They operate within the space provided by a certain thinking and policies about the body

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 191.

⁴¹ Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, 1983, p. 160.

⁴² Foucault, Discipline and Punishment, 1977, p. 305.

⁴³ Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 1968, p. 266.

and the mind.

Another aspect of Foucault's work on the subject, is presented in his works, Madness and Civilization and Discipline and Punishment.⁴⁴ A substantial part of these works explore the "dividing practices" that have been employed in the social categorization and subsequent treatment of the subject. The dividing practices used by psychiatrists, social reformers, and policy and law makers, like the development of the human sciences, have extended and further refined the modern objectivization of the subject.

Foucault's work Discipline and Punishment is subtitled, "the birth of the prison." However, the prison is not Foucault's major concern. Foucault seeks to write,

a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge; a genealogy of the present scientifico-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications and rules, from which it extends its effects and by which it masks its exorbitant singularity.⁴⁵

Foucault is concerned with the ways power and discourse form configurations which produce what he calls "docile bodies." These are bodies which are capable of being molded by power (i.e., psychiatrists, social reformers,

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. by R. Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1973). Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison, 1977. Of these two works, we will discuss the latter as representative of Foucault's work of dividing practices.

⁴⁵ Foucault, Discipline and Punishment, 1977, p. 23.

police, etc.). Here, Foucault is introducing or reintroducing a Nietzschean conception of the body. The Nietzschean body is not a biological entity. The Nietzschean body is a historical and social construction "embedded within a political field" and "subject to power relations which restrain it."⁴⁶ It is a body capable of being altered, transformed, and reformed by power configurations. In Foucault's words, power relations "invest it (the body), mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."⁴⁷ Foucault refers to this relationship between power and the body as "bio-power." One of Foucault's primary missions is to show how the social control of the body or bio-power is made possible in modernity or within the modern episteme.

A crucial point must be made here. It is important to note that Foucault's examination of power and the body is a marked departure from traditional accounts (i.e., Marxist and Neo-Marxist). Those accounts rest on an understanding of sovereign power. Consequently, they generally see power as emanating from top levels of the stratification system, i.e., the state and bourgeoisie, and being used as a tool to control the masses. For Foucault, however, power is

⁴⁶ Barry Smart, Foucault, Marxism and Critique (London: Unwin, 1983), p. 86.

⁴⁷ Foucault, Discipline and Punishment, 1977, p. 25.

omnipresent. It is a factor in every intellectual and policy consideration. Even the allegedly objective classification and treatment of the criminal conducted by experts and the legal system are shown to be in compliance with certain technologies of control (and also technologies of the self).

In addition to his concern for the creation of docile bodies, Foucault is concerned with the array of discourses and practices which make the modern control of the body possible. These discourses and practices serve as the underpinning for classification and exclusion of the "criminal" from the non-criminal. Foucault finds these origins in the modern forms of disciplinary technology (e.g., prisons, humanist reform, counseling, etc.). Disciplinary technologies operate directly on the body. The body is open to power configurations. These configurations seek to forge a body "that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved....discipline makes individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise."⁴⁸ It is this disciplinary power which separates or organizes the criminal from the non-criminal and mandates different techniques to transform the criminal into the non-criminal.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

Foucault argues in his late work, History of Sexuality, that our current understanding of sex and sexuality are modern inventions.⁴⁹ According to Foucault, "We have had sexuality since the eighteenth century and sex since the nineteenth."⁵⁰ Like, Foucault's conception of the historical body, this is a historically constituted sexuality. This is a modern sexuality which is capable of identification, classification, and control. In this instance, however, it is not simply the imposition of disciplinary technologies from "outside" but the willing, speaking subject who takes part, along with the expert, in the classification and control processes.

In this work on sex and sexuality, Foucault moves his focus away from what could be called the "external social forces" which create the subject to a different but related avenue of inquiry. This avenue explores the ways in which the individual sees his or herself as possessing subjectivity. In such related social practices as psychoanalysis and the confessional, it is the subject who must reach "deep within" and express some hidden deep truth about his or her own subjectivity--beyond the surface to the real. In the various confessional practices the

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume I, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77, ed. by C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 210-11.

individual learns to see himself or herself as a subject and cooperate in the enunciation of their subjectivity.

However, there are also important dynamics of power at work in this creation of a speaking subject. Certain institutions have induced the subject to create and speak its subjectivity. It is within such an environment of power that "Western man becomes a confessing animal."⁵¹

Foucault writes:

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations...One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses--or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat.⁵²

For Foucault, "the confession gives certain needs to the soul and renders it a specific nature."⁵³ Church practitioners and various sex professionals have given the individual his or her essence, which must be apprehended by both the investigator and the individual.

For Foucault, the reasons for the insistence on individual confession is a recognition by the experts that

⁵¹ Foucault, History of Sexuality, 1980, p. 59.

⁵² Ibid., p. 59.

⁵³ Paul Wapner, "What's Left: Marx, Foucault, and Contemporary Problems of Social Change." Praxis International, 9, 1989, p. 97.

the self is a protector of some "deep truth." Particularly for Foucault, sex in the modern era has been seen as one of the key sites of this deep truth. The subject, through the aid of an expert, could gain access to this site of truth and render it up for explication and examination. In modernity sex became a matter of truth. Foucault writes,

The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as the problem of truth.⁵⁴

The nineteenth century gave us the "interplay of truth and sex."⁵⁵ Beginning in this period the subject was seen as the harbinger of a great secret which was the foundation of his or her being. This great secret was capable of rendering knowledge about the deep self and humanity if it was "spoken in time to the proper party and by the person who was both the hearer of it and the one responsible for it..."⁵⁶ The individual became at once the object of expert discourse and the subject of his/her self-created subjectivity. The ironic aspect of this treatment of sexuality is in "having us believe that our liberation is in the balance."⁵⁷ Once the individual, through the help

⁵⁴ Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 1980, p. 56.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 159.

of an expert interpreter, brought forth the hidden truth, the door was open to enlightenment, self-understanding, and in the end, self-improvement (and an endless array of T.V. talkshows). However, for Foucault what this reveals is more reliance upon mechanisms of social control or expertization.

Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. It was in the nature of a public potential; it called for management procedures; it had to be taken charge of by analytic discourses. In the eighteenth century, sex became a police matter...an ordered maximization of collective and individual forces...⁵⁸

When "sex became a police matter," new forms of discursive and practical controls were put in place to manage sex. Government bureaucracies arose to deal with issues of reproduction. Experts on sexuality emerged to translate the deep truths and to develop appropriate social policy which could regulate and channel it. Meanwhile, the individual was given the narrative tools for the classification and control of his or her body. The individual had learned to see himself or herself as a subject capable of being the harbinger of deep truths. The subject became an accomplice in his or her own creation, classification, and management.

What is the outcome of Foucault's examination of the modern subject? Perhaps it is best summarized by Foucault's observations that "man is an invention of recent

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

date. And one perhaps nearing its end."⁵⁹ Foucault even went as far to "wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."⁶⁰ Despite the apocalyptic anti-humanist tone of these statements, Foucault is not forecasting the end of the human race. Rather, he is pointing to the subject as an unstable and contingent product of a specific cultural and historical episteme or an "order of things." For Foucault, the subject (man) is a historical creation. The subject, as a personality type and a social datum for examination, is a product of a particular episteme. More specifically and crucially, it is the outcome of a particular discursive strategy and power configuration. The empirico-transcendental subject of modernity is but part of particular "order of things." In the same way that the Classical episteme gave way to the Modern episteme, soon that latter system which placed man at its center will fade away and with it the idea of the subject.⁶¹

In chapter 2, we explored how modernity placed two conceptualizations of the subject at its center: the Cartesian and the Rousseauian. Like other counter-modern thinkers we have examined, Foucault seeks to show how both

⁵⁹ Foucault, The Order of Things, 1970, p. 387.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 387.

⁶¹ Although Foucault rarely uses the term postmodern, this seems to be what he has in mind as a replacement for the modern order of things.

are illusions. However, he proceeds in a somewhat different manner. The Cartesian self, which sought to bring all objects before the investigating subject, is shown not to be ahistorical or universalistic but as part of a particular historically-constituted "order of things" which places man at its center. Likewise, the deep Rousseauian self is shown not to be a vital, untapped realm of knowledge, but something that is created and imposed by certain disciplinary power arrangements and technologies. Instead of history as a litany of humanistic progress or as the unfolding of the human spirit, Foucault gives us a historical journey wrapped in new forms of discipline. For Foucault, humanity does not walk from the darkness of traditional authority and oppression into the light of enlightenment and freedom, but is continuously surrounded by various new forms of coercion and social and self control. Western society continues to erect self-trapping illusions advanced as realities.

Pop Art, Authenticity, and the Subject

So far, we have been primarily concerned with postmodernism as it is manifested in theory and philosophy. This may give the impression that what is labeled postmodern is merely an intellectual discursive activity occurring in the discipline of philosophy or academia in general. However, many of the ideas of postmodern thought

can be found in other areas of contemporary cultural production. In this section, we will extend the discussion of postmodernism beyond academic discourse into the arena of cultural production. Here, we will address how the phenomenon of pop art, which has been part of the Western art scene since the 1960's, may be seen as part of the larger postmodern movement. Specifically, we are concerned with how pop art and so-called post-pop art approach the related issues of authenticity and authorship.⁶² Pop art, like the discourses in linguistics, post-structuralism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, contribute in unique ways to the postmodern project of decentering the subject.

The pop art phenomenon can trace some of its roots to the Dadaist Movement of early twentieth-century culture. Part of the Dadaist artistic and theoretical project was to take everyday artifacts from industrial production and use them as items of art and artistic contemplation. Two outcomes of the Dadaist's artistic experiment, which were incorporated by pop art, were a blurring of the distinction between art and non-art and a questioning of the role of the artist in art production.

In the wake of World War II, a related artistic ideology and method to Dadaism resurfaced. During the 1950's the term "pop art" was coined by the British critic

⁶² For a discussion of post-pop art see, Paul Taylor, Post-Pop Art (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

Lawrence Alloway to refer to "a group of artists interested in redeeming popular culture."⁶³ Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Watts, Andy Warhol, and Claus Oldenburg began incorporating images and signs from popular culture into the realm of so-called "high" or "serious" art. In the most celebrated cases, Lichtenstein used comic strips while Warhol used soup cans and Marilyn Monroe silk screens as part of artistic creation. In the pop art of Lichtenstein and Warhol "images from mass culture, regarded as vulgar, unworthy of an aesthetic consecration, returned virtually unaltered as materials of the artist's activity."⁶⁴ By treating commodities of capitalist production as items of art, the pop-artists began restating important questions concerning authenticity, authorship, and the nature of art itself.⁶⁵ Within the pop scheme, the artist did not have to accept the romantic mythology of the isolated, alienated, creative genius to be classified as an artist. Nor did art have to be seen as the

⁶³ Carol Anne Mahsun, Pop Art and the Critics (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 5.

⁶⁴ Roland Barthes in Paul Taylor's, Post-Pop Art, 1989, p. 22.

⁶⁵ The commercial nature of Warhol's art led the Canadian government to impose a merchandise duty on some of his sculptures that were to be shown in a Toronto gallery. According to the Canadian National Review Act only original sculpture or replicas were to be imported duty free. Cf., Jay Walz, "Canada Rules Out Boxes as 'Art': Creations by Warhol Held as 'Merchandise' Subject to Duty," The New York Times, March 9th, 1965.

production of something original and authentic to be viewed as art.⁶⁶ The artists could take the role of the pop celebrity and art could be created with the aid of photographs, reprints, reproduced material, and copying procedures.

After a period of decline, the pop art movement began to resurface in the 1980's as "the most influential movement in the contemporary art world."⁶⁷ Under the label, neo-pop, post-pop, or simply postmodern, artist began to incorporate more of the images and technological methods used in the pop art of the 1960's. With the introduction of new technologies, such as the copying machine and the personal computer, into society and art production, questions reemerged with regard to authorship and authenticity. Some artists, such as Barbara Kruger, have used the new technologies to challenge directly the traditional notions of authenticity, representation, and authorship. Kruger has described part of her artistic strategy as deconstructing "the notion of being a great

⁶⁶ The style employed by the pop artists was not well received by those accustomed to traditional notions of art and the role of the artist. Writing in the early 1960's, the art critic Max Kozloff labeled pop artists as the "new vulgarians," who share a "common concern with the problems of the commercial image, popular culture, and metaphysical disgust." Max Kozloff, "Pop Culture, Metaphysical Disgust, and the New Vulgarians," *Art International* 6, 1962, pp. 34-36.

⁶⁷ Paul Taylor, Post-Pop Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 11.

artist."⁶⁸ Like the first generation of pop artists, Kruger seeks to call into question the modern reliance on the genius, self-mastering artist and his/her production of "original art." She attempts, in her words, "to ruin certain representations, to displace the subject and to welcome a female spectator into the audience of men."⁶⁹ Kruger's artistic strategy is to use "images from published sources and to add texts to them."⁷⁰ By using copies from existing sources and superimposing messages on them, Kruger confuses the notions of art-as-representation and undermines the idea of the creative, self-reflecting, and autonomous artist. If art can arrange and use already produced material, the idea of art cannot be viewed as an "original representation." Essentially, it is and can only be a representation of a representation, a point made in semiotics. Furthermore, if the artist can be simply an arranger of existing sources, the view of the artists as "creative genius" cannot be theoretically sustained. In terms of our discussion, it can be said that the Rousseauian inspired source of deep truth or creativity is replaced by a more postmodern conceptualization.

For pop-art and other forms of postmodern expression,

⁶⁸ Barbara Kruger quoted in Margot Lovejoy, Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media (Ann Arbor MI: UMI Press, 1989), p. 113.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 111.

the artist cannot have, or be perceived as having, a privileged position in the production of cultural artifacts. The postmodern artists is simply arranging previously produced images and signs in a particular manner. What emerges from this is an aesthetic of "simulated authorship, in which ideas of originality and repetition, authenticity and theft are teased out to their problematic limits."⁷¹

Walter Benjamin in his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" captured the importance of the relationship between technological change and art when he wrote,

...Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree, the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice--politics.⁷²

For Benjamin, changes in technology led to changes in the productional rationale and organization of art. It would make little sense to question postmodern artists such as

⁷¹ Steven Connor, Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary (New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1989), p. 95.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations, ed., by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 224, emphasis added.

Kruger, Lichtenstein, Warhol, and others on issues of the authenticity and authorship of their art. These are questions which only have meaning within the modern organization of artistic production. As Benjamin noted, "the presence of an original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity."⁷³ Postmodern artist's use of previously produced material in the construction of art makes the questions of authorship and authenticity unanswerable or simply, meaningless. If art can be produced by pushing a button on a copying machine or a personal computer, it can no longer be perceived as being an authentic outcome of a creative author. Art moves from being a righteous ritual, which relies on prescribed procedures, precedent, and codes of conduct, to a political matter, where the emphasis is placed on the management of artistic production, promotion, and consumption (cf. the promotional personality of Warhol). In Benjamin's terms, art loses its cult value and is replaced by an exhibition value. Describing this process, David Roberts writes,

Technical reproduction destroys the unique aura of the art of the past by alienating the reproduced from its context, by breaking it from the matrix of tradition.....The whole function of art is thereby revolutionized. The liberation of the art of the past from the alienation function of magic and religious representation (cultic value) and aesthetic self-representation (authenticity) frees art for its

⁷³ Ibid., p. 220.

new function.⁷⁴

This new function described by Roberts is determined to a great degree by the politics of mass production and consumption.

Benjamin's linking of art and technological change provides important insight into the sociological background of postmodern art. However, it does not provide us with a description of the affirmative and ironic attitude of many postmodern artists. Whereas Benjamin, as a critical theorist, laments the movement away from reliance upon authenticity and authorship, many postmodern artists welcome and celebrate the demise of this reliance. For the postmodern artist, the emphasis of modern art on authenticity and authorship are artistic representatives of erroneous and out-dated philosophical and artistic principles. To call or search for authenticity requires the artists to assume a privileged position in cultural production. Postmodernists deny this privileged position (or any privileged position, cf. the Derridean revolt against linguistically based conceptual hierarchies) and the accompanying search for authenticity.

⁷⁴ David Roberts, "The Museum and Montage," in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 5, 1988, p. 549-50, emphasis added.

Summary

In this chapter, we have examined the process of the decentering of the subject. As we have seen the decentering process can take different forms. While each area discussed--psychoanalysis, genealogy, and pop-art--has certain idiosyncrasies in its appraisal of the modern subject, a thread of continuity can be glimpsed in comparison. The thread revealed is best summarized by the idea that the modern subject is a social and cultural construct. For Lacan and Foucault, there are no first principles of the subject which can serve as a basis for knowledge or as a foundation for human sciences.

The dual nature of the subject described by Freud, leads to the conclusion that the metaphysical subject of philosophy cannot be the sole condition for rationality and knowledge. In Lacan's writings, it is revealed how the Freudian inspired search for a foundational human nature is itself misplaced. In Foucault's writing, we see how the subject is a creation of discursive and power configurations. Finally, in pop art we see how the modern idea of the authenticity and artistic creativity are becoming outdated with changes in art, society, and technology. These propositions, taken together, reveal the postmodern ethos that the subject is a complex, socio-culturally, constructed anthropomorphism. For postmodernists, this recognition may symbolize the final

phase of the modern subject and the dethroning of the modern human being as the center of Western philosophy. The decentering of the subject also provides a space for counter-modern social movements, such as feminism, to develop an ideology of liberation.

In the forthcoming chapter, we will take-up the relationship between rationality, historical change, and emancipation. This seemly inherent relationship is another central battle ground between modernists and postmodernists. Specifically, we will discuss how postmodernists answer the question: Does rationality lead to emancipation?

CHAPTER VI

THE CRITIQUE OF RATIONALITY, PROGRESS, AND EMANCIPATION

In the previous chapter, we sought to illustrate how the critique of subjectivity is an important element of the postmodern framework. Here, we will explore a related topic: Some of the twentieth century's discontentments with the Enlightenment's closely-related notions of rationality, progress, and emancipation. We will begin with an exploration of the twentieth-century disenchantment with both Enlightenment and Marxist theories of evolutionary change (i.e., liberalism and socialism). In that section, we will explore the works of Walter Benjamin, T. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. We will specifically focus on Adorno and Horkheimer's, Dialectic of Enlightenment as paradigmatic of the disenchantment with these views of emancipation. We will followed this with a discussion of the recent debate between Juergen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard on the possibilities and limitations of rationality in contemporary epistemology and emancipatory politics. Finally, we will explore the attitude towards the past and historical change that is exemplified in so-called postmodern architecture. Here, we will examine how postmodern architecture attempts to break with the progressive style of modernism's International Style of Architecture through the use of an ironic historicism. We

will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the political outcomes of the death of archetypical theories of human emancipation.

In a statement which captures part of the socio-political rebellion against the Enlightenment's liking of rationality, progress, and emancipation, C. Wright Mills wrote in 1959,

Our major orientations--liberalism and socialism--have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves. These two ideologies came out of The Enlightenment, and they have had in common many assumptions and values. In both, increased rationality is held to be the prime condition of increased freedom. The liberating notion of progress by reason, the faith in science as an unmixed good, the demand for popular education and the faith in its political meaning for democracy--all these ideals of The Enlightenment have rested upon the happy assumption of the inherent relation of reason and freedom.¹

For Mills, and other social and cultural theorists of the twentieth century, many of the Enlightenment's important doctrines have become indefensible, untenable, or simply exhausted. Central among these exhausted doctrines is the idea of teleological historical change or "progress" (cf. the discussion of Condorcet in Chapter 2). This doctrine was accompanied by an "evolutionary optimism" which enthusiastically embraced reason and rationality as the vehicles through which history moved and humanity obtained emancipation and freedom. In the aesthetic, political, and

¹ C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 166.

scientific realms, reason was seen as the force that would shatter the irrational features of traditional society. With the destruction of tradition and its political and religious barbarism, emancipation would finally be realized.

As discussed earlier, for an Enlightenment philosopher, such as Condorcet, the capacity for "the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite."² By employing the power of rationality and science, the emerging enlightened society could free itself both from the dogmas of traditional knowledge and the confines of traditional authority. With this cognitive and political emancipation would come moral development and ultimately the perfection of the individual and society. Subsequent historical developments (e.g., the proliferation of war, the environment crisis, etc.) have made the Enlightenment's conclusions about evolutionary progress and resulting emancipation untenable. They no longer seem to correspond with "socio-political reality." In the view of Robert Wallace,

'Progress' is no longer the watchword, the unquestionable beneficial goal and process that it once was in the United States and the West.... It is no longer only 'counter-cultural' types who doubt the possibility or even the meaning of progress....For many of us 'progress' has thus become another name for the steamroller of

² Marquis de Condorcet, Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, trans. by J. Barraclough (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955), p. 4.

history--a steamroller which it now seems may only stop when it has obliterated its 'drivers' as well as everything else.³

As this statement indicates, today there is a tendency to see progress and rationality as mutually exclusive categories. The "lessons of history" found in the World Wars, National Socialism, the environmental crisis, and countless other episodes and events of the twentieth century, make Condorcet's and other similar optimistic forecasts of moral perfectibility and emancipation through rationality highly problematic.

The inherent relationship between rationality and progress is more than an idea fostered by the Enlightenment. It is a complex belief system that appears in many different forms throughout modern Western culture. For the sake of the discussion to follow, we will break this belief system into two types. These types, while closely related, may be differentiated on the basis of their locus of social change. First, are views of history that promote a supra-historical philosophy to explain socio-historical change. Often these views see social change in terms of transcendent factors, such as the manifestation of a subterranean rationality or human spirit, as in Hegelian philosophy. Generally, these philosophies relate change to some metaphysical or

³ Robert Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Lowith-Blumenberg Debate." *The New German Critique*, 22, 1981, p. 63.

spiritual unfolding of trapped human potentiality. In other words, humanity or history are thought to have an inherent logic waiting for release. Related to these supra-historical philosophies, are theories in the social sciences which see historical change as the evolution of society towards higher or more complex forms. These views have appeared in the form of Comtian and Parsonian evolutionary theory, Marxist accounts of social change, Neo-Marxist accounts, such as Habermasian communicative evolution, and various theories of socio-economic development. As a tendency, these theories argue that societal and technological complexity are becoming more finely tuned or advanced with the refinement of rationally constructed knowledge. Seen in terms of an evolutionary process, societies or historical periods can then be evaluated by the degree or level of scientific or societal rationality present.

What differentiates these sociological theories from their philosophical counterparts is where they place the locus of change. In the social sciences the locus is to be found in the phylogenetic characteristics of the social, while in the philosophical it is to be found in some metaphysical potentiality. However, despite discrepancies, both of the above versions of historical change have two things in common. First of all, both of these theories assume that modernity or civil society mark an important

step in the eventual emancipation of humanity. Secondly, both accept the idea that history is a unified, linear, totality, with inherent meaning. These versions of change forge the events of history into a totality where stages follow one another in progressive succession, as in most traditional historiography.⁴

We will begin with a discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment.

The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Marx's historical materialism attempted to temper bourgeois culture's unequivocal optimism in civil society as the fulfillment of an inherent historical logic. However, Marxist theory did not completely distance itself from this doctrine and its framework. In place of bourgeois culture's reliance upon idealistic models of societal evolution, Marxism substituted a "materialistic conception of history."⁵ This, however, was done while retaining many of bourgeois theory's teleological features. Essentially, dialectical theory took "seriously the utopian promises of bourgeois philosophy, but shows that capitalist

⁴ There are of course exceptions to this linear historiography. Specifically, cyclical theories of social change, cf. Oswald Spengler, Today and Destiny: Excerpts from The Decline of the West of Oswald Spengler, ed. by E.F. Daking (New York: Norton, 1940).

⁵ Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, trans. by M. Dobb (London: International Publishers, 1970), p. 220.

class societies must structurally fail to fulfill them."⁶ For Marx, history was leading somewhere, but the ultimate manifestation was not to be found in capitalist society or bourgeois culture. Communism would mark the completion of the dialectical movement of history. It would be the final stage in historical development, not bourgeois civil society.

For many Marxist-inspired writers of the twentieth-century, the theory of a dialectical movement of history culminating in world communism, did not successfully distance itself from the "naive optimism" in rationality that was evident in bourgeois thought. For these writers, the Marxist philosophy of historical evolution, did not lead to an equitable society and emancipation, but to a Weberian iron cage administered by a technocratic instrumental rationality.

Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," is representative of the growing disenchantment many twentieth century Marxists experienced with Marx's evolutionary theory and its political embodiment in various working class movements. The theses, written shortly before his suicide while attempting to flee Nazi occupied France, sought to analyze the problems

⁶ Stephan Fuchs, The Logification of History: A Critique of Neoevolutionist Thought. Unpublished Manuscript, University of California at Riverside, March, 1986, p. 186.

inherent in Marxist and vulgar Marxist historical theory.⁷

For Benjamin,

nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement.⁸

The German workers had been misled by the linking of the historical mission of the working class with bourgeois society's adherence to technological "progress." For many socialist groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, work was viewed as the "savior of modern times."⁹ Within this Marxist-inspired view, labor was seen as the primary mechanism of historical evolution. Labor was also the force which would be eventually responsible for emancipation and socio-political fulfillment. Technological progress, made possible by labor, was seen as an irresistible force, propelling all of humankind towards historical perfection. While Marx did distinguish "necessary" from "free labor," critics believed it, nevertheless, collapsed all meaningful human action under the label of "homo laborans." In other words, labor was seen as the true human quality. As a result of this

⁷ In Walter Benjamin's, Illuminations, trans. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 253-264.

⁸ Ibid., p. 258.

⁹ Josef Dietzgen, quoted in Ibid, p. 259.

overemphasis on labor as the center of meaning, Marxist theory and the labor movements associated with it had inadvertently leveled the distinctions between technological advancement and human emancipation. Technological development became the vehicle of personal and group emancipation.

The linking of the historical destiny of the working class with the logic of progress was made possible by what Benjamin believed was a fatal flaw in Marxist or "vulgar" Marxist theory. Marxist theory had failed to critique and successfully differentiate itself from bourgeois cultural rational mastery and domination of nature. Vulgar Marxist theory,

recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism. Among these is a conception of nature which differ ominously from the one in the Socialist utopias before the 1848 revolution. The new conception of labor amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naive complacency is contrasted with exploitation of the proletariat.¹⁰

What the labor movement did not realize was that it was a very short step from the Enlightenment's emphasis on the mastery of nature to the mastery and control of workers, it is an age of Weberian rationalization so-to-speak. The Enlightenment's goal of bringing the mysteries of nature under the control of rationality, science, and technology were easily transferable to the human condition. For both

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 259.

the bourgeoisie and the Marxists, the progress of rationality and science were "something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind."¹¹ This proved to be a fatal error for Marxism's theory of emancipation for it "bypasses the question of how its (capitalist society) products might benefit the workers while still not being at their disposal."¹²

Benjamin's pessimistic appraisal of Marxist historical theory and its practical embodiment provided part of the inspiration for the critique of the Enlightenment found in Adorno and Horkheimer's 1944 work, The Dialectic of Enlightenment. In this work, Adorno and Horkheimer take up and expand Benjamin's reappraisal of the Enlightenment's and Marxism's happy relation of rationality and progress. With Fascism as a historical backdrop and Nietzsche and Weber as theoretical guides, Adorno and Horkheimer seek a total reevaluation of the legacy of Enlightenment rationality. Their self described goal was "the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism."¹³

For Adorno and Horkheimer, like Benjamin before them, the regression so evident in contemporary society was but

¹¹ Ibid., p. 260.

¹² Ibid., p. 259.

¹³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. by J. Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. xi.

the working out of the very logic contained within bourgeois Enlightenment rationality. In the Enlightenment "the submission of everything natural to the autocratic subject finally culminates in the mastery of the blindly objective and natural."¹⁴ The submission of the natural to the all-knowing subject "condemns the spirit to increasing darkness" (cf. Weber's "iron cage").¹⁵ As a result, "the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."¹⁶

The origins of the disaster of the Enlightenment was to be found in its orientation towards knowledge and control of the world. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Bacon's essay "In Praise of Human Knowledge" was paradigmatic of the Enlightenment's relation of knowledge and power.

Despite his lack of mathematics, Bacon's view was appropriate to the scientific attitude that prevailed after him. The concordance between the mind of man and the nature of things that he had in mind is patriarchal: the human mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles; neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world's rulers.¹⁷

As the rational human mind seeks to develop a concordance between itself and nature, it eventually succeeds in bringing the world under its autocratic gaze and control.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. xvi.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. xiv.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4, emphasis added.

Furthermore, as the rational mind seeks to overcome myth and superstition, its growing power permits an unrestricted domination, not only of nature, but ultimately of self and others. What began as the rational mastery and control of nature through science and technology eventually becomes an omnipresent rationality which reifies and dominates everything it encounters--it is extended to all human endeavors.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, a key aspect of the Enlightenment's paternalistic rationality is its manifestation in and control of technology (e.g., the merger of science and capitalist production). Within the logic of the Enlightenment, technology becomes "the essence of knowledge."¹⁸ This technology progresses not "by concepts and images," but through the "exploitation of others."¹⁹ "What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men."²⁰ Technology makes this control of nature and humans possible. The violence of rationally constructed knowledge and its technological manifestation becomes the standard through which modernity measures societal advancement.

A further central aspect of the Enlightenment, which was an outgrowth of its ruthless appropriation of nature,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

was its tendency to pull all outer or unknown realms into its analytic gaze and manipulative rationality. As a result, all that "does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect."²¹ Like Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens, where self preservation is the only protection against the seduction of the mytho-poetic past, modern rationality has constructed a representational world which is as alienating as it is liberating. From the perspective of rationality, all unknown realms must first be represented in order to be repressed. For Adorno and Horkheimer,

Men have always had to choose between their subjection to nature or the subjection of nature to the Self. With the extension of the bourgeois commodity economy, the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose cold rays the seed of the new barbarism grows to fruition. Under the pressure of domination human labor always led away from myth--but under domination always returns to the jurisdiction of myth.²²

Bourgeois society, with its doctrine of instrumental rational self-preservation and its belief in technological progress, is the seed of a new barbarism which is harsher than the allegedly mythical world it sought to overcome. Human labor under domination leads away from traditional myth, but domination must inevitably resort to myth to

²¹ Ibid., p. 6.

²² Ibid., p. 32. As Dostoevsky has said, "man continues to be moved by myth, miracle, and authority"--and mostly in that order.

support its appropriation of power. Under this system of power and domination, progress becomes regression and enlightenment becomes myth.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, this is not the story of how the Enlightenment went wrong, but the story of the unfolding of its intrinsic logic.²³ In equating knowledge with the subject's domination of nature through technology, the Enlightenment "is as totalitarian as any system."²⁴ As such, "myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology."²⁵ The Enlightenment did not inadvertently veer from the course of reason and emancipation, these were but mythical constructs to cover its naked appropriation of power. These mythical constructs were the price humanity paid for a disenchanted, de-magicalized world stripped of meaning by an overly exuberant rationality.

In his late work, Negative Dialectics, Adorno declares, "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb."²⁶ This "retrogressive

²³ As we shall see in our discussion of Habermas, this is the critical difference between the first and second generation of critical theorists.

²⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1972, p. 24.

²⁵ Ibid., p. xvi.

²⁶ Theodore Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. by E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973), p. 320.

anthropogenesis," as Paul Connerton has phrased it, is consistent with, and in many ways summarizes, the general outlook of the Dialectic of Enlightenment.²⁷ What was triumphant modernity for the French Philosophes and Hegel, was tragic modernity for Adorno and Horkheimer. As such, the Dialectic of Enlightenment, along with Weber's discussion of the iron cage, can be included among the important works that was part of the reevaluation of what was generally the taken-for-granted association of rationality, progress, and emancipation. Today, this position is perhaps best summarized by Octavio Paz's statement,

We used to believe that revolution, transformed into universal science, was the key to history, the magical command which would open the doors of the prison to which humanity had been held from the very beginning. Now we know that the key does not open the doors: it closes them tight shut.²⁸

In the next section, we will take-up Habermas' appraisal of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment and a similar orientation in post-structuralist philosophy.

²⁷ Paul Connerton, The Tragedy of Enlightenment: an Essay on the Frankfurt School (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 114.

²⁸ Octavio Paz quoted in Serge Moscovici, "Questions for the Twenty-first Century," Theory, Culture and Society, 1990, 7, p. 6,

Communicative Rationality or Incommensurable
Language Games: The Habermas/Lyotard Debate

Juergen Habermas has been called the "last great rationalist"--a title which is either negative or positive depending upon the position of the person doing the labeling. Habermas is either the last hope to preserve the Enlightenment's goals of reason and emancipation or the defender of an outdated mode of thinking and theorizing. For many, Habermas' social theory holds the promise for a reconstruction of the Enlightenment's ideals of reason, progress, and emancipation. For those loyal to Habermas, what his theory provides is a socially constituted or normative basis for rendering social critique. Those who support his project believe that without such a basis for grounding and legitimizing critique, no vision of emancipation is possible.²⁹ We are therefore doomed to face a world of incommensurability, undecidability, and indefensible domination.

Habermas' attempts the reconstruction of the Enlightenment ideals of reason, progress, and emancipation through what he refers to as the "theory of communicative action."³⁰ Habermas agrees with other contemporary

²⁹ For a sympathetic reading of Habermas Cf. Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

³⁰ Cf. Juergen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interest, trans. by Jeremy Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972), and The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1, trans. by T.

critics of the Enlightenment that given the theoretical revelations of the twentieth century we can no longer accept a correspondence theory of truth and a denotative theory of language. In other words, we can no longer accept the traditional rationalist argument that theory captures and language reports unmediated reality. This being the case, we can no longer appeal to a foundational metaphysics or "first principle" to legitimate a discourse and its truth claims. However for Habermas, the demise of the correspondence theory of truth and foundational metaphysics does not mean we are foundationless. There remain certain everyday structures and rules embedded in linguistical practices and speech acts that define and legitimate all discursive activities. In other words, language and speech are not just mediums for the conveyance of ideas they have a normative function. This revelation makes the quest for a foundational critique possible.

For Habermas, the communicative rules of everyday validity claims always appeal to a normative rationality for legitimation (i.e., the strength of the better argument). Verbal utterances and discourses must appeal to this normative context to be socially legitimate. In drawing on this normative background, the individual speaker is evaluated in regard to his/her level of communicative competence. These rules embedded in

McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

communicative action make the quest for truth through consensus a normative framework that guide all speech acts.

In Habermas' words,

actions regulated by norms, expressive self-presentations, and also evaluative expressions, supplement constative speech acts in constituting a communicative practice which, against the background of a lifeworld, is oriented to achieving, sustaining, and renewing consensus...The rationality inherent in this practice is seen in the fact that a communicatively achieved agreement must be based in the end on reasons.³¹

Essentially, communicative rationality serves as a "court of appeal" for the settlement of validity claims. If the discursive arena is free from the distortions of power, self-interest, and ignorance, then open communication and reason are possible. Under these "ideal speech" conditions, truth claims can be settled by appealing to the background of a particular discursive community. This being the case, truth becomes what is agreed upon under these conditions of "ideal speech." In other words, truth is that which is obtained through consensus. Truth is a conversationally dependent and normative principle. As a consequence, truth does not have to be grounded in some type of "first principle" or foundational metaphysics. The affirmation of truth is already given in the potentiality of communication.

In order for Habermas' theory of communicative action to be more than simply a sophisticated type of utopian

³¹ Habermas, Ibid., p. 17.

idealism, it must, within the rationalist tradition, ground itself in a (scientific) theory of society. With this in mind, Habermas promotes his theory as a foundation for a neo-evolutionist theory of social change. For Habermas, preceding evolutionary theories, specifically Marx's, Weber's, and Parson's, fail to draw a distinction between the systems (i.e., institutional) rationalization of the state and economy and the rationalization of lifeworlds. Unlike systems rationalization, rationalization of the lifeworld does not entail the progressive application of instrumental rationality. Lifeworld rationalization is similar to the learning process that occurs in the development of the individual. Using Piaget, Kohlberg, and other developmental psychologists as models, Habermas argues that lifeworlds evolve on the basis of a "societal learning process."³² Central to this argument is the idea that "'organizational principles' 'institutionally embody' the structures of consciousness provided by world-views."³³ Just as an individual is able to learn from life experience and incorporate it into consciousness, a society can integrate cultural solutions to shared problems into social institutions (i.e., a society can "learn" and "mature").

³² Jurgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, trans. by T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979). Habermas has altered this position somewhat in more recent works.

³³ Fuchs, The Logification of History, 1986, p. 96.

Habermas' communicatively informed evolutionary theory allows societies to be evaluated on the basis of their level of learning. Societies can "be rated and classified according to the extent to which they exemplify the higher forms of social integration and higher problem-solving capacities."³⁴ This allows Habermas to grant legitimacy to certain aspects of the modern age, specifically in regard to the level of social integration found in its legal problem solving institutions. Comparing traditional and modern societies' degree of social integration, Habermas writes,

Social integration accomplished via kinship relations and secured in cases of conflict by pre-conventional legal institutions belongs, from a developmental-logical point of view, to a lower stage than social integration accomplished via relations of domination and secured in cases of conflict by conventional legal institutions.³⁵

This does not mean that modernity is legitimate-in-itself. Modernity is plagued by "problems of the superseded social formation" (e.g., class struggle).³⁶ However, it does exhibit a more advanced form of social integration and therefore learning. In other words, Habermas concludes that it is possible to find alternatives to metaphysical

³⁴ Michael Schmid, "Habermas's Theory of Social Evolution," in J. Thompson and D. Held (eds.), Habermas: Critical Debates (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 169.

³⁵ Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, 1979, p. 163,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

notions of progress and to provide a new rationale for societal emancipation.

Habermas' theory of communicative action and social evolution is a marked departure from the views of the first generation of critical theorists. This discrepancy forces Habermas to come to terms with the critique of modernity rendered by the previous generation of critical theorists (e.g., Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer), as well as the related critique in poststructuralist thought (e.g., Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, etc.). For Habermas, the critical theory of Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer exhibit a "totalizing critique" of modernity. By this he means that they see society as one all-encoumpasing totality. These writers, like those in traditional social science evolutionism, draw no distinction between systems rationalization and the rationalization of the lifeworld. In failing to develop this differentiation, they exhibit, what he refers to as a "performative contradiction." In other words, as a result of "identifying reason with repression, they undermine the foundations of their own critique."³⁷ Given the logic of their argument "it is no longer possible to place hope in the liberating force of

³⁷ Nancy Love, "Epistemology and Exchange: Marx, Nietzsche, and Critical Theory," *New German Critique*, 41, 1987, p. 71.

enlightenment."³⁸ Consequently, it becomes impossible for Adorno and Horkheimer to legitimate their critical theory of society, since it is built upon the Enlightenment's separation of repression and reason--a position they undermine in the Dialectic of Enlightenment.

For Habermas, the central problem with Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of modernity is their over reliance upon a philosophy of consciousness. This position, first articulated in Cartesian philosophy, "conceives of human action primarily in terms of individual speaking and acting subjects."³⁹ Habermas seeks to show that Adorno and Horkheimer's reliance on a philosophy of consciousness, as opposed to a theory of inner subjectivity, is the fatal flaw which results in the "totalizing critique" of modern existence which levels all distinctions between instrumental rationality (i.e., means and ends rationality) and reason. Describing Adorno and Horkheimer's position in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Habermas writes,

Reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible--this far reaching thesis, as we have seen, is grounded in the first excursus by the fact that from the very start the process of enlightenment is the result of a drive to self-preservation that mutilates reason, because it lays claim to it only in the form of purposive-rational mastery of nature and instinct--precisely as instrumental

³⁸ Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, trans. by F. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 106.

³⁹ Richard Wolin, "Critical Theory and the Dialectic of Rationalism." New German Critique, 41, 1987, p. 23.

reason.⁴⁰

By equating Enlightenment reason with the rationality of self preservation, Adorno and Horkheimer are essentially identifying subjective reason with instrumental reason. In other words, Habermas believes that Adorno and Horkheimer do not recognize that there is a difference between intersubjective reason and individualistic instrumental rationality. For them, objectivizing thought (in the form of total reification) and purposive-rational action, which both accompany modern subjectivity, are the final outcomes of the Enlightenment's domination of nature through purposive-rational mastery. The result of Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique is the production of a "'life' that is characterized by the knowing and acting subject's devotion to a blind, self-directed, intransitive, self-preservation as his only 'end.'"⁴¹ There is no recognition of a intersubjective lifeworld that does not play by the same instrumental rational rules. Within the Adorno and Horkheimer position, "nothing more than instrumental reason is retained when we think through 'the basic processes of conscious life....'"⁴²

⁴⁰ Cf. Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action Vol. I, 1984, p. 388, emphasis in the original.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 388.

⁴² Ibid., p. 396.

Habermas' purpose in discussing the Dialectic of Enlightenment is to show how this critique and other related arguments inevitably leads to a dead end as long as the philosophy of consciousness serves as a guide. What is needed, in Habermas' view, is the recognition of an intersubjectivity informed by communicative reason.

A subjectivity that is characterized by communicative reason resists the denaturing of the self for the sake of self-preservation. Unlike instrumental reason, communicative reason cannot be subsumed without resistance under a blind self-preservation. It refers neither to a subject that preserves itself in relating to objects via representation and action, nor to a self-maintaining system that demarcates itself from an environment, but to a symbolically structured lifeworld that is constituted in the interpretive accomplishments of its members and only reproduced through communication.⁴³

By "denaturing of the self" Habermas means that his intersubjective constituted subject does not adhere to the instrumental rationality occurring at the institutional level or within Adorno's and Horkheimer's argument. The intersubjective self operates under different guidelines.

Employing the idea of communicative reason enables critical theory to be grounded in "the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals" rather than the atomistic philosophy of consciousness.⁴⁴ With the recognition that "the utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom...is built into the linguistic mechanism of the

⁴³ Ibid., p. 398.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 398.

reproduction of the species," a new track for critical theory and emancipation can be followed.⁴⁵ This track, by avoiding the errors of the philosophy of consciousness, can successfully steer clear of the totalizing perspective (i.e., the perspective which sees society as all-encoumpasing) and the resulting performative contradiction within which Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as the Nietzschean-inspired poststructuralists, find themselves trapped.

Lyotard and the Incommensurability of Language Games

Jean-Francois Lyotard would agree with some of what Habermas has to say about contemporary philosophy and epistemology. Lyotard would accept the argument that the correspondence theory of truth is no longer valid. He would also agree that truth claims are explicated within and determined by linguistic and group boundaries. However, for Lyotard what is at stake is not these post-empiricist epistemological revelations, but the idea that they can be used to ground a new critical theory of society, to reestablish an evolutionary notion of society, and to promote a universal path for human emancipation.

In The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Lyotard seeks to describe the new conditions of knowledge

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 398.

in postmodern culture and postindustrial society.⁴⁶ For Lyotard, modern knowledge "legitimizes itself with reference to a metadiscourse."⁴⁷ For Lyotard, these metadiscourses or metanarratives are undelying "first principles" or aprioris. They are metaphysical assumptions on which all modern discourses rest. The metadiscourse or grand narrative of modernity has taken the form of "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth."⁴⁸ Lyotard uses the term "postmodern" to refer to an "incredulity toward metanarratives."⁴⁹ Postmodern knowledge does not rely upon a metadiscourse to legitimate its position. It accepts the Wittgensteinian notion that knowledge is guided by language games which are and can only be "internally legitimate." These language games therefore lack any universal or foundational standard for comparison. For Lyotard, various discourses and their truth claims are heteromorphous or radically different language games with "their own rules, structure and

⁴⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, (1979) 1984.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. xxiii.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. xxiii.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. xxiv.

moves."⁵⁰ What postmodern knowledge accomplishes is that "it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy."⁵¹ In other words, professional discourse cannot capture these language games in-themselves. "All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species..."⁵² We do not need nor can we support a new archetypal theory which can unite or overcome these heterogeneous language games.

As the "last great rationalist," Habermas is one of the primary targets in Lyotard's discussion of modern and postmodern knowledge. As stated earlier, Lyotard is in agreement with Habermas on the point that truth claims are embedded within what Habermas calls "linguistic practice and communicational interaction." The issue is if this revelation can be used to reformulate Enlightenment reason and emancipation. Lyotard thinks not.

There is no reason to think that it would be possible to determine metaprescriptives common to all of these language games or that a revisable consensus like the one in force at a given moment in the scientific community could embrace the totality of metaprescriptions regulating the totality of statements circulating

⁵⁰ Douglas Kellner, "Postmodernism as Social Theory," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 5, 1988, p. 250.

⁵¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 1984, p. xxv.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

in the social collectivity.⁵³

In other words, Lyotard feels that language games are so incommensurable and consensus is so illusive that no theory can unite them into a coherent explanatory framework. From Lyotard's perspective, Habermas' communicative action theory with ideal speech as its means and consensus as its goal rests on "the validity of the narrative of emancipation."⁵⁴ It is but another attempt to establish a metanarrative--a new first principle on which a all-encoumpasing theory can be constructed. However, in an age where the creation of knowledge is no longer dependent on metanarratives for legitimation, Habermas' theory can no longer lay claim to universal validation. Along with Richard Rorty, Lyotard would contend that the notions of communicative action and ideal speech "are simply moral virtues" and not epistemological guarantees.⁵⁵

Essentially, Habermas' theory is an attempt to establish a metanarrative capable of uniting all language games with the thread of communicative reason. However, for Lyotard, communicative action theory makes two faulty assumptions about the contemporary production of knowledge. First, it fails to recognize that "language games are

⁵³ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

⁵⁵ Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 1980, 53, p. 736.

heteromorphous, subject to heterogeneous sets of pragmatic rules."⁵⁶ Contemporary knowledge, even in science, works within its own parameters and adheres to its own set of internal rules of the game. These games are incommensurable with the games played in other arenas of knowledge production. Secondly, communicative action theory fails to understand that "consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end."⁵⁷

"Consensus is a horizon that is never reached."⁵⁸ In Lyotard's view, the goal of discussion is not consensus but paralogy (i.e., disagreement and dissent). Scientific knowledge production is not guided by underlying norms of consensus, but by an internal political struggle over proper research. Scientific truth is forged under the tension between varying and conflicting viewpoints. This "double observation" against communicative action theory,

destroys a belief that still underlies Habermas' research, namely, that humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularization of the 'moves' permitted in all language games and that the legitimacy of any statement resides in its contributing to that emancipation.⁵⁹

In Lyotard's view, in Habermas' writings, "the cause is

⁵⁶ Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 1984, p. 65.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

good, but the argument is not."⁶⁰

For Lyotard, the death of the metanarratives of modernity and the lack of consensus need not signal the onset of nihilism or the "decline of the West." Lyotard writes,

Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. Science 'smiling into its beard' at every other belief has taught them the harsh austerity of realism.⁶¹

This is the condition of knowledge in postmodern culture. Knowledge can only be legitimate when it is local or within the context of "the little narrative" (petit recit).⁶²

These "little narratives" of everyday life are cohesive enough to provide local patterns of meaning, but are too fragile to support a universal system of knowledge or an emancipatory politics. Knowledge no longer requires the creation of archetypical theories to provide meaning and orient action--it does not seem to require transcendence or unitary coherence. These "theories" already exist within the practices and communication circuits of the lifeworld.

Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶² Ibid., p. 60.

various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent.⁶³

This statement sounds strangely Habermasian. However, Lyotard does not think these communication circuits are encompassing enough to transcend heterogeneous life forms. They, therefore, provide no basis for the establishment of a new critical theory of society nor can they serve as a foundation for a universal politics of emancipation. Communication circuits are simply part of the condition of knowledge in the postmodern world and reflect the incoherence and fractionalization of the world.

One of the central issue at stake in the Habermas/Lyotard Debate is whether or not we can have or need new notions of rationality, emancipation, and progress. Habermas seeks to develop a theory that is capable of both explaining historical progress and providing a rational foundation for social critique and emancipatory politics. Habermas is convinced that only a rationalistic account with universal significance can provide the foundations we need to conduct life, politics, and science. Without a foundation, we lack the ability to provide anything but opinion and speculation. For Lyotard, it is no longer possible to have such an archetypal theory as Habermas' in the postmodern condition with its

⁶³ Ibid., p. 15.

incommensurable language games and paralogical conditions. The independent language games of professional knowledge and the little narratives of everyday life are all that are necessary for legitimation. Simply put, for Lyotard the "mourning process (for the lost metanarrative) is over...there is no need to start all over again."⁶⁴

The debate over the exhaustion of the Enlightenment's orientation towards rationality, progress, and emancipation can also be found in other discursive formation. In the section to follow, we will explore how this debate can also be found in the architectural debate over aesthetic style.

The Ironic Historicism of Postmodern Architecture

Seen through the eyes of postmodern architects, one of the central problems with modern architecture, which led to its figurative and literal collapse, was its negation of community and historicity. In the drive to create clean and pure space, modern architects, like the Enlightenment Philosophes, had viewed the past as something to overcome. History and tradition were seen as strangling the attempt to build a new, modern world. What was needed was a type of architectural social engineering which would provide people with rational space and thus produce enlightened lives. However, the results of the use of rationality to break and transcend historical continuity were not as

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

intended. Instead of contributing to the emancipation of the individual, modern architecture, in the view of Heinrich Koltz, left humanity "surrounded by a sea of endless monotony," filled with "the simplest functionalism."⁶⁵ Modern architecture was thus representative of the bureaucratic confinement of modernity as a whole.

The "spirit" of modern architecture can be found in the conclusion to a manifesto of the Bauhaus Movement written in 1919, Walter Gropius proclaimed,

Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.⁶⁶

Modern architecture's vision was to employ both art and science in the creation of a new universal form. Traditional ornamental and irrational structures were to be replaced by an architectural form which could accentuate the rational human's inborn rationality by enhancing individual choice and freedom. This vision of a new rational architecture was to be made possible through the use of the techniques of modern mass production. In the

⁶⁵ Heinrich Koltz (ed), Postmodern Visions: Drawings, Paintings, and Models of Contemporary Architects (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), p. 7.

⁶⁶ Walter Gropius quoted in Ulrich Conrads (ed.), Programmes and Manifestoes on Twentieth-Century Architecture (London: Lund Humphries, 1970), p. 49.

words of Le Corbusier, another important proponent of architectural modernism, "houses must go up all of a piece, made by machine tools in a factory, assembled as Ford assembles cars, on moving conveyor belts."⁶⁷ Together, the new ahistorical form and mass production came to be the defining features of modern architecture. In the description of Robert Stern, modernism "proposed a break with history and a repudiations of traditional aesthetics in favor of self-referential, functionally and technologically determined form."⁶⁸

On July 15, 1972 at 3:32pm the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Development in St. Louis was demolished. For the postmodern architect and modern critic, Charles Jencks, this date marks the end of Gropius', Le Corbusier's, and other modern architect's dream of providing clean, pure, and rational space.⁶⁹ What began as an attempt to provide a new international style which was functional, universal, mass produced, and accessible had ended in the rubble of a St. Louis implosion. For Jencks, the Pruitt-Igoe housing development, which once was hailed as the future of housing

⁶⁷ Le Corbusier quoted in Reyner Banham, "Progressive Building in Paris: 1918-1928," in Peter Serenyi, Le Corbusier in Perspective (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 38.

⁶⁸ Robert A.M. Stern, Modern Classicism (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 8.

⁶⁹ Charles Jencks, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (London: Academy Editions, 1984), p. 9.

for the poor, represented all that was wrong with both modern architecture and modern society. Pruitt-Igoe, built in the 1950's as part of the U.S. government's plan to provide subsidized housing for the poor, had proven to be a disaster in both design and function. Although less than twenty years old, the development had been deemed unlivable. For Jencks, this architectural disaster was not just representative of the failures of government housing, but of the failures of modernism's dream of rational, ahistorical form.⁷⁰

It is within this climate of the perceived failure of modernism where postmodern architecture emerges. Postmodern architecture adopts a radically different orientation toward the past. The past, becomes a source of inspiration, rather than negation. Paolo Portoghesi describes modernism's paranoia of the past,

The negation of the past, or rather the rigid morphological separation between present and past desired by the Modern Movement, was a typical defense mechanism, to use the Freudian term for negation. 'The cathartic illusion,' wrote Marcello Pignatelli, 'of freeing ourselves from all dross and obstacles, of cutting the knots of conditioning and guilt, of waking up different tomorrow, destroying yesterday's house full of unbearable memories, really means projecting the internal conflict onto a magical act, in the impossibility of elaborating on it.'⁷¹

As this quote indicates, modernism wanted to wipe the slate

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Paolo Portoghesi, Postmodern: The Architecture of Postindustrial Society (New York: Rizzoli), p. 20.

clean. It wanted an architecture and a society which was free from the confines, "dross, and obstacles" associated with tradition. However, for Portoghesi and other postmodern architects the "end of prohibition" has arrived. The past is no longer taboo: Architects are now free to incorporate modes of expression and design from the past. For Portoghesi, architectural postmodernism can then be used to describe "any building that breaks the modern prohibition against historical reference, whether with iron self-commentary or with vernacular earnestness."⁷²

If postmodernism was merely a type of aesthetic return to the past, it could easily be labeled as part of a romantic anti-modernism that is as old as modernity itself. However, there is an added element which distinguishes postmodernists from the anti-modernists. Many postmodern architectural works blend the so-called return to the past or classicism with an ironic presentation. It is, in Jencks words, "a classicism without tears."⁷³ In blending the styles of the past with a type of parody, it seeks to call into question issues of historical progress, continuity and even the coherent meaning of history itself. As Brent Brolin comments, "while postmodernists acknowledge

⁷² David Kolb, Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 89.

⁷³ Charles Jencks (ed.), Postmodern Classicism (London: Architectural Design, 1980), p. 5.

history, many seem compelled to torture it until an 'original' contribution to artistic Progress has been made...⁷⁴

This type of ironic historicism was given a polemical voice with the writings, drawings, and works of Robert Venturi. Venturi wanted more than a return to the past. Architectural works must incorporate irony into its reappropriation of the past.

The architect who would accept his role as a combiner of significant old cliches--valid banalities--in new contexts as his condition within a society that directs its best efforts, its big money, and its elegant technologies elsewhere, can ironically express in this indirect way a true concern for society's inverted scale of values.⁷⁵

Thus architecture becomes a means for calling into question the value system of modern society. It becomes a political statement in the form of an ironic historicistic architecture.

One of the most representative works of the architectural irony outlined by Venturi is Charles Moore's Plaza d'Italia in New Orleans. The Plaza employs traditional Italian historical references, however it rearranges and presents them in parodic style. Linda

⁷⁴ Brent Brolin, Flight of Fancy (New York: St. Martin Press, 1985), p. 309.

⁷⁵ Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 44. Also cf. Robert Venturi et al., Learning from Las Vegas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

Hutcheon describes Moore's Plaza:

Moore encodes signs of local Italian ethnic identity--from Latin inscriptions to a parody of the Trevi fountain. That particular corner of Rome is a complex mix of theatrical stage, palace, sculpture, and nature. In Moore's parodic rendition, the same elements are retained, but are now executed in a new media. Sometimes even structures are refashioned and 'refunctioned': a Tuscan column becomes a fountain, with water running down it.⁷⁶

Within Hutcheon's reading, postmodern architecture's ironic presentation, as represented by Moore, "shows both its critical awareness and its love of history by giving new meaning to old forms..."⁷⁷ Past styles are not just incorporated as literal, they are mixed with an ironic presentation to produce a new nonliteral and perhaps critical meaning.

What does the attitude of postmodern architecture, in either its ironic or earnest form, tell us about the issues of rationality, progress, and emancipation? In part, it can be read as a cultural representation of what Adorno and Horkheimer described in the Dialectic of Enlightenment. Like Enlightenment rationality, the modern architect's dream of providing rational space, free from the ornamental trappings of the past, is reducible to an exercise of

⁷⁶ Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 32.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 31. This has been interpreted as a new extension of modernism's elitism. As Lebbeus Woods notes, the Plaza reads like "a sequence of one line jokes..." quoted in Stern, Modern Classicism, 1988, p. 78.

power. While modern architecture ideologically presented itself as enhancing personal freedom, it, like Enlightenment rationality, actually produced alienation and contributed to the process of total reification. Nowhere is this point more evident than in modernism's ideas about worker housing. As Hutcheon points out,

Although Gropius and Le Corbusier both designed workers' housing, neither seems to have felt the need to consult those who would live there: it must have been tacitly assumed that the intellectually underdeveloped would allow the architects to arrange their lives for them.⁷⁸

Like Enlightenment rationality which assumed the role of legislator to the "uneducated masses," modern architecture wanted to provide rational space, in order to create a new type of humanity--to influence the unenlightened

However, it is not just a critical theory of modernity nor an unproblematic return to the past which most of postmodern architecture espouses. The past is not, as it is for conservative anti-modernists, a model to correct the banality of contemporary life. Postmodern architects also question the past. Essentially, they argue that there is no unified, totalizing past from which we can draw on. The past is discontinuous and fragmented. Furthermore, it is always interpreted with the confines of the contemporary. History is always constructed rather than being simply there. And like contemporary life, the past is viewed as

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

consisting of multiple and incommensurable or unconnected life forms. Thus, the only means of expressing history is with a type of tongue-in-cheek approach which is "both a homage and a kind of ironic thumbed nose to the past."⁷⁹

Conclusion: Post-Metanarrative Politics

The postmodern perspective, despite its theoretical and practical diversity, emphasizes the point that history has no inherent logic. It, therefore dismisses those approaches which have sought to impart an overarching logic to social change (e.g. Hegel, Condorcet, Marx, etc.). This being the case, any theory which seeks to connect history and emancipation within a rational, economic, or communicative metanarrative (i.e., an essence or implied standard of judgement) is suspect. Thus, the postmodern position is distrustful of both philosophical and social science accounts of socio-cultural evolution. Both accounts have tried to grant history a teleology. And, both have used various strategies to link emancipation with some apriority (e.g., rationality, communicative action, etc.).

Within the intellectual climate created by the demise of the traditional metanarratives of emancipation, contemporary politics is left with two possibilities. Either, (a) it can become an ironical critical theory--as

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

manifested in certain works of postmodern architecture, or, (b) it retreats from conventional philosophy into the lifeworld to find meaning and/or emancipatory potential. The former position recognizes the historicity of all statements and often blends this realization with an ad hoc socio-political critique. However, because this position lacks a foundation for critique, it is unable to articulate criticism in a coherent, universal form. Its only option, then is parody. In the latter position, where the lifeworld is embraced as a potential site of emancipatory politics, we can find two divergent reactions, represented by Habermas and Lyotard. Habermas seeks to use the potentiality of the lifeworld as material for an all encompassing emancipatory politics. Lyotard too looks to the lifeworld. However, for him the lifeworld is too fragmented to employ successfully an overarching formula for emancipation. Thus, Habermas' approach is merely repeating the mistakes of the past. For Lyotard, we must accept the inevitability of incommensurable language games and life forms. Localized emancipation and conceptions of justice are all we can have (if any).

In this chapter and in the previous two, we sought to outline some of the central positions of the postmodern framework. Essentially, we argued that postmodernism can be seen as rebellion against linguistic correspondence, modern subjectivity, and the Enlightenment's linkage of

rationality, progress, and emancipation. In the following chapter, we will begin to shift the focus towards a sociology of postmodernism. We will attempt to show how a social epistemology can avoid postmodernism's collapse or leveling of all meaning.

CHAPTER VII

TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGICALLY-INFORMED POSTMODERNISM

We have been concerned with the various theoretical and cultural positions of postmodernism, trying to show how postmodern thought forces a reevaluation of the conventional modern understanding of such issues as referentiality, subjectivity, and historical continuity. Obviously, there are important theoretical and practical differences between cultural postmodernism and postmodern philosophy, Adorno/Horkheimer and Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida, for example: We have, however, sought to deemphasize these differences in favor of developing a general postmodern framework or position.

In this and subsequent chapters, we will begin shifting the focus away from explication and towards explanation. We will now be concerned with providing a sociological account of postmodernism. Obviously, this is not a straightforward or an easy task. The arguments of postmodernism pose a formidable challenge to conventional sociology's epistemological position and many of its cherished concepts and theories. In this section, we will, nevertheless, begin the process of describing what a "sociological account of postmodernism" might look like and what it might seek to accomplish through the introduction of a social epistemological framework.

The central task of this chapter is to examine the complex relationship between sociology and postmodern thought. The principal argument of this chapter is that postmodernism can use certain sociological insights to escape its idealistic, relativistic, and often nihilistic conclusions. This encounter between sociology and postmodernism is viewed as a reciprocal exchange: What we will refer to in this chapter as "conventional sociology" can also benefit from the postmodern position, e.g., from the postmodern critique of objectivism and correspondence referentiality. What follows is not a standard sociological critique of a philosophical or knowledge system, but an attempt to develop both a sociologically informed postmodernism and a postmodernist informed sociology. We will draw upon the writings of Baudrillard, Durkheim, and others to develop our argument.

One of the apparent ironies of this encounter between sociology and postmodernism is that much of postmodern theory already shares the general orientation of certain schools of sociological thought, specifically the outlook found in certain variants of the sociology of knowledge. Both postmodernism and elements of sociology exhibit what could be termed a "de-ontologized" or "de-naturalized" orientation towards many of the metaphysical, philosophical, or ideational issues of Occidental culture and its modern expression (e.g., natural essences, the

conditions of subjectivity, theory/reality correspondence, innate rationality, etc.). In this regard, sociology and postmodernism can be seen as sharing a related view of the mechanism which produce knowledge of the world. However, this is where the similarity ends. There appears to be little interest in incorporating a sociological position into the postmodern framework. As Randall Collins has noted:

It is widely accepted that questions of knowledge, of science, of intellectual discourse in general, are grounded in a social context. Yet philosophy has not made the transition from the social to the sociological. Philosophers invoke the social in a general way and taken-for-granted way, while their use of actual sociology is meager and often uninformed.¹

The reason postmodernism has not relied on sociological insights is perhaps due to sociology's image as an exclusively positivistic or realistic endeavour or, as Collins points out, it may be an "anti-positivist ploy" to "deny the objective or at least demonstrable nature of knowledge in general."² In either case, sociology, it will be argued, has the intellectual tools for the construction of a sociologically-informed postmodernism and the material for an alternative way of thinking about some of the philosophical quagmires within which postmodern theory finds itself embedded.

¹ Randall Collins, "For a Sociological Philosophy," *Theory and Society*, 17, 1988, p. 669.

² *Ibid.*, p. 669-70.

In order to unravel the relationship between sociology and postmodernism, we will begin our discussion with an overview of the postmodern theoretical position. This is an attempt to summarize and condense the labyrinthine positions discussed in the previous chapters. This will be followed by an examination of conventional sociology's understanding of its object of analysis and disciplinary goals. Specifically, we will focus on sociology's understanding of the issues of objectivity and social reality. Afterward, we will discuss Jean Baudrillard's critique of that conventional sociological perspective. Baudrillard, with his declared objective of putting an end to the social, provides an important postmodern challenge to conventional sociology's understanding of itself and its stance on objectivity and correspondence referentiality (cf. our discussion of language in Chapter 4). In this section, we will evaluate the successes and failures of Baudrillard's and the general postmodern analysis of the possibilities of reliable knowledge of the social world. In the succeeding section, we will begin the discussion of how to merge certain insights of both postmodernism and sociology--without falling into either the objectivism of conventional sociology or the relativistic "unknowability" of postmodernism. Here, we will examine Durkheim's pragmatism lectures given at the Sorbonne in the 1913-14 academic year. These lectures, it will be argued, provide

the epistemological roots for rethinking postmodernism's leveling of all meaning and theoretical expressions. Finally, we will conclude with a brief discussion of some important questions raised by our sociological assessment of postmodern thought.

The Modern and the Postmodern: An Overview

It is quite possible to become lost in the labyrinthine lexicon of postmodern thought and practice. Consequently, it is important before discussing the relationship between sociology and postmodernism to reexamine the epistemological and general theoretical position of postmodernism. The following categories provide some of the basic "ideal type" differences between modern and postmodern thought and their respective cultural orientations. Most of these points overlap in some way; they have been, however, differentiated for the sake of continuity and simplicity. Within this admittedly simplified schemata, postmodernism and modernism are seen as sets of binary oppositions.

Modern
universality
foundationalism
the apriori
certainty
science
unity/consensus
presence
linearity

Postmodern
incommensurability
indeterminate truth
the pragmatic
fallibility/interpretation
literature/poetics
fragmentation/parology
absence/difference
non-linearity

optimism

nihilism³

In this section we will briefly discuss each one of these binary distinctions for purposes of further clarification.

First of all, in place of modern thought's reliance upon universal conditions or essences, postmodernism emphasizes multiple voicing and the incommensurability of various life forms (i.e., group cultures) or language games. For the postmodernists, there are no universal essences or laws which transcend the locality of culture, language, history, or the organization of knowledge. These localities mark the boundary between radically different life worlds or forms of life. From the postmodern position, there is no need to search for an underlying element which unites all life worlds. Any such strategy would simply be an hegemonic attempt to establish and affirm the superiority of one classification system and one truth claim over another. Thus, for the postmodernists, determining who is "telling the truth" and who is engaged in rhetorical pontification is an impossible theoretical task.

Secondly, since life forms are incommensurable, it becomes impossible to have firm foundations for making truth claims. In postmodernism, truth is a philosophical

³ Some of these categories are adapted from Thomas McCarthy's Introduction of Habermas', The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. ix.

ideal which has very little relevance in the actual establishment of knowledge. In this regard, postmodernists are strongly influenced by Nietzsche's linking of power and knowledge. For the postmodernists, truth is more an issue of power/knowledge legitimation than an empirically-discovered or rationally-constructed foundational principle. Therefore, postmodernists emphasize the local character and indeterminacy of truth. When a "truth event" occurs it is a local event and ultimately a matter of the power and knowledge matrix at work within a knowledge/culture producing community or organization. Consequently, the scientific discovery or isolation of a causal or first principle or the identification of law-like patterns is merely a mythical construct to cover what is actually a very haphazard and power-laden endeavor.

Thirdly, postmodernists emphasize the pragmatic over the apriori. The pragmatist approach views truth, in part, as nothing more than a convenient instrument for the conduct of daily life or knowledge production.⁴ Within this view, foundational truths are impossible to obtain. Consequently, if truth is to remain it must be stripped of its metaphysical illusions and viewed as merely an instrumental means for organizing our experience of the

⁴ For a discussion of pragmatism and social theory, cf. Eugene Rochberg-Halton, Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), specifically, pp. 1-23.

world (e.g., Rorty).

Fourthly, in place of the modern attempt to ascertain and establish the certainty of competing truth claims, postmodernists emphasize the infinite fallibility of such an enterprise. For the postmodernists, the world can never be captured as-it-is. Knowledge of the world is always mediated by pre-existing intellectual categories, social factors, or language. The best we can do is engage in a poetic interpretation of the world. However, the goal of this interpretation cannot be the recovery of some hidden dimension or underlying structure, as in depth hermeneutics (cf. Foucault's critique of hermeneutics). Such a strategy would merely be another form of Occidental culture's endless search for absolute certainty (cf. Derrida's discussion of "presence"). Instead, the goal of discourse (if indeed it is a goal) is one marked by a ceaseless interpretative strategy, where the individual merely writes for the sake of writing.

This move brings us to the fifth set of categories. The postmodernists see themselves engaged in literature or textual analysis rather than traditional science. For them, the intellectual superiority of scientific discourse over literary discourse cannot be sustained. Science is merely one form of writing which differs from literature only in regard to the level of sophisticated rhetorical strategies it employs in making and protecting truth

claims. Essentially, all knowledge is merely the product of writing or a text of the world. Consequently, all that we can do as intellectuals or scientists is engage in textual analysis like the literary critic.

Sixthly, in the place of modernity's emphasis on unity and consensus, postmodernism points to fragmentation and parology (i.e., conflict). The postmodernists dismiss as useless the attempt to construct a unitary framework of knowledge. For the postmodernists, knowledge and cultural production is non-cumulative and non-unified.⁵ Consensus is seen as being both a myth and a hazard for contemporary knowledge production. It has been and will continue to be philosophically impossible for scientists or other knowledge producer to reach a consensus on what counts as reliable knowledge and successfully to exclude that which is not appropriate. Furthermore, the lack of consensus is not viewed in a negative light. For the postmodernists, a pluralistic multiple voicing is the best protection we have from theoretical hegemony.

Seventhly, modernists generally accept (at least in some form) a correspondence between word and world (i.e., correspondence referentiality). Words, concepts, and theories are seen as enabling the investigator to bring a

⁵ For a discussion of this in science see, Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), and Paul Feyerabend, Against Method (London: New Left Books, 1975).

social or natural object into the direct light of analysis. The object is seen as having presence (Derrida), which means that the object can be immediately brought before the investigating subject. This enables the object to be open to examination and classification. However, the postmodernists contend that correspondence referentiality is an extremely naive perspective. Like the idealists and nominalists, postmodernists see words, concepts, and theories as human constructs without immediate (or postponed) presence. When we refer to something in the world we are employing a differentiated linguistical system (Saussure) that is a human or cultural creation. As such, its bearing on reality-in-itself is non-direct or absent.

Eighthly, postmodernists point to non-linearity over linearity. In regard to historical change, postmodernists emphasize how history is void of any transhistorical logic. History has no inherent rationality which unfolds into a preplanned form. Rather than the modernist emphasis on evolutionary and temporal linearity, postmodernists stress historical and temporal relativity. This historicistic move enables postmodernism to attack such cherished ideas as progress, emancipation, and societal evolution.⁶ There

⁶ Historically, these terms were used as Euro-American slogans or ideologies for subjugating the "Third World." Recently, various Southern Hemisphere intellectuals have pointed out the relationship between these concepts and periphery exploitation. For a discussion of this in relation to Marx, see Tsenay Serequeberhan, "Karl Marx and African Emancipatory Thought: A Critique of Euro-Centric

historicistic stance is another means for calling into question the overall modernistic agenda of providing certain and secure knowledge of the world.

Finally, in place of modernistic optimism, postmodernism tends to be nihilistic. Since all knowledge is a contingent outcome of power, cultural hierarchies, or rhetoric, there appears to be little hope of establishing meaning and firm knowledge of the world. As we shall see in the next few chapters, these nihilistic conclusions are one of the central differences between postmodernism and the sociological position to be presented.

The classification system employed above is very general. It is intended merely as a overview--a means for placing postmodernism in perspective. In the next section, we will be concerned with examining the epistemological orientation of conventional sociology. As will be shown, the perspective of conventional sociology is generally modern in its orientation. The discussion to follow is intended as further means for setting the stage for our view of the theoretical encounter between sociology and postmodernism.

Modern Sociology: Between Positivism and Realism

Ernest Gellner has said that "every philosophical baby that is born alive is either a little positivist or a

Metaphysics," Praxis International, 10, 1990, pp. 161-179.

little Hegelian."⁷ This statement also applies to "sociological babies." The history of sociology is closely linked with the larger modern philosophical and scientific effort to establish firm and reliable knowledge of the world. Since Comte's establishment of a "social physics" in the early nineteenth century, sociologists have sought to either develop social laws from patterns of sensory experience (positivism) or provide accurate, rational interpretations of social phenomena (realism), at least in theory. While sociologists may differ over the proper means for achieving understanding of the social, most are in agreement over their general intellectual mission, or at least, seek to give the impression of unity.⁸

Historically, what has united most conventional sociologists, regardless of their focus, method, or theoretical position, is the belief in a real social realm beyond the subject's definition of the situation and beyond linguistic signification. Sociologist may bicker over the definition of concepts or theoretical interpretations (i.e., positivist vs interpretive, macro vs micro, or conflict vs symbolic interactionism), but they are virtually united in the belief that material conditions, social organization, interactional networks, or some societal region are sites

⁷ Ernest Gellner, Relativism and the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 4.

⁸ This is perhaps more of a professional ideology than an indication of "sociology in action."

of intrinsic meaning or causality. Philosophers may ponder the meaning of referentiality and theory/reality correspondence, but most sociologists take the social to be real, actual, and determining. As an anti-nominalist and anti-idealist enterprise, sociology sees itself as going beyond the unanswerable and paradoxical questions of philosophy into something that is pragmatic and empirically or rationally verifiable. Sociology sees this move away from philosophy and metaphysics as allowing it to make definitive statements on the overall nature of society or some societal element.

While sociologists are virtually united in their intellectual mission to uncover the social, they are often methodologically divided on how to achieve it.⁹ Since its inception, conventional sociology has been caught between two combative epistemologies--positivism and realism. These divergent epistemologies agree that any type of science should be an empirical, objective, and rational activity which produces reliable explanations of the social or natural world.¹⁰ Their disagreement arises over how these objectives should be achieved. For the "ideal type" positivist, the only source of true and reliable knowledge

⁹ Cf. Everett C. Hughes, The Sociological Eye, Vol. II (New York: Aldine-Atherton, 1971), pp. 431-477.

¹⁰ Russell Keat and John Urry, Social Theory as Science, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 5.

is sensory experience. The point of any scientific endeavor is to establish laws from the patterned regularities of the domain of direct (or systematically refined) experience. Knowledge gained through other means (e.g., deduction, interpretation, metaphysics) is unreliable since it results in the production of unverifiable truth claims (i.e., it cannot be tested).

On the other hand, realists argue that any science should concern itself with uncovering the hidden structures that produce patterned regularities or outward appearances. For the realists, truth and reality are hidden below the surface of visible "events." The unearthing of meaning requires some form of indepth analytics to reach this hidden reality below the surface of appearance. Consequently, the realist see sociology, in part, as a constructivist activity, which searches for underlying structures. Within this view, the rational mind is seen as playing a key role in the uncovering and construction of accurate and reliable knowledge of the social world.

These two conceptualizations of the proper orientation for doing science have produced two intellectual (and political) camps, two styles of intellectual work, and two types of sociologists. One follows the dictates of positivistic epistemology by seeking to locate patterned laws of the social; the other is concerned with uncovering a deep reality. Like their epistemological counterparts,

both are in agreement that sociological methods should capture, and sociological knowledge report, the social world-as-it-is. Their differences are centered around the issues of the appropriate methodology to employ to reach and recover the social (i.e., scientific or interpretative, cf. the methodenstreit debate in late nineteenth-century social theory) and the proper level at which to find social reality.¹¹

Positivistic sociologists believe in the existence of a social world beyond individual experience and signification. They claim that the social "exists prior to and independently of such (sociological) knowledge."¹² The social world and its elements can be recovered through the use of methods which exact and refine sensory experience (i.e., scientific method, often of a quantitative variety). This position is best exemplified by Durkheim's attempt to establish the existence of "social facts." Durkheim defined social facts as a constraint which is "general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its

¹¹ For a discussion of this see Anthony Giddens (ed.), "Introduction" in Positivism and Sociology (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 1-22.

¹² Derek Layder, "Beyond Empiricism? The Promise of Realism," Philosophy of Social Science 15, 1988, p. 255.

individual manifestations."¹³ For the positivist camp, Durkheim's classic study of suicide, with its statistical revelation of social facts, is a model of what the science of society should be doing.¹⁴

The sociological realist questions the appropriate methodology and "unit of analysis" for the reappropriation of the socially real. In other words, the realist position does not agree with the positivist description and presentation of the social. Since the human sciences are inevitably linked with, and caught within, the social world, it is impossible to utilize the same positivistic methodology as the physical sciences which deal exclusively with inert matter. What is needed are rational methods of interpretation which uncover deep or hidden meaning. Meaning for the hermeneutically inclined realists does not lay at the surface. Therefore, meaning can not be obtained through sensory experience alone, as it is for the positivists. A proper methodology requires some combination of sensory data and rational interpretation to establish a conjunction of events.

The realist way of seeing the social is perhaps best represented in Marx's "materialist conception of history."

¹³ Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method, trans. by S. Solovay and J. Mueller (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 13.

¹⁴ Emile Durkheim, Suicide, trans. by J.A. Spaulding and G. Simpson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

Marx wanted to distance his work methodologically from both the idealism of Hegelian philosophy and the positivism of "vulgar economics." In the German Ideology, Marx and Engels tackle the problems of idealism. In one of their most powerful and sarcastic critiques of the implications of idealism they write: "once upon a time an honest fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed of the idea of gravity."¹⁵ Later, in a more analytical statement, Marx concluded:

To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which under the name of "the Idea," he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal for "the Idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.¹⁶

However, this rejection of Hegel did not lead Marx to abandon the rationalism of idealism in favor of the pure sensory inclination of positivism. Marx was also skeptical of the positivistic perspective, which only analyzes "the superficial, phenomenal or apparent features of social and economic life."¹⁷ In this sense, the Marxist view of social reality serves as a model for the realistically

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 2.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, Capital, Vol I. (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), p. 19.

¹⁷ Keat and Urry, Social Theory as Science, 1982, p. 99.

inclined sociologist. Sociologists should employ both observation and logic in their construction of the true causal structure of events or phenomena.

The sociological orientation towards the social world, in either its positivistic or realistic vein, certainly has its advantages, at least in an instrumental sense. The taken-for-granted existence of the social, backed by the objective or rational measurements of quantitative or qualitative methodology, allows sociologists to make what they believe to be absolute pronouncements on a range of social principles, issues, and problems. However, in doing so both schools of sociology open themselves up to a series of philosophical attacks and a general intellectual skepticism (cf. Foucault's discussion of the human sciences in an Chapter 5). First of all, from a postmodern position, conventional sociology is unable to explain how the sociologist can be removed from the cultural and linguistic scene to give an objectivistic account of social reality. Nor is conventional sociology able definitively to state or explain how it is that its concepts, measures, or interpretations come to capture accurately and report unmediated social reality (i.e., the problem of reflexivity). Seen from the vantage point of post-positivistic postmodernism, the failure of modernistic sociology to address adequately these issues makes it an extremely problematic discipline and its knowledge content

suspect.

In the section to follow, we will explore Jean Baudrillard's postmodern critique of conventional sociological positivism and realism. In this encounter we can better see the theoretical positions at work in both sociology and postmodernism and postmodernism's important challenge to the conventional sociological framework.

Baudrillard and the End of the Social-as-Real

The early work of Jean Baudrillard in the late 1960's and early 1970's sought to supplement traditional Marxist theory with insights from structural linguistics and semiotics.¹⁸ Baudrillard was then concerned with understanding political economy as a semiological system of sign consumption rather than as a specific mode of economic production. For Baudrillard, contemporary society is a post-industrial one--marked by mass consumption. As such, the logic of its dynamics are to found at a different level than a production-oriented society. Baudrillard envisions consumption, not in the traditional Marxist terms of an usurping of use value by exchange value with the development of the capitalist mode of production, but as "a system which assures the regulations of signs and

¹⁸ Cf. Jean Baudrillard, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, trans. by Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, (1972) 1981.

integration of the group."¹⁹ This means that a consumer society "substitutes a social order of values and classification for a contingent world of needs and pleasures, the natural and biological order."²⁰

Consequently, in consumer society:

Marketing, purchasing, sales, the acquisition of differentiated commodities and object/signs--all of these presently constitute our language, a code with which our entire society communicates and speaks of and to itself. Such is the present structure of communication...²¹

The underlying code or language of consumer society is distinct from the underlying code of an industrial or production oriented society. The code of consumer society is marked, not by the underlying dynamics of class conflict and exchange rationale, but by a proliferation of consumption inducing signs.

By the late 1970's the language or code of consumer society had become all-pervasive for Baudrillard. The proliferation of the commodity sign, made possible by the simulational world of television and other informational technologies, had completely permeated the sphere of language, communication, and as a consequence, society. As William Bogard has described it:

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer Society" in Mark Poster (ed.), Selected Writings (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 46.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

²¹ Ibid., p. 48.

What fascinates modern man, and what finds its support in the hi-tech, digitalized world of post-industrial consumer society, is electronic simulation (television, which for us has become more true than true; computer models, more real than real), fashion (more beautiful than beautiful), catastrophe (more eventful than the event)...²²

Essentially, post-industrial consumer society is so "entangled in illusion that the distinction between true and false, TV and reality, cannot legitimately be made."²³

With this proliferation and blurring of original notions of direct signification caused by the various informational technologies, the real has become the hyperreal. "We have become completely absorbed by models, completely absorbed by fashion, completely absorbed by simulation."²⁴ As a result, traditional notions of referentiality have collapsed. The "precession of the model...puts an end to the real."²⁵ It becomes impossible to establish correspondence referentiality in a climate where the sign replaces and obliterates the object it originally

²² William Bogard, "Closing Down the Social: Baudrillard's Challenge to Contemporary Sociology," *Sociological Theory*, 8, 1990, p. 4.

²³ Steven Best, "The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification: Jean Baudrillard and Post-Modernism," in Current Perspectives in Social Theory, ed. by John Wilson (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1989), p. 38, emphasis added.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, "Fatal Strategies," in Selected Writings, 1988, p. 187.

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities (New York: Jean Baudrillard and Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 98-99.

represented (e.g., "is it real...or is it memorex"). Reality has been replaced by appearance. It becomes impossible to distinguish between the real and simulacrum.

One important result of the collapse of referentiality is that what we once called society has become an indistinguishable "mass." Cultural, ethnic, and class differences are becoming leveled by the homogeneous (and homogenizing) hum of the television and related simulational technologies.²⁶ In Baudrillard's words, "the masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation."²⁷ The masses as a signifier no longer corresponds to an object-in-the-world. The masses no longer can be referred to as a civil society, culture, "the people," class, or a repository for revolution or social action. All referentiality and with it all attached meanings have been leveled. With this leveling comes the "implosion" of the social-as-signifier. The social has become empty.²⁸ Baudrillard writes:

....If the social is both destroyed by what produces it (the media, information) and reabsorbed by what it produces (the masses), it follows that its definition

²⁶ The leveling of ethnic and class differences has also been pointed out by North American mass media critics, cf. George Gerbner, "Television: A New State Religion?" *Et Cetera*, 34, 1977.

²⁷ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 1983, p. 20.

²⁸ Baudrillard is not only saying that the social has disappeared, he is also arguing that the social has never existed, cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72

is empty, and that this term which serves as universal alibi for every discourse, no longer analyses anything, no longer designates anything. Not only is it superfluous and useless...it conceals that it is only abstraction and residue, or even simply an effect of the social, a simulation and an illusion.²⁹

The social as a "universal alibi" for politicians and social scientists has ceased to exist. The social as a grand concept or reality principle has been destroyed by information technologies and redeployed in an undifferentiated or undifferentiatiable mass. Here, the social ceases to have hermeneutical meaning or critical potentiality.

(The masses) don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested. The referendum (and the media are a constant referendum of directed questions and answers) has been substituted for the political referent. Now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representation, but to one of simulation.³⁰

As further evidence of the collapse of the social, Baudrillard cites the refusal of the French to protest the extradition of a German lawyer (Klaus Croissant) while a soccer match was on television.³¹ A sociality (i.e., a sense of social identity) with any inherent meaning has ceased to exist. He asks, "where is sociality in Los

²⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

³¹ Ibid., p. 12.

Angeles?"³²

For Baudrillard, the rise of the undifferentiated mass marks, not only the end or implosion of the social, but also the end of that positivistic or realistic discourse which developed and sought to capture it--sociology. Sociology, as the master discourse on the social, no longer has an object--a point of reference--a signified. Therefore, it dies alongside the social. Baudrillard writes:

Sociology can only depict the expansion of the social and its vicissitudes. It survives only on the positive and definitive hypothesis of the social. The reabsorption, the implosion of the social escapes it. The hypothesis of the death of the social is also that of its own death.³³

The social and sociology have been swallowed up by a new version of society. In this version all transcendence and referentiality are impossible. In other words, it is no longer possible for the "all-knowing sociologist" to utilize the term "society" to capture the social. Speaking as sociologist (or more accurately as an ex-sociologist), Baudrillard writes:

The situation no longer permits us to isolate reality or human nature as a fundamental variable. The result is therefore not to provide any additional information or to shed any light on reality, but on the contrary, because we will never in the future be able to separate reality from its statistical, simulative projection in the media, a state of suspense and definitive

³² Ibid., p. 83.

³³ Ibid., p. 4.

uncertainty about reality.³⁴

Sociology then dissolves into a form of literature, poetics, or science fiction--although the "gibberish of the 'social sciences' will still echo it, i.e., the social, long after its disappearance."³⁵ It no longer can claim a privileged epistemological position from which to express and defend its truth claims. Sociology's epistemological position was based on the ability of its perspective and concepts to extract meaning from (or impart meaning to) the social. These meaning-extracting and granting functions of sociology are no longer possible in an era marked by the social's disappearance. The traditional type of social, that is the actively-constructed, community based culture, has been upsurbed by a simulational mass society.

Ironically, Baudrillard's argument is a social theory of the death of social theory. It is meant to be a type of final word on the irrelevance of sociology in the contemporary world.³⁶ Henceforth, Baudrillard commits himself to writing something akin to science fiction or an

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses," in Mark Poster (ed.), Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 210.

³⁵ Baudrillard, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, 1983, p. 68.

³⁶ In this regard, cf. Alvin W. Gouldner, The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

"absurdist pataphysics" (i.e., emotionally based comments).³⁷ This science fiction may have "flashes of insights," but it is literature or poetics rather than traditional critique, analysis, or theory. The goal of analysis is to become excessive and exuberant. Baudrillard writes:

(Theory) must become excessive and sacrificial to speak about excess and sacrifice. It must become simulation if it speaks about simulation, and deploy the same strategy as its object. If it speaks about seduction, theory must become the seducer, and deploy the same stratagems...³⁸

Sociology's only option is to become hyper-conformist. It must, in a Nietzschean way, recognize the mass "as the repository of a finally delusive, illusive, and allusive strategy, the correlative of an ironic, joyful, and seductive conscious."³⁹

In many ways, Baudrillard can be seen as bringing postmodern problematics into sociology. What was once merely an obscure and arcane debate in philosophy, architecture, and literary criticism has now infiltrated the "serious discourse" of the social sciences. For Baudrillard, not only is the individual decentered, but also the social. It seems that the social is as unstable

³⁷ Cf. Best, "The Commodification of Reality," 1989, p. 36. One of the most illustrative examples of this style of writing is Baudrillard's, America (London: Verso, 1988).

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), p. 27.

³⁹ Baudrillard, "The Masses," 1988, p. 217.

as modernist "man." The social, it turns out is not able to take the place of the subject, as the structuralist seemed to argue. Baudrillard's "critique" of sociology is a clever and ironical attack upon the epistemological position and cherished principles of the discipline. For Baudrillard, the social is a text without depth. It is nothing (and never has been anything) but a system of signification. When this signification becomes confused or blurred, the social simply ceases to exist--it dies or implodes.

Baudrillard, as with most postmodernists, generally offers us a nominalistic view of the social. Within this framework, when sociologists speak of the social or any of its elements or characteristics (e.g., social class, status, anomie, alienation, etc.), they are not talking about a real realm or real phenomena. Essentially, sociologists are giving an artificial and arbitrary signifier, which could easily be represented in another way or not represented at all. Consequently, sociology is trying to create meaning and causality in a realm which lacks independent substance. There is no correspondence between the sociological word and the social world. Within the Baudrillardian and the nominalistically-influenced postmodern framework, if referentiality is no longer possible, then all hopes of finding fixed, determinate meaning (such as in the social) ceases to be possible. The

only courses of action which remains are nihilistic surrender or endless and meaningless literary pontification--a rather necessary, but not sufficient, aspect of the transition to a different intellectual culture.

Despite his playful idiosyncrasies, Baudrillard is offering an important critique of the modern, conventional sociology discussed earlier. Both the positivists and realists rest their truth claims on grasping the social as it exists: If we accept Baudrillard's argument, this task is no longer possible. In the context of his views, sociologists are at best bad poets or at worst unsophisticated con artists!

Baudrillard's vision of the social is as unacceptable as the objectivistic positivism and realism of conventional sociology. We can no more accept the idea that our sociological concepts capture and illuminate the social-in-itself, than we can accept Baudrillard's postmodern position that the social is merely signification-without-reference. Both perspectives represent the extremes of objectivism and nominalism. They either promote their knowledge as completely accurate or they argue that concepts are relative and have no validity. Both perspectives need new ways of conceiving the social which avoids both all-knowing objectivism and the total collapse of meaning in postmodernist relativism and nihilism.

In the next section, we take up this issue of how we can develop a view of the social which avoids (not solves) the problems of both conventional sociology and postmodernism. This does not involve a fateful strategy of out-maneuvring one's opponent. This is philosophically impossible. It is more along the lines of thinking of the social and social investigations in different terms. Fortunately, the material for this construction is already in place. The late work of Durkheim provides a means for examining the postmodern position and for providing an alternative vision of epistemology.

Rethinking Durkheim: The Encounter with Pragmatism

Durkheim is generally recognized to be the individual responsible for the establishment of sociology as an objectivistic and positivistic endeavor. As such, he is generally considered by critics to be one of the most extreme advocates of the conventional sociology discussed earlier. There is certainly enough evidence to support this position. In The Rules of Sociological Method, Durkheim proclaimed sociology's intellectual mission as the search for "social facts."⁴⁰ Sociology is to be an objective discipline "dominated entirely by the idea that

⁴⁰ Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method, 1966, pp 1-13.

social facts are things and must be treated as such."⁴¹ However, in this section, and in the next chapter, we would like to go beyond the objectivism and facticity of Durkheim's social facts into a Durkheimian-based sociology of knowledge. This sociology of knowledge was introduced in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, however, it seems to come to its fruition in his encounter with American pragmatism. It is this encounter we wish to explore, for it seems to provide an important means for evaluating the total collapse of meaning in postmodernism. First, however, a brief caveat on two very unlikely compatriots, Nietzsche and Durkheim.

Nietzsche and Durkheim

Two important declarations on God were made in the late nineteenth century. The most notorious of these statements was Nietzsche's affirmative proclamation, "God is dead." The other, by Durkheim, declared that "God and society are one."⁴² At first glance, it would appear that these statements have little in common beyond their point of reference. The former statement was made to signal the end of moral and philosophical foundationalism and the dawning of a postmodern age of nihilism and unverifiable

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 143.

⁴² Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, trans. by J.W. Swain (London: Allen & Unwin), p. 206.

truth claims. The latter statement was made as part of an effort to establish a science of society and allow for definitive truth declarations. Generally, Durkheim's statement is seen as affirming and extending the explanatory power of modern notions of rationality and science. However, from a sociology of knowledge perspective these statements can be read as complementary theoretical visions.

When Nietzsche argued that God was dead he was not simply making a statement about the secularization of Occidental culture. He was also saying that all efforts at establishing transcendental or extra-human knowledge are in vain. Essentially, Nietzsche was using the death of "God" as a metaphor for the inevitable demise of modern science's epistemological myth of transcendental or objectivistic knowledge. At a certain level, this argument is parallel to what Durkheim is arguing about the relationship between God and society. In arguing that explanations of God must be found in the collective organization of the social, Durkheim is too saying that the transcendental and metaphysical explanations of God and truth are unacceptable. Both Nietzsche and Durkheim seek to replace philosophically-based truth claims, with a different version of belief/knowledge production. For both Nietzsche and Durkheim, all phenomena are "human, all-too-human." However, it is at this point that these two related visions

of the exhaustion of traditional philosophy part company. We have traced the Nietzschean-inspired postmodern path into nihilism. Now we will explore the sociological path.

Durkheim's Pragmatism Lectures

During the 1913-14 academic year, Durkheim gave a series of lectures on pragmatism at the Sorbonne. Marcel Mauss refer to these lectures as "the crowning achievement of Durkheim's philosophical work."⁴³ The verbatim content of the lectures were never published and were subsequently lost. However, under the guidance of Mauss, the lectures were compiled and later published using student lecture notes.⁴⁴ The content of these lectures reveal a different and more complex Durkheim than the one given by and adapted into conventional sociology. As Armand Cuvillier remarks in the Preface to the French edition, in these lectures "Durkheim's sociological realism finally resolves itself into a theory of knowledge which is at the same time idealistic and realistic."⁴⁵ These lectures serve as a platform for Durkheim to explore "the nature and function

⁴³ Quoted in Steven Lukes, Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 485.

⁴⁴ Originally published as Pragmatisme et sociologie (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1955). Translated by J.C. Whitehouse as, Pragmatism and Sociology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

of concepts, and the role of speculative thought."⁴⁶
Through a disucssion of Durkheim's encounter with
pragmatism, we will perhaps find a way of rethinking the
total collapse or leveling of all meaning in postmodernism.

As the title of the lectures suggests, Durkheim seeks
to come to grips with the American pragmatist movement. He
is sympathetic to the general attempt of pragmatism "to
soften truth."⁴⁷ However, Durkheim has serious
reservations about pragmatism's amorphous conclusions
(i.e., its formlessness and relativism). Durkheim
appreciates pragmatism's "heightened sense of human
reality, the feeling for the extreme variability of
everything human."⁴⁸ Specifically, he accepts the
pragmatists arguments that reality is unstable and that
truth is a human product. On these points, pragmatism and
sociology are in agreement. Durkheim writes:

History begins nowhere and it ends nowhere.
Everything in man has been made by mankind in
the course of time. Consequently, if truth is human,
it too is a human product. Sociology applies the
same conception to reason. All that constitutes
reason, its principles and categories, has been
made in the course of history.⁴⁹

However, the pragmatists take this revelation about the
human construction of truth to mean that the only

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. xl

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

conceptualization of truth that is possible is one where it is conceived as a convenient instrument for the attainment of individual goals. For the pragmatists, truth has only a practical or utilitarian value. Truth is nothing more than a helpful means for the organization of individual experience and for the conduct of daily life.⁵⁰ This being the case, the pragmatist conclude that there is no need for any broader, cumulative, or speculative philosophy.

It is on this point that Durkheim and the pragmatists part company. For Durkheim the revelations of the human character and instability of truth does not mean that it has ceased to serve as a guiding principle of a society or group. For Durkheim, truth is best conceived of as a "collective representation." As such, truth, like morality, has an "obligatory nature," rather than merely a philosophical or epistemological one.⁵¹ "Truth is a norm

⁵⁰ Durkheim seems to be refering more to the pragmatism of James than that of Dewey or Pierce. For example, Pierce once wrote, "...the real is the idea in which the community ultimately settles down..." quoted in, C. Wright Mills, Sociology and Pragmatism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 202. Pierce's social theory of reality seems close to Durkheim's conceptualization. However, Pierce does not believe that the community actually constitutes the truth. The community will eventually appropriate the nature of reality. Dewey promotes a consensus theory of truth, similar to Durkheim's, yet it relies on a much more individualistic version of society. Undoubtedly, Durkheim presents a simplified view of pragmatism.

⁵¹ Durkheim, Pragmatism and Sociology, 1983, p. 98.

for thought in the same way that the moral ideal is a norm for conduct."⁵² Hence:

We are not free in a state of certainty. We feel obliged to adhere to truth. We see our certainty as something that is not personal to us, and that is to be shared by all men. Whether this is an illusion or not, we have that belief.⁵³

Truth, then, is something beyond individual experience and individual utility. It cannot be adequately understood in the subjectivistic terms described by the pragmatists. A better understanding is provided from a sociology of knowledge perspective.

While Durkheim agreed with the pragmatists that truth has no ultimate metaphysical foundation and we can therefore "no longer accept a single, invariable system of categories or intellectual frameworks," its sacred nature does serve as a means to orient life and for the social production of knowledge.⁵⁴

It could well be that certainty is essentially something collective. We are only certain when we are certain that we are not the only ones who are certain. Even when we have worked out a personal belief, we need to communicate it, in order to be certain that we are not mistaken. The authority of tradition and opinion is not, of course, exempt from criticism. When we criticize them, however, it is always in their own name. When, for example, we criticize popular prejudices in the name of science, we are using the authority which opinion accords to

⁵² Ibid., p. 98.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 101.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

science.⁵⁵ Both pragmatism and the Durkheimian sociology of knowledge agree that certainty and truth are not absolute categories derived from the real world. However, unlike the subjectivistic implications drawn by pragmatism, sociology emphasizes that certainty and truth are socially contingent issues that are worked-out and negotiated through interaction with others. Furthermore, if there are disagreements on truth, there is an appeal to legitimate authority/knowledge structures to determine the outcome of competing claims.⁵⁶ Durkheim concludes that "if there are ways of acting which impose themselves on us through collective authority, why should there not be ways of thinking that would impose themselves on us in the same way, through the authority of the collective consciousness."⁵⁷

Durkheim further concludes that "the concepts worked out by the masses and those worked out by scientists are not essentially different in nature."⁵⁸ Both are products of the confines of particular knowledge producing

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 102, emphasis added. Cf. Baudrillard's vision of the "social," discussed earlier in this chapter.

⁵⁶ This is similar to Habermas' position described earlier, however, Durkheim does not wish to use this insight to develop a larger emancipatory model. In this regard, it is perhaps closer to Nietzsche's power/knowledge perspective.

⁵⁷ Durkheim, Pragmatism and Sociology, 1983, p. 101.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

communities. Durkheim writes:

Concepts which are collective in origin (as all concepts really are) take on in our eyes, even when their object is not a real one, such a strength that it appears to be real. That is why concepts acquire the vividness and force of action, of sensations.⁵⁹

Durkheim acknowledges the arbitrary nature of concepts, but this does not mean that they are socially or heuristically meaningless. Within the confines of a community or society, these concepts have a collective representation (collective symbolism) that extends their meaning beyond the dictates of the philosophical community and its arguments about referentiality or correspondence. These concepts serve to orient the conduct of social life.

In these lectures (and throughout his work) one could certainly raise objections to Durkheim's hegemonic and totalizing use (to borrow some terms from Foucault) of collective consciousness and collective representation, but conclude that Durkheim's basic point is still valid.⁶⁰ From a Durkheimian sociology of knowledge perspective, even if we dispense with the traditional philosophical notions of truth and concept/reality correspondence, meaning does not become disintegrated and scattered. There remain

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 101.

⁶⁰ This totalizing of collective consciousness led to the development of the control position in theoretical sociology. To avoid this, it would seem more appropriate to break Durkheim's totalizing collective representation into smaller sub-fields which compete in knowledge production and vie for legitimation.

interactional networks and authority hierarchies which organize and utilize the notion (or ideology) of truth. Granted this is not the idea of truth sought after by the majority of Western philosophy, we can say that it is still a guiding pragmatic principle of the organization of society.

One of Durkheim's central arguments in these lectures is that issues of truth and reality cannot be adequately dealt with through a traditional philosophical or epistemological reading. An adequate accounting requires a sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge is not concerned with drawing distinctions between true and false forms of knowledge. Rather, it is concerned with accounting for the how and why of knowledge production. It is this point that is most crucial for our discussion and requires further elaboration.

There are some important parallels between postmodernism and pragmatism which make Durkheim's lectures most poignant for our considerations. Both pragmatism and postmodernism seek to move away from traditional philosophy and both tend to level the distinctions between fact and fiction, science and literature, and professional and lay interpretations. However, the critical point that can be extracted from Durkheim is that while this move is "philosophically logical," at least within the defined goals of classical philosophy, it is not "sociologically

logical." In making this move, both the postmodernists and pragmatists end up denying the socially (or group) constituted performative nature of truth. Within the intellectual framework of philosophy, it indeed may be no longer possible firmly to establish foundational truth by capturing the world-as-it-is. However, sociologically, the ideal of truth still has meaning.

One of the central reasons that the social version of truth still has meaning is due to the absence of a correspondence between the social version and nature of truth and the philosophical version. Essentially, the two versions were never connected or compatible--they are incommensurable. From the sociology of knowledge perspective, we can say that revealing that philosophy can no longer distinguish between fact and fantasy does not require that people begin marching in the streets demanding a restoration of correspondence referentiality or that scientists stop working because their concepts no longer enable them to construct a computer or engage in biotechnology research. Concepts such as truth and reality have a certain social facticity beyond the idiosyncratic idealistic debates of philosophical discourse (or any discourse). Hence, the collapse of meaning in pragmatism and postmodernism does not tell us anything about the collapse or non-collapse of the organization and production of reality and truth. It only tells us why one particular

productional rationale of truth and one version of reality are no longer ideationally possible. Commenting on the pragmatic leveling of truth, Durkheim writes:

(For the pragmatists) reason is placed on the same plane as sensitivity; truth on the same plane as sensations and instincts. But men have always recognized in truth something that in certain respects imposes itself on us, something that is independent of the facts of sensitivity and individual impulses... It is one thing to cast doubt on the correspondence between symbols and reality: but it is quite another to reject the thing symbolized along with the symbol.⁶¹

Essentially, this is an ironic vindication of transcendence; it can be considered the outcome of both pragmatic and postmodern thought. In postmodernism's idealistic and pragmatism's subjectivistic collapse or leveling of all meaning, they inevitably throw out the object with the symbol. The symbol or the idea is seen as being more concrete, real, and confining than the actual object. Objects only exist as mental representations. Once these representations have been "deconstructed," the object ceases to be "real" and produce "real" consequences. Again, this may make philosophical sense, but it does not make sociological sense. Indeed, the relationship between signifier and signified may be ideationally arbitrary and a correspondence between word and world may not exist, but this does not mean that these distinctions are socially meaningless or cease to have social or group importance.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 68.

For Durkheim and the sociology of knowledge, the "pressure that truth is seen as exercising on minds is itself a symbol that must be interpreted, even if we refuse to make of truth something absolute and extra-human."⁶² On this point, Durkheim writes:

Pragmatism, which levels everything, deprives itself of the means of making this interpretation by failing to recognize the duality that exists between the mentality which results from individual experiences and that which results from collective experiences. Sociology, however, reminds us that what is social always possesses a higher dignity than what is individual. The sociological point of view has the advantage of enabling us to analyze even that august thing, truth.⁶³

Unlike pragmatism, postmodernism does make a distinction between individual experience and the socio-historical constitution of the individual. However, there is no distinction between the philosophical view of the world and the social world. Despite arguments to the contrary, postmodernism essentially is still caught up in a realistic correspondence model of word and world referentiality. Only within such a model would it be possible to claim that Occidental reason is logocentric (Derrida), or that the metanarratives of modernity have collapsed (Lyotard), or that the social has imploded (Baudrillard). Giving up this model requires more than a new philosophical position (modern--postmodern, positivism--postpositivism,

⁶² Ibid., p. 68.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 68.

constructionism--deconstructionism). It requires a sociologically based model which dispenses with determining who has a better representation of reality or who is providing us with a true account of a given phenomenon and turns to the issue of the social production of reality, truth, and knowledge. This of course does require some degree of realism--perhaps a cautious or constructivist realism (We will discuss this further in the next chapter). But perhaps this is a necessity in all linguistically or symbolically based statements or programs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to sketch out what an encounter between postmodernism and sociology might look like. As stated earlier, this encounter was not intended as a sociological critique of postmodernism or as a postmodern critique of sociology. We have tried to show that postmodernism, as an essentially philosophically based perspective, is somewhat sociologically naive, particularly in regard to its total collapse of meaning. Yet, the same can be said of the objectivistic position of conventional sociology.

The preceding exposition raises three important and related questions for the sociology of knowledge position presented herein. First of all, does the outcome of this encounter mean that sociology has to give up its privileged

epistemological position on the social? Secondly, can we assume that sociology is a form of literature or poetics? And, finally, how can such an analysis given in this chapter avoid the problem of reflexivity (i.e., why should we believe this position's truth claims)? We can only answer these questions in a provisional way here. We will take up these questions throughout the remainder of this work.

In regard to the first point, if we see sociology in the traditional way, the answer has to be, yes. Sociology can not defend the position that it has a privileged or superior access to truth. However, this does not mean that sociology has nothing to say or that its intellectual products are meaningless. Questions of this nature can always be seen from either a philosophical or sociological perspective. Nor does it mean that sociology is literature or poetics. If indeed sociology is merely literature, we must insert the sociological point that all literature is not socially the same. Hence, we can always sidestep the philosophical position with a sociological one and vice versa.

Finally, in regard to the problem of reflexivity, it has been said that philosophers never solve problems, they only become bored with them. Perhaps the same is true for postmodernly inclined philosophers and practitioners of the sociology of knowledge. There is really no clear way out

of the problem of reflexivity. It is a spiraling and ironic intellectual trap. As Hilary Lawson has written:

For to recognize the importance of language is to do so within the language. To argue that the character of the world is in part due to the concepts employed, is to employ those concepts. To insist that we are confined by the limitations of our own problematic is to be confined within those very limits.⁶⁴

While this may not mean "business as usual" within sociology or any other field, it can be said that if we simply refuse to reflect on such issues, we still are confronted by the need to end the metatheoretical spiral somewhere. Thus, perhaps it is not a matter of selecting one strategy which forever avoids the problem of reflexivity, but a matter of deciding on a pragmatically cautious or constructivist version of reality. Within the logical of this position, reality can be used if it reconized to be a socially constructed heuristic device--a way of making statments and not an objectivistic foundation.

In the next two chapters we will take up the specific ways in which both reality and truth can be perceived in sociological, rather than traditional philosophical, terms.

⁶⁴ Hilary Lawson, Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1985.), p. 9. Cf. the Goedel Theorem in Mathematics, which maintains that no logical argument can be made merely by an appeal to concepts and notions within a given arithmetic system; consistency has to come from another system with stronger resources. It is also worth noting that there may be some parallels between postmodern philosophy and chaos theory in physics. Both emphasize, to one degree or another, randomness and undecidability.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM A PHILOSOPHY TO A SOCIOLOGY OF TRUTH: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

In the preceding chapter, we began the process of rethinking postmodernism's frontal attack on all aspects of meaning through the introduction of a Durkheimian-influenced sociology of knowledge. It was argued that postmodernism is perhaps philosophically correct, yet sociologically naive, when it dispenses with the concept of reality and levels down all truth and validity claims. In fact, it can be argued that this leveling represents the type of totalizing thinking (cf. Foucault's discussion of totalizing discourse) which postmodernism itself seems to deplore in modern discursive formations. We concluded that the postmodern position, despite its argument of being "post-philosophical," is still deeply enveloped within a philosophical or epistemological way of seeing and explaining the world. Essentially, it may be said that certain forms of postmodernism remain caught within the "idealist fallacy," that is, "the belief that all significant forms of order may be reduced to language like processes."¹ As a consequence of this position, when

¹ Timothy J. Reiss, The Uncertainty of Analysis: Problems in Truth, Meaning, and Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 4.

language or theory "orders" are seen as being no longer capable of capturing unmediated reality, all discursive meaning effectively implodes or ends and all "orders" effectively collapse. As a result of this philosophical or idealistic way of perceiving the world, contemporary theory has a tendency to either become a referentless poetics (i.e., a form of fiction) or entangled in an inescapable and hopeless nihilism.

In this chapter, we will continue our search for a sociological means for reconsidering the issues of reality and truth. Specifically, we will discuss the contributions a sociology of knowledge, particularly in its neo-Durkheimian variant, can make for our appraisal of postmodernism. We will draw upon the work of Mannheim, Latour, and others.

Essentially, we will argue three points. First, while this sociological version is not unproblematic, it does point to the existence of a different framework for approaching such fundamental and traditional philosophical distinctions or crucial dualities as reality and appearance, truth and myth, knowledge and belief, and objectivism and relativism. Secondly, we will argue that all of these distinctions, in one way or another, rest on the realist position that an objective account of social or natural reality is or has been possible. This correspondence account (i.e., that theory captures and

language reports the real) is one which the sociological framework seeks to avoid. However, it is important to point out that this maneuvering does not stem from the claim that the sociological framework has captured the true reality which philosophy has somehow missed. Rather, it originates in the argument that truth and reality, including the sociological versions, need to be thought of as the "social constructs" of knowledge and culture producers, instead of metaphysical entities existing outside of human socio-political activity. Finally, we will argue that a perspective of this type allows one to avoid the meaningless gibberish or nihilistic silence, the sort of reductio ad absurdum, which is often the outcome of postmodern philosophical thinking. It, thus, can be seen as a possible means for steering clear of the idealistic quagmires associated with postmodernism.

In order to explore the potential contributions of the sociology of knowledge to our examination of postmodern discourse, we will first examine the thought of Karl Mannheim, explicating his general vision of what the sociology of knowledge should be doing and how it should approach the issues of truth and reality. This section also contains a discussion of the so-called "strong program" in the sociology of knowledge, one which seeks to extend Mannheim's vision of sociology to all spheres of knowledge. Next, we will take-up the constructivist

position of Bruno Latour in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Latour's discussion of science provides one of the most illuminating examples of how a sociology of knowledge model can respond to the general philosophical categories of truth and reality, thus making an important contribution to our discussion and appraisal of postmodern theory. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of how these insights from the sociology of knowledge allow us to "place postmodernism in perspective."

It must be added that there are three general directions one can take when examining the issues of truth and reality from a sociological perspective. First, one can explore the phenomenology of everyday life or micro "construction of reality" along the lines of Schutz, Garfinkel, Goffman, or Berger and Luckmann.² Secondly, one can explore the general "social milieu" which molds all forms of knowledge, such as Mannheim's work. Finally, one can explore the organization and production of truth by certain scientific or intellectual groups, as in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Generally speaking, the first two positions have been concerned with so-called

² Specifically see, Alfred Schutz, The Phenomenology of the Social World, trans. by G. Walsh and F. Lehnert (Northwestern University Press, 1967), Harold Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

"commonsense knowledge" and the latter with "specialized knowledge." For this presentation, selecting the appropriate sociological approach and "level of analysis" of reality or truth is not a decision based on who is closer to the truth about the social world, but a matter of interpretative expediency or practical reason. We wish to avoid the momentum distraction sectarian issues: While utilizing them as we deem fit. We are suspending judgment on the relative merits of the micro and macro perspectives and the general micro/macro debate in social theory. Consequently, since our primary concern is with the "specialized knowledge" of postmodernism, we will primarily focus on the latter type of sociology, the "macro" one, regardless of overlap. We will select from each perspective what is necessary for the development and explication of an over-all sociology of knowledge framework.

The Sociology of Knowledge: From Mannheim to the
"Strong Program"

The roots of the sociology of knowledge can be found in many of the "classic statements" of nineteenth-century European sociology, such as Marx's structure/superstructure dichotomy, Weber's discussion of religious types, and Durkheim's concept of collective representations. However, the sociology of knowledge was only formally introduced as a branch of sociological analysis by Max Scheler and given a firm direction by Karl Mannheim in the 1920's. For

Mannheim, the chief spokesperson for the early sociology of knowledge, its goal was to explore how thinking functions as "an instrument of collective action."³ In this respect, the goal of the sociology of knowledge is vastly different from that of traditional philosophy. Historically, most philosophy had only concerned itself with one type of (pure) knowledge and one knowledge-producing system; with few exceptions, it had not been concerned with the dynamics of everyday or commonsensical thought and knowledge. In a paradigmatic statement, Mannheim's comments,

Philosophers have too long concerned themselves with their own thinking. When they wrote of thought, they had in mind primarily their own history, the history of philosophy....This type of thinking is applicable only under quite special circumstances, and what can be learned by analyzing it is not directly transferable to other spheres of life.⁴

Traditional philosophy, with its quest for absolute and universal truth, was not conceptually equipped to address the historical, cultural, and group variability of knowledge content. The tendency of much of conventional philosophy was to label various knowledge claims as either rational or irrational or to treat them as "closing in on the truth" (i.e., leading towards cumulative knowledge). With regard to the former, knowledge either corresponded to

³ Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, trans. by L. Wirth and E. Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1936), p. 1, emphasis added.

⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

the rigorous requirements of rational or empirical development, proof, and argumentation and was deemed, knowledge, or it did not and was labeled, belief. In the latter tendency, each historical endeavour was usually seen as merely a step on the road to ultimate truth about an object or issue (cf. the discussion of rationality and progress in Chapter 6). However, the sociology of knowledge, as Mannheim conceived it, was to trace the social origins of certain "modes of thought."⁵ For Mannheim, these modes of thought had to be located within the historically-specific social milieux and the general social frameworks which produced them.

Mannheim recognizes that the sociology of knowledge is itself historically and socially constituted. In a setting where truth can be clearly ascertained there is really no need for a sociology of knowledge. When religion, philosophy, science, or some other discourse can provide the appropriate rationale for the conduct of "intellectual business," there is no need for a discussion of the social circumstances that produce knowledge. However, in periods when truth "slips away," or "dismantles," such as in modern society, a "relational" sociology of knowledge is a necessity. For Mannheim, the fragmentation of knowledge in the modern world has undoubtedly introduced the appropriate time for the emergence of a sociology of knowledge. In

⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

Mannheim's words,

It is clear that such problems can become general only in an age in which disagreement is more conspicuous than agreement. One turns from the direct observation of things to the consideration of ways of thinking only when the possibility of direct and continuous elaboration of concepts concerning things and situations has collapsed in the face of multiplicity of fundamentally divergent definitions.⁶

The multiplicity of definitions and the resulting scattering of meaning have forced modern science seriously to evaluate the underlying factors which influence knowledge production.

It is in this regard that Mannheim's sociology of knowledge can be seen, at least in part, as an attempt to reconstruct the basic rational goals of scientific investigation. Mannheim, like the Weber of The Methodology of the Social Sciences, wanted to disclose the hidden social and historical dimensions at work in any scientific endeavor.⁷ Essentially for both Mannheim and Weber, laying open the historical context of knowledge was the "only way to provide a limited autonomy to scientific inquiry."⁸ The sociology of knowledge will, in Mannheim's words, allow us to "calculate more precisely...modes of

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷ Max Weber, The Methodology of the Social Sciences, trans. by E.A. Shils and H.A. Finch (New York: , 1949).

⁸ Edward Davenport, "The New Politics of Knowledge: Rorty's Pragmatism and the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences," Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 17, 1987, p. 397.

thought and to predict...ideological reactions..."⁹ It could be an instrument for further clarifying the factors that inhibit non-distorted knowledge of the world.

However, the intrinsic logic of such a sociological approach would, at some point, have to dispense with the notion that truth claims are evaluated on their ability to correspond accurately with the object of analysis or the intellectual integrity of what is claimed as true. In other words, the sociology of knowledge would have to suspend the philosophical quest of determining who is telling the truth, since it possessed sociological rather than philosophical criteria of judgment. Because Mannheim viewed the sociology of knowledge as partly a reconstructivist enterprise, that is as way of determining the factors that distort truth, he was reluctant to open all forms of knowledge to sociological exploration. Essentially, he relegated the sociology of knowledge to what might be called mundane discourse. The latent rationalism in Mannheim forced him to treat science, logic, and mathematics as special cases of knowledge. These fields were "free floating" and, therefore, not potential sites for sociological discussion.¹⁰ It was at this point of limited effort where, according to David Bloor,

⁹ Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, 1936, p. 189.

¹⁰ Cf. Ibid., p. 79.

Mannheim's "nerve failed him."¹¹ It is also the point where, for purposes of further exploration, the Durkheimian influenced "strong program" in the sociology of knowledge emerged.

The so-called "strong program" of the sociology of knowledge sought to go beyond Mannheim's somewhat timid approach to knowledge.¹² For the advocates of the strong program, all knowledge is culturally and historically specific and therefore open to sociological investigation. Even those fields, such as science, logic, and mathematics, which Mannheim placed in a special supra-historical category, were to have their social origins explored and explicated. In the words of Mary Hesse, "Knowledge is now taken to be what is accepted as such in our culture."¹³ It is to be conceived of as a pragmatic construction of various social groups, and not as something independent, philosophical, or "in the air." For the strong program

¹¹ David Bloor, Knowledge and Social Imagery (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 8.

¹² For some early examples of the strong program, Cf. Barry Barnes, Scientific Knowledge and Sociological Theory (London, 1974), Harry M. Collins, "The Seven Sexes: The Social Destruction of a Phenomenon," Sociology 9, 1975, pp. 205-224, Barry Barnes and Steve Shapin, Natural Order (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979), Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, Laboratory Life (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979), and Ibid.

¹³ Mary Hesse, "The Strong Thesis of Sociology of Science," in Revolutions and Reconstructions in Philosophy of Science, ed. by M. Hesse (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 42.

there is "nothing in the physical world which uniquely determines the conclusions of that (scientific) community."¹⁴ Often using Kuhn's discussions of paradigms in the philosophy of science as a starting point, the strong program argued that even scientific knowledge is to be seen as historically and socially contingent.¹⁵ All types of science cease to be a special and superior form of knowledge clearly distinguishable from belief and immune from sociological examination. As we shall see, this move has important implications for our consideration of postmodernism.

Two of the most outspoken advocates of the strong program are Barry Barnes and David Bloor.¹⁶ For Bloor the strong program has four basic tenets:

1. It would be causal, that is concerned with the conditions which bring about belief or states of knowledge.
2. It would be impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure.
3. It would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs.
4. It would be reflexive. Like the requirements of

¹⁴ Michael Mulkay, Science and the Sociology of Knowledge (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 61.

¹⁵ Kuhn's work in the philosophy of science helped pave the way for these developments in the sociology of knowledge. Cf. Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

¹⁶ Often they are grouped and simply referred to as the "Edinburgh School."

symmetry this is a response to the need to seek general explanations.¹⁷

The strong program as outlined by Bloor seeks to move beyond traditional philosophical discussions of truth and reality into a sociological explanation of various forms of knowledge. In this regard, it is similar to Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. However unlike Mannheim, it treats all knowledge forms as sites of sociological investigation. Each knowledge form is to be seen as relative to social factors. In fact the strong program go as far as to argue that relativism is a necessity for all types of social scientific understanding. Barnes and Bloor write,

Our claim is that relativism is essential to all those disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, the history of institutions and ideas, and even cognitive psychology, which account for the diversity of systems of knowledge....It is those who oppose relativism and who grant certain forms of knowledge a privileged status, who pose the real treat to a scientific understanding of knowledge and cognition.¹⁸

For Barnes and Bloor the fight is between those who want to grant a privileged position to one form of knowledge over another (rationalism) and those who treat all knowledge equitably or symmetrically (relativism). For Barnes and Bloor, it is no longer possible to defend the rationalist position that science is hierarchically superior to other

¹⁷ Bloor, Knowledge and Social Imagery, 1976, p. 4-5.

¹⁸ Barry Barnes and David Bloor, "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," pp. 21-47 in M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds.), Rationality and Relativism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 22.

forms of knowledge or belief; it is no longer possible to simply brush some knowledge claims aside by saying that they are irrational beliefs (i.e., that they do not meet the rigorous requirements of science). In their words,

For the relativist there is not sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. Because he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality he does not see rationally and irrationally held beliefs as making up two distinct and qualitatively different classes of things.¹⁹

Determining what is rational and what is irrational or what is true and what is false are simply matters of preference based on the prescribed norms and standards existing within the investigator's locality. There is no need to appeal to any "higher source" for the determination of these issues (something akin to the death of God, as asserted by Nietzsche and the loss of transcendence as emphasized by others). The answer is to be found within the social context which imparts the various criterions for judgment.

As an example of the social contingency of categories, Barnes and Bloor discuss the case of the anthropologist Robert Bulmer and his difficulty in grasping the taxonomy of the Karam of New Guinea.²⁰ Bulmer found that the Karam have a taxon called "yakt" which is similar to our classification for birds. However in the Karam's taxon,

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 27-28, emphasis added.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

bats were included while cassowaries were excluded. Bulmer was forced to examine each "bird" before he was able to distinguish what belong in the "yakt" taxon and what did not. For Barnes and Bloor, this case is important because it reveals that even empirical terms like "bird" or "yakt" are linguistically context dependent. They write:

What these examples show is that even empirical term like 'bird' do not constitute a special core of concepts whose application depends only upon an unconditioned reason. Learning even the most elementary of terms is a slow process that involves the acquisition from the culture of specific conventions.²¹

As a result, even that knowledge which is supposedly empirically and universally valid and reliable, such as science, is dependent upon culturally produced categories. Consequently, no rationally based system of knowledge can escape the conceptual boundaries of society (cf. the Godel Theorem in physics).

However a central question haunts the strong program: How can the sociology of knowledge purport to provide reality while denying that privilege to the more prestigious natural sciences (i.e., the reflexivity problem)? As we shall see in the next section, the bold claims of the strong program can produce innovative ways of rethinking basic traditional philosophical polarities and the means for addressing the dilemma of the preceding question.

²¹ Ibid., p. 38.

From Logic to Sociologic: Latour's Constructivist
View of Science

The strong program in the sociology of knowledge has had its most important impact in the sub-field of the sociology of scientific knowledge. Here, it has been especially instrumental in molding what is often called "the constructivist thesis" of science.²² Generally, the constructivist position within the sociology of scientific knowledge has used the strong program as a guide to examine empirically how scientists actually go about negotiating truth and constructing scientific knowledge. From this position, scientists are often approached ethnographically, that is, as if they were members of a newly discovered tribe.²³ The goal of this approach, in accordance with the position of the strong program, is to suspend philosophical judgments about reality and truth and focus on the specifics of how scientists go about forming a statement about the world and constructing general truths.

One of the most important proponents of the constructivist thesis in the sociology of scientific

²² Harry Collins has described the task of the sociology of scientific knowledge as exploring "what comes to count as scientific knowledge and how is so to count." In "The Sociology of Scientific Knowledge: Studies of Contemporary Science," in Annual Review of Sociology (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), p. 267 (pp. 256-285).

²³ Specifically see, Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981).

knowledge is Bruno Latour.²⁴ However, Latour's view of science can be seen as more than simply a restatement or extension of the relativism of the strong program: his work contains the seeds of both a "redefined strong programme" and an important revision of the tasks of a broader sociology of knowledge.²⁵ His insights are most relevant to our consideration of postmodernism.

In Science in Action, Latour seeks to open the "black box" of scientific fact production. This is accomplished by tracing and following the various links which scientists utilize in building science. One of Latour's basic arguments is that scientific facts must be constructed by establishing strong networks. The stronger and more encompassing the network, the harder the fact becomes. The scientist, by successfully recruiting allies (human and non-human), appealing to authority, referring to former texts, compiling data, creating computer files, etc., is able to create an encompassing network, the sponsorship of a sustaining audience, a community of truth. Therefore, he/she is able to go from soft rhetoric to hard rhetoric. In other words, the establishment of a strong network

²⁴ Cf. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, Laboratory Life, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986) and Latour, Science in Action (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

²⁵ For a discussion of the "redefined strong programme" cf. Latour, "A Relativistic Account of Einstein's Relativity," Social Studies of Science, 18, 1988, 3-44.

allows the scientist to produce a fact. What becomes a scientific fact and an accepted truth is a direct outcome of the strength of the ties, or in his words "metrological chains," which a scientist or group of scientists is able to construct and enforce. If the scientist has been successful, reality "has been defined."²⁶ In essence, then, reality is a matter of definition; it is defined through social networks.

The importance of Latour for our discussion does not necessarily come from the specifics of his discussion of science, but from the general sociology of knowledge he develops and the methodology he uses to explicate it. Latour seeks carefully to negotiate a path between rationalism, which emphasizes the cognitive supremacy (or asymmetry) of science, and an extreme relativism, which says there is no criterion for determining anything (symmetry). For Latour, both are unacceptable positions. Treating science as strictly a rational or cognitive enterprise denies the important social dynamics which must be employed to establish scientific facts, while an extreme relativism denies the existence and establishment of any facts. For Latour,

If there is no controversy among scientists as to the status of fact, then it is useless to go on talking about interpretation, representation, a biased or distorted world view, weak and fragile pictures of the world, unfaithful spokesmen. Nature

²⁶ Latour, Science in Action, 1987, p. 179.

talks straight, facts are facts. Full stop. There is nothing to add and nothing to subtract.²⁷

Latour's position accepts as facts those rare statements which lack controversy, while he remains relativistic with regard to the ongoing struggle of scientists to turn soft statements into hard facts. Latour points out that if a position, such as relativism, rejects all knowledge claims, it begins to look ridiculous since there are issues on the natural world that have been settled by scientists. However, if we treat science rationalistically, we develop a distorted view of how science produces hard facts. In the Latourian position, facts are socially constituted "hard fiction."

What does distinguish science from other forms of knowledge is the degree of material and human resources available for the construction of facts.

The proof race is so expensive that only a few people, nations, institutions or professions are able to sustain it...this means that the production of facts and artefacts will not occur everywhere and for free, but will occur only at restricted places at particular times.²⁸

Essentially, fact production is relegated to those times and places which can garner the resources and networks capable of transforming statements into facts. This does not mean that knowledge that cannot muster the resources is invalid, it is simply not "hard knowledge."

²⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 179.

However, the central epistemological question remains: do scientists have a superior access to reality which enables them to discover truth and report knowledge about the world? For Latour, answering this question requires one to adopt an asymmetrical view of rational thought and irrational belief, something he and the strong program are unwilling to do. Traditionally, it has been held that every individual who possesses a "sound mind and a sound method" has the ability to be as rational as the scientist.²⁹ Those who lacked this attribute (i.e., the irrational) were merely under the influence of various social or psychological prejudices. If those prejudices were eliminated, the rationality embedded in all of humanity will finally emerge (cf. Condorcet in Chapter 2). However for Latour, it is better to think of irrationality and rationality, not as states of mind, but as constructed labels. Irrationality, like rationality, has to be constructed through networks--in this case a network of accusers. However, if irrationality is "put on trial," the results are at best ambiguous. For every claim of irrationality in one knowledge system, exists an element of irrationality in the rational system doing the accusing. It turns out that "everyone on earth is as logical or as illogical as any one else."³⁰ Latour concludes that "no

²⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 195.

asymmetry between people's reasoning can be recognised."³¹
Essentially, everyone is a practical reasoner and is as rational or irrational as the next person.

However, one may ask: If reasoning is not a matter of qualitative cognitive differences between people, why do we not all share the same beliefs? By eliminating the cognitive distinction between rationality and irrationality, Latour's is able to answer this question. Like the scientist in the laboratory, the practical reasoner of everyday life is concerned with "what can be tied to a claim to make it stronger and how can the claims that contradict it be untied."³² Essentially, people neither think logically or illogically--they think sociologically. All people move from element to element as they construct statements about the world. When a controversy starts, "they look for stronger and more resistant allies..."³³ Some are able to recruit more allies than others. As a consequence, their truths become "harder."

Consequently, what separates science from everyday practical reason or belief is not an issue of logic but an issue of the level of controversy and the appropriate social ties to mobilize to end the controversy (i.e.,

³¹ Ibid., p. 196.

³² Ibid., p. 198.

³³ Ibid., p. 205.

sociologic). Essentially, the difference is a matter of content rather than form. The everyday practical reasoner does not have to mobilize as many allies in the production or replication of a standard taken-for-granted knowledge as the scientist does for the production and defense of a hard fact. As evidence, Latour provides the following example:

'An apple a day keeps the doctor away,' the mother said handing out a glowing red apple to her son, expecting a grin. 'Mother,' replied the child indignantly, 'three NIH studies have shown that on a sample of 458 Americans of all ages there was no statistically significant decrease in the the number of house calls by family doctors; no, I will no eat this apple.'³⁴

In mobilizing the statistics of the National Institutes of Health, the child is acting as if this everyday colloquialism is in need of the same type of support employed by science. In other words, the child is treating this soft fact as if it were a hard fact and in need of the same type of documentation and supporting allies. Since this colloquialism has passed from generation to generation without being challenged, it becomes true. There is no need to treat it as an irrational belief or as a potential scientific fact. Essentially, soft fact are basically all we need for the conduct of everyday life (cf. the taken-for-granted in everyday life according to Alfred Schutz and the role of identity).

³⁴ Ibid., p. 206.

When in the course of human events, of the conduct of life, we answer such questions as: How much money did I earn this month? Is my blood pressure above or below normal? Where was my grandfather born? Where is the tip of Sakhalin Island?, depending on who is doing the questioning, we can either provide soft or hard answers.³⁵ If we provide hard answers, we must appeal to supporting documents and begin the process of stacking-up hard facts and constituting hard truth. Latour writes:

Even the question 'who are you' cannot be solved, in some extreme situations, without superimposing passports to fingerprints to birth certificates to photographs, that is without constituting a file that brings together many different paper forms of various origins. You might very well know who you are and be satisfied with a very soft answer to this absurd query, but the policeman, who raises the question from the point of view of a centre, wants to have a harder answer than that...³⁶

Soft answers usually do not require the same type of "metrological chains" as hard answers. They differ not by their degree of logic or illogic but by the sociologic required for their construction. They are "tribe" specific measures for the accumulation of soft truth.

Latour provides us with three central insights which have a bearing on our employment of a sociology of knowledge approach to postmodernism. First of all, for Latour truth should not be treated logically, but

³⁵ Ibid., p. 252.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 252.

sociologic-ally. He introduces a move from logic to a sociologic. The logical is concerned with drawing distinctions between rationality and irrationality and between knowledge and belief. Latour and his sociologic makes no such traditional philosophical distinctions. Both knowledge and belief are equally logical or illogical. The cognitive quality of these forms of thought cannot be clearly distinguished. However, while they are not philosophically distinguishable, they can be sociologically differentiated. Belief and knowledge are separated by the degree of sociologic involved (i.e., the type of association involved, weak or strong).

Secondly, Latour provides us with both a non-objectivistic and a non-relativistic vision of truth. If truth claims are not attacked and there is no controversy among competing truth providers, then the claims are true. In his words,

...If they are not attacked, people know exactly what nature is; they are objective; they tell the truth; they do not live in a society or a culture that could influence their grasp of things, they simply grasp things in themselves; their spokespersons are not 'interpreting' phenomena, nature talks through them directly.³⁷

If the so-called "black boxes" of knowledge are sealed, people do not "live in a world of fiction, representation, symbol, approximation, convention: they are simply

³⁷ Ibid., p. 206.

right."³⁸ If there is a controversy, various strategies are employed to strengthen the rhetoric into a hard fact (cf. the appeal to "principle" as a mask for political self-gain or exclusion of others) and forging another "black box." Truth, then, is not philosophically determined; it is socially determined.³⁹

Finally, Latour provides us with a reply to the issue of reflexivity raised in the last chapter. In other words, how can sociology defend its own truth claims while relativizing (i.e., treating science and belief symmetrically) other forms of knowledge? In responding to this, Latour argues that we should develop an alternative vision of the social. Instead of focusing on the influence of class, culture, and politics in the content of a knowledge system, we should focus on the "relative solidity of associations" (i.e., networks, a sustaining community of the faithful)⁴⁰ While indeed the concepts employed by sociologists are arbitrary, the associations they utilize

³⁸ Ibid., p. 206.

³⁹ Latour's constructivist view of science may be contrasted with Foucault's and Habermas'. Foucault emphasizes the power constraints and dynamics at work in the development of knowledge. Habermas sees science as a working example of the ideal speech situation. On the other hand, Latour is primarily concerned with the construction of science. Power plays an important role, but it is not the determining factor of science. Nor does Latour suggest, as Habermas does, that science is a social ideal.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 256.

in constructing the social world are not. Latour writes,

...Our method would gain nothing in explaining 'natural' sciences by invoking 'social' sciences. There is not the slightest difference between the two, and they are both to be studied the same way. Neither of them should be believed more nor endowed with the mysterious power of jumping out of the networks it builds.⁴¹

Sociology, or Latour's account of science, does not have a privileged position in the production of truth. It cannot tell scientists what they are really up to. Sociology, like the natural sciences, must establish "metrological chains" in order to establish hard facts about society. The facts it produces do not correspond to the philosophical version of the real, but are negotiated and forged. Society becomes what is constructed--either in the hard sense of sociology or in the soft sense of everyday discourse. Latour writes,

The very definition of a 'society' is the final outcome, in Sociology Departments, in Statistical Institutions, in journals, of other scientists busy at work gathering surveys, questionnaires, archives, records of all sorts, arguing together, publishing papers, organizing other meetings....The results on what society is made of do not spread more or faster than those of economics, topology or particle physics. These results too would die if they went outside the tiny networks so necessary for their survival.⁴²

We need not search for philosophical foundations to explain sociology's description of the social. Sociology, like all forms of knowledge, must establish the networks capable of promoting its vision of the world. "A sociologist's

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 256.

⁴² Ibid., p. 257.

interpretation of society will not be substituted for what every one of us thinks of society without additional struggle."⁴³ However, this position does not mean that sociology or philosophy are useless, only that they exist within a matrix of "legitimate" power.

Latour provides us with a particularly appealing version of truth and knowledge. He also provides us with a means of by-passing the questions of objectivism and relativism without destroying all meaning, a most important means at our disposal for reconsidering the positions of postmodern theory.

Conclusion: A Sociology of Truth

What can we learn about postmodernism from the sociology of knowledge and Latour's reconstituted strong program? Most importantly the recent developments in the sociology of knowledge make it possible to shift our conceptions of truth and reality, rationality and irrationality, and knowledge and belief from a philosophical logic to what Latour referred to as a sociologic--a process we began with the discussion of Durkheim in the last chapter. This admittedly agnostic view is void of the explicit or implicit reference to the foundational real. It helps us rethink the generation of knowledge "without reference to realist definitions of 'truth,' 'reality,'

⁴³ Ibid., p. 257.

'facts,' and 'knowledge.'"⁴⁴ Unlike postmodernism, it accomplishes this redefinition without "textualizing" the world and leveling all meaning. As we discussed earlier, postmodernism does make a move similar to the one taken by the sociology of knowledge (and sociology in general). It too seeks to go beyond the metaphysical obsession with truth, reality, and context-free knowledge.

However, instead of dropping the search for foundations and moving in a sociological or constructivist (i.e., viewing reality as a social construct) direction, the postmodernists drop them and move in a nihilistic direction. Since what counts as knowledge is seen as unverifiable and arbitrary, postmodernists believe everything is void of meaning. They are what we might call "frustrated rationalists:" In other words, they see the revelation of relativism as meaning the end of all definite knowledge about the world. However, such as position only seems to make sense when one thinks there once existed epistemological certitude and a firm way of knowing which have somehow been disrupted--rather than context dependent doubts. Describing this basic insight of the sociology of knowledge, Mary Hesse writes,

In such a new construal of cognitive terminology, rules of argument and criteria of truth are internal to a social system....but this account does not remove

⁴⁴ Paul Tibbetts, "The Sociology of Scientific Knowledge: The Constructivist Thesis and Relativism," *Philosophy of Social Science*, 16, 1986, p. 53 (pp. 39-57).

the motivation for epistemological studies nor emasculate philosophical theories. Such consequences only follow for those who retain a rationalist theory of knowledge, not for those who accept the redefinition of 'truth' and 'rationality' implied by their status as internal to given societies.⁴⁵

It seems evident to us that from a sociology of knowledge position, the search for context-free rationality (cf. the positivism of certain types of science) was a misplaced project to begin with. The loss of philosophical foundations is no occasion to mourn; nor is it an occasion to embrace nihilism. It is merely an occasion to suspend such philosophical distinctions and polarities and move in another direction. In this regard, the sociology of knowledge provides both an alternative to (and a means of criticizing) the extremes of the postmodern orientation towards knowledge. Leveling all meaning and treating the world as a text is fine philosophically, but postmodernists should not expect all realms of knowledge production to follow suit. The postmodern position does not enable us to consider why truth is still a performative concept (i.e., is socially constraining, cf. our discussion of Durkheim in Chapter 7) despite its philosophical demise.

Essentially, we may conclude that if truth and reality are conceptualized in sociological rather than in the terms of traditional philosophy the outcome is very different. Instead of ushering in a postmodern world of unfoundational

⁴⁵ Mary Hesse, "The Strong Thesis of Sociology of Science," 1976, p. 46.

claims, we usher in a different model for understanding what makes truth and reality possible. In refusing to "play according to the rules and guidelines established by traditional philosophy," the sociology of knowledge is providing us with a radical program for a rethinking of our knowledge of the world.⁴⁶

In the next chapter, we will utilize this sociology of knowledge position described herein to discuss the specific organization and production of postmodern theory, culture, and knowledge.

⁴⁶ Tibbetts, "The Sociology of Scientific Knowledge," 1986, p. 53.

CHAPTER IX

GROUP SOLIDARITY AND SYMBOLISM: THE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF POSTMODERNISM

In the previous chapter, we explored how recent variants of the sociology of knowledge approach the philosophical juxtapositions of truth and falsehood, rationality and irrationality, and belief and knowledge. We concluded that these recent developments provide us with a useful way for rethinking postmodernism's collapse of all meaning and its leveling and deracination of all discursive formations (e.g., literature and science). In addition, we argued that the constructivist position in the sociology of scientific knowledge, specifically Latour's, provides us with an account, a sort of gauge, which illustrates how knowledge of the world is produced and maintained. As such, Latour's becomes an important means for considering all forms of knowledge--including the philosophical and cultural. Most importantly for our consideration, Latour's inspection of the production and maintenance of knowledge is accomplished without being bogged down in the epistemological debate between objectivism and relativism.¹ In a word, it offers us an alternative paradigm and keeps us from falling into a paralyzing debate

¹ In fact, this debate becomes meaningless from a constructivist or social epistemological position.

on philosophical polarities.

Essentially, we may conclude that recent developments in the sociology of knowledge illustrate that knowledge is social through and through. There is no internal/external distinction (i.e., between the internal rational and the external social). We no longer need to argue that the sociology of knowledge can only provide a description of the social factors that impinge on the creation of rational knowledge. We can now conclude that all knowledge, including the scientific and the sociological, have social origins and all knowledge producers are engaged in the activity of constructing rather than revealing the world. In Sal Restivo's words, "selves, minds, and ideas are not merely social products; nor are they merely socially constructed; they are social constructs."² Ideas are society inside and out. Therefore, all knowledge can be seen, to use Latour's term, socio-logically.

In this chapter, we seek to move from the construction of scientific knowledge in general to the construction and dissemination of postmodern philosophical and cultural knowledge. We intend to combine some of the useful ideas gained from our previous discussions of Durkheim and the sociology of science with a discussion of the organization

² Sal Restivo, "The Social Roots of Pure Mathematics," in Susan Cozzens and Thomas Gieryn (eds), Theories of Science in Society (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 123 (pp. 120-143).

of social groups so as to examine postmodernism as a social construct. As Collins has noted, "Although philosophy may not be a 'science,' it has a social structure as an intellectual community, which can be understood by extending the techniques and theories of the sociology of science."³ Such a sociology of postmodernism, then, is thought to be congruent with the sociology of scientific knowledge since both seek to explain the production and consumption of "specialized knowledge" forms.

Principally, we argue that postmodernism and its accompanying skepticism and nihilism can be seen, not as the final statement upon matters of truth and reality, but as a socially and historically contingent discourse. We share the view of Eugene Goodheart, who has proclaimed that "skepticism is an historically conditioned view of experience, which does not disqualify it as a method or a system of thought, but its historical character should bar it from putting on metaphysical or universalistic airs."⁴ Consequently, while the sociological account to follow shares postmodernism's general distrust of any absolute claim to foundational truths, it does not see this viewpoint as being necessarily "true" or "false." It is

³ Randall Collins, "Toward a Theory of Intellectual Change: The Social Causes of Philosophies," *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 14, 1987, p. 108 (pp. 107-140).

⁴ Eugene Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 176.

simply one form of knowledge-of-the-world among many. From this position, we can say that postmodernism is a perspective which, like all perspectives, must be constructed, fortified, promoted, and maintained by knowledge and culture-producing communities and institutions. Consequently, the structure of those knowledge-producing and culture-consuming communities becomes of central importance.

One final introductory point. It is worth reemphasizing that when postmodernists claim that the metanarratives of modernity have collapsed (Lyotard) or that it is no longer possible to distinguish fact from fiction or TV from reality (Baudrillard), it is simply restating the realist view of knowledge in an inverse form. In other words, it is de facto assuming that reality somehow speaks to and from it. Saying that we cannot be sure of anything is merely a negative way of saying that we can be sure of everything! Both statements operate under the same realist dialectic. From our position, what is at stake is not who has the true story of reality, the modernists or the postmodernists, but who is able to define reality, or the absence of reality in the case of postmodernism, and why this is the case. Consequently, we, like Durkheim and the constructivists in the sociology of scientific knowledge, argue that it is the organization and production of knowledge which result in reality, or the

reality of non-reality in postmodernism, and not vice versa.⁵

In order to explicate our sociological treatment of postmodernism, we will discuss two questions: (1) Why has postmodernistic theory been developed and promoted in certain intellectual discursive fields and not in others? For example we ask, why has postmodernist theory been developed in and adapted into literary criticism, philosophy, and architectural theory and not in physics, biology, or economics? (2) Why has postmodernistic culture been an influential form of "cultural capital" in some social groups or "life worlds" and not in others? In other words, why are artists, cultural theorists, or the new service classes more inclined to adopt and promote postmodernistic culture or theory compared to factory workers, government bureaucrats, or the old bourgeoisie? These questions may seem unimportant and irrelevant from a philosophical perspective. However, from our sociopolitical perspective they are central to the understanding of any knowledge/culture system. Furthermore, they point to a means for situating the issues of postmodernism within what postmodernism itself refers to as the "social context" or "human community." If knowledge is variable and context-dependent, as postmodernism itself argues,

⁵ For a discussion of this cf. Stephan Fuchs, The Professional Quest for Truth, 1991, in press.

questions and interpretations of the specifics of this variability are of utmost importance.

In order to address the above questions, we will first discuss the social organization of groups as presented in Durkheimian and Neo-Durkheimian sociology. As we have already seen, group organization has been used by Durkheim to counter the position of American pragmatism. We will now use a variation of the Durkheimian position to explore postmodernism. The organizational approach is intended to supplement the discussion of the construction of knowledge discussed in the last chapter. We will then use these notions to provide a sociological account of postmodern intellectual production and consumption.

The Social Organization of Cognitive Styles

In Chapter 7, we drew upon Durkheim's discussion of pragmatism as a means for rethinking the ironically omniscient idealism of postmodernism. In addition to that "epistemological" discussion, there is also much to be learned from Durkheim's and the Neo-Durkheimians' linkage of social organization with religious beliefs, classification systems, and general cognitive styles. As we shall see, this linkage has important ramifications for both a general sociology of knowledge and our attempt to situate postmodernism within a sociological as well as a social context.

In the Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, Durkheim develops two important concepts with regard to the organization of social groups and the types of religious beliefs held by practitioners.⁶ First, he introduces the well-known distinction between the sacred and profane. Durkheim defines the sacred as those symbols or activities which have special, extraordinary, or forbidden meaning attached to them; by the profane he refers to the commonplace or ordinary. For Durkheim, religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things."⁷ In its "elementary form," this sacredness is nothing more than the symbolic elevation of the clan or group to the order of a religion. Its origin is not the universal psychological condition of humanity or an irrational response to environmental unknowns, but the social raised to the level of the "holy."

Secondly, Durkheim provides us with a discussion of the importance of ritual in the maintenance of the sacred. Rituals are the means by which the sacred object is constructed, expressed, and maintained. They become a means for charging the object with sacredness--of imparting

⁶ Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, trans. by J.W. Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964).

⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

it with mana.⁸ When groups join together in a ritual or "rite of intensification," they are reaffirming the power of the social. They are (re)endowing the social with an extraordinary and all-encompassing power. This endowment becomes part of the collective consciousness of the group, as well as the cognitive structure of the individual practitioner.

Consequently, for Durkheim those groups with a high level of internal solidarity are more likely to produce religious styles that draw rigid boundaries between the sacred and the profane. These mechanical societies--i.e., those with high "moral density" according to Durkheim, with a well-developed "collective conscience"--produce elaborate and confining religious symbolic codes. Those less rigid societies with an "organic" sort of solidarity and with a more complex division of labor produce individualistic and universalistic religious types (cf. Weber's differentiation of "sect" and "church"). Describing the emergence of these "cults of individualism" in modern Western societies, Durkheim writes,

As individuals have differentiated themselves more and more and the value of an individual has increased, the corresponding cult has taken a relatively greater place in the totality of the religious life and at

⁸ Cf. Randall Collins, "The Durkheimian Tradition in Conflict Sociology," in Jeffrey Alexander (ed.), Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 111. As Collins points out this would be an important theme in Goffman's sociology.

the same time it is more fully closed to outside influences.⁹

The final outcome for Durkheim is that religious styles are the result of social and organizational typologies. Tight social structures produces rigid religious distinctions between the sacred and the profane and powerful group oriented rituals (e.g., totemism and animism). On the other hand, organizationally diverse societies produce more individualistic and fragmented religious and ritual styles (e.g., civil religions).

In Primitive Classification, Durkheim and Mauss extend Durkheim's previous discussion of religion to other types of cultural classification and knowledge systems.¹⁰ For Durkheim and Mauss, "it is because men were grouped, that in their ideas they grouped other things."¹¹ For them, the classification systems (i.e., the interrelatedness of categories and cultural items) employed by various social groups were the product of the level and type of social organization present in various societies. In short, "logical relations are, in a sense, domestic relations."¹² What comes to be a culture's system of differentiation can

⁹ Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 1964, p. 424-25.

¹⁰ Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, Primitive Classification, trans. by R. Needham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 82.

¹² Ibid., p. 84.

be attributed to the level of social integration or type of organization present in a given society. Societies with a rigid sense of solidarity (i.e., the mechanical) tend to have rigid boundaries between individual elements of a larger classification system. Cohesive or socially dense societies typically have elaborate and rigid symbolic and hierarchical differentiations between true and false, right and wrong, bird and fish, space and time, workers and rulers, etc.. In such settings, "things are above all sacred or profane, pure or impure, friends or enemies, favorable or unfavorable..."¹³ It is a strict dichotomy: There is not much room for individual interpretation or mediation. The symbolic and social order of the group has been raised to the level of absolute, non-negotiable truth.

Closely bound groups exert a great deal of control over individual members. What the group holds as symbolically representative or as a social distinction is to be held as sacred by all members of that society. There is no room for rule departure or deviance. What is sacred is sacred and what is profane is profane. As Durkheim and Mauss seek to illustrate, the distinction between sacred and profane is not simply an aspect of religious belief, it also extends to the logic of classification distinctions. They conclude that, the "logical hierarchy is only another aspect of social hierarchy, and unity of knowledge is

¹³ Ibid., p. 86.

nothing else than the very unity of the collectivity..."¹⁴
Like religion, classification systems are products of the type and degree of social organization existing within a given group of people.

One of the most influential attempts to develop further the Durkheimian position on social organization and its relations to cognitive styles can be found in the work of Mary Douglas. Her work seeks to extend the sociological approach initiated by Durkheim and Mauss to all forms of knowledge. Specifically, Douglas has introduced what she refers to as the "grid/group theory."¹⁵ Her theory is loyal to the Durkheimian tradition, yet it seeks to avoid the evolutionist ranking of societies and the granting of a privileged position to modern systems which can be found in Durkheim's position.¹⁶

For Douglas, "group" refers to the level of solidarity present in a given group. This ranges from loosely knit associations to tightly bound and closed groups. Groups may have weak or strong group loyalties. Within her theory those groups with strong loyalty ties can be said to have a

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 84.

¹⁵ Her grid/group theory has gone through several revisions. For a discussion of this see, James V. Spickard, "A Guide to Mary Douglas' Three Versions of Grid/Group Theory," *Sociological Analysis*, 50, 1989, pp. 151-170.

¹⁶ Cf. Mary Douglas, How Institutions Think (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 98-99.

high degree of "group." The second aspect, "Grid," refers to the "scope and coherent articulation of a system of classification."¹⁷ Like the group dimension, a classification system can also vary. In this case, the variation is from a coherent, elaborated symbolic hierarchy with "caste-like" role and class structures to discrete items and loose and mobile role sets.

When combined, these two dimensions provide "four extreme visions of social life" and can be employed to situate the type of cosmology present within different social groups.¹⁸ (a) Groups with a low level of group and grid tend (LP/LD) to produce a cosmology which "allow options for negotiating contracts or choosing allies and in consequence it also allows for individual mobility up and down whatever the current scale of prestige and influence."¹⁹ Essentially, this category is "individualistic" and corresponds with the social structure of "competitive societies."²⁰ (b) A collectivity with low group and high grid (LP/HD) "ascribes closely the way an

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, Natural Symbols (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 82.

¹⁸ Mary Douglas (ed.), Essays in the Sociology of Perception (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁰ Mary Douglas, In the Active Voice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 212.

individual may behave."²¹ The pressure exerted on individuals within this classification comes primarily from the hierarchical structure of the group. (c) Groups which have a high level of group and low level of grid (HP/LD) tend to produce social environments where "loyalty is rewarded and hierarchy respected" (e.g., large bureaucratic organizations).²² At times, this may also be true for clans or extended families: Here, the prevalent dichotomy is between insiders and outsiders (i.e., We/Them). Finally, (d) groups with a high level of group and a high level of grid (HP/HD) produce an environment where "only the external group boundary is clear."²³ In this cosmological type, the group "survives not only by justifying its boundary against outsiders but also by justifying its separate graded compartments."²⁴

In a certain sense, Douglas combines the two contributions of Durkheimian thought discussed earlier into a coherent theory of group organization and cognitive styles. She takes Durkheim's notion of the types of solidarity present in different societies and combines that with the complexity and variability of symbolic

²¹ Douglas, Essays in the Sociology of Perception, 1982, p. 4.

²² Ibid., p. 4.

²³ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁴ Douglas, In the Active Voice, 1982. p. 210.

organization (i.e., role definitions and other hierarchical structures). Like Durkheim, Douglas views cognitive styles or cosmologies as "not at all natural but strictly a product of social interaction."²⁵ Those groups with rigid control produce one type of cosmology, while those with slack or loose control produce another.

For Douglas and Durkheim, belief/knowledge systems are the outcome of social organization. The specific sociological issue is not the manifest content of this knowledge, but the way it is shaped by the type of social organization present. As Douglas explains,

All the arguments taking place in families, churches and sports clubs are about whether the institution shall draw its group boundary closer, or relax it, apply its rules more strictly, create more rules or relax them all....God may be invoked, and curses uttered before a rift, or blessings for a truce.²⁶

For Douglas, ideational debates over content are essentially sociological debates over organizational form and control. The central issue is the degree of control that the group is to have over its internal symbolic and class hierarchy. Those groups that are "solid" are more likely to appeal to established guidelines, while those groups that are "loose" are more likely to relax boundaries and rule and role distinctions.

²⁵ Douglas, Essays in the Sociology of Perception, 1982, p. 5.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

Another important contribution to the Neo-Durkheimian linking of social organization and cognitive styles can be found in the work of Richard Whitley. Whitley extends the Neo-Durkheimian argument into the production of all types of scientific or "specialized" knowledge forms. As such, it has special significance in our consideration of postmodern knowledge. Whitley has pointed out that disciplines with similar organizational types tend to produce similar styles of knowledge.²⁷ The style of knowledge is dependent, in part, upon the degree of "task uncertainty" and "mutual dependence" evident in a particular intellectual field. Task uncertainty refers to the level of unassuredness or lack of confidence which accompanies the production of novel knowledge in a particular work organization. Those groups with a low degree of task uncertainty are more likely to have proscribed, bureaucratic-like procedures for producing knowledge, while those with high task uncertainty are more likely to engage in ad hoc procedures.

The second aspect of this theory, mutual dependency, is an outcome of two organizational processes. First, the "extent to which researchers have to use the specific results, ideas, and procedures of fellow specialists"

²⁷ Richard Whitley, The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Whitley is also closely connected to the complex organizational position.

(i.e., functional dependence).²⁸ Secondly, the "extent to which researchers have to persuade colleagues of the significance and importance of their problem..."(i.e., strategic dependence).²⁹ Those fields where functional dependence and strategic dependence are low tend to produce situations where knowledge producers are able to pursue a variety of goals "without needing to incorporate specific results and ideas of particular specialist colleagues..."³⁰ As examples, Whitley cites post-1960 Anglo-Saxon sociology and management studies. On the other hand, intellectual fields where both functional dependence and strategic dependence are high tend to produce situations where there is a high degree of specialization and a strong sense of boundary maintenance (e.g., among physicists and mathematicians). These groups have a sharp distinction between who is a legitimate knowledge producer and who is not and what counts as knowledge and what is trivial and unworthy. They also have a well defined research agenda which strongly conditions the types of problems and solutions that can be put forth by individual knowledge producers. As an example of this type of field, Whitley cites Twentieth-century physics. Between these two extremes lie various degrees of mutual dependence and

²⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 88.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

various knowledge fields and styles.

The Neo-Durkheimian position, as presented by Douglas and Whitley, leads us to conclude that groups which are cohesive and integrated produce what is called a "fact mode of reasoning," while loosely affiliated groups produce a "conversational mode of reasoning."³¹ Groups with a tight knit structure will appeal to the authority of established principles or "facts" (in the Latourian sense) in argumentive discourse. They are principally concerned with forming and sealing black boxes of knowledge. These groups employ what Basil Bernstein has referred to as a "restrictive code" in the production of group knowledge.³² In these groups communicative acts serve to enforce group standards. Within conditions where the group has low task uncertainty, any attempt to break with the restrictive code is often seen as a rebellion against the group itself. Knowledge producers are tied into using the proscribed procedures of the group code or they face marginality or exclusion. On the other hand, those groups that are loosely coupled and have a high degree of task uncertainty tend to engage in negotiation and arbitration. They

³¹ Fuchs, The Professional Quest for Truth, 1991, p. 170.

³² Cf. Basil Bernstein, Class, Codes and Control I: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971). Bernstein uses this term in reference to the socialization style of the working class.

utilize an "elaborated code" of knowledge production.³³ Here, there is importance placed upon individualistic speech patterns and discursive conversation. The individual within this type of knowledge field is professionalized to express and support his or her truth claims through appeal to explication, explanation, and argumentation. In fields of this type, individual producers are more likely to engage in discursive debate rather than the establishment of "scientific facts."

Whitley and Douglas, like Durkheim before them, are essentially arguing that "cosmologies are sticks people use to coerce one another...and that different sticks will work in different social contexts."³⁴ Also, they are arguing that cosmologies symbolize common group membership. Cosmologies are basic distinctions that may be "dressed-up" or enlivened by ideological or cultural debate over content, but their form remains essentially social in its origin. Social organization is an integral part of the production and dissemination of knowledge or cognitive styles. The source of God may be the social as Durkheim proclaimed, but, as Douglas and Whitley seek to illustrate, so too is the origins of knowledge and culture (cf. the discussion of Durkheim and Nietzsche in Chapter 7).

³³ Ibid, Bernstein uses this term in reference to the socialization style of the middle class.

³⁴ Spickard, "A Guide to Mary Douglas' Three Versions of Grid/Group Theory," 1989, p. 165.

When we combine the notions obtained from the Durkheimian and Neo-Durkheimian discussion of the organization of social groups with the arguments obtained from the Latourian discussion of knowledge production, (i.e., the recruitment and marshalling of allies and the production of "hard facts") we find an important means for situating the production of postmodern knowledge. In the next section, we will explore how these ideas come to bear upon one specific cognitive style--postmodern knowledge/culture.

The Production of Postmodern Knowledge

When we scan the academic horizon in search of bastions or "factories" of postmodern thought, we are often led to the doors of Philosophy, Social Theory, and Literary Criticism and not to the doors of Economics or Physics.³⁵ Furthermore, once we enter these "postmodern departments," we are often led to the doors of junior or "marginal" faculty members.³⁶ From our discussion of Durkheim,

³⁵ While postmodernism has affected a number of areas, we will specifically use Philosophy and Literary Criticism as paradigmatic examples of postmodern fields throughout this section.

³⁶ For a discussion of the marginality of "postmodern" practitioners, cf. Pierre Bourdieu, Homo Academicus (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. xviii-xix. Describing the post-structuralists, Bourdieu writes, "They appear like religious heretics, or, in other words, rather like freelance intellectuals installed within the university system itself, or at least, to venture a Derridean pun, encamped on the margins or in the marginalia

Douglas, and Whitley outlined above, our search does not simply reveal a methodological and theoretical division of labor resulting from the common quest for truth. It reveals three very general sociological points: (1) Different intellectual groups have certain organizational characteristics that produce various cognitive styles and forms of knowledge about the world. (2) Due to organizational differences between fields, various intellectual groups have to develop different ranges and types of coalitions and cliques to establish and promote their particular knowledge about the world. (3) Within these groups there are often struggles to establish, maintain, or revise the hierarchical and symbolic structure of the group. These are instances when ideas become symbolic weapons in the battle for discipline control. Below we will discuss the importance of each of these three points in situating the production of postmodern knowledge.

With regard to the first point, if we compare the fields where postmodern knowledge has been produced and adopted we will first of all note that these intellectual fields are "organizationally looser" and have a relatively high degree of task uncertainty compared to the fields where the issues and problems of postmodern skepticism are not an issue. In those postmodern-inclined fields black

of an academic empire threatened on all sides by barbarian invasions (p. xix).

boxes of knowledge are rarely ever closed. Knowledge claims are continuously debated within the confines of a conversational code of conduct, or to use Bernstein's terminology, these fields operate under an elaborated or discursive code. Within such an organizational setting, there is often an emphasis on plurality and multiple interpretations, since these fields lack the type of social organization necessary for the establishment of what Latour refers to as "hard facts." These fields tend to spawn metatheoretical discussions, reflexivity debates, and a general relativism.³⁷ As Douglas has pointed out, "Questioning and doubt can be held in check only by a strong institutional structure."³⁸ The disciplines associated with postmodernism lack the institutional structure and symbolic code necessary for the avoidance of skepticism. They are essentially organizations that promote a high level of doubt, questioning, conversation, and debate.

However, while the "methodology" may be ill-defined and the goals pluralistic, these are also fields where closely coupled grouped research schools are (and have been) often a central locale in the production of knowledge. In Whitley's schema, these are fields which may

³⁷ Cf. Stephan Fuchs, "Relativism and Reflexivity in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge," 1991, in press.

³⁸ Mary Douglas, "Pascal's Great Wager," *L'Homme*, 93, 1985, p.19 (pp. 13-30).

be classified as having a low degree of functional dependence and a somewhat high level of strategic dependence. In other words, in these postmodern-inclined fields, knowledge producers are not tied into using the ideas and procedures of fellow knowledge producers. However, they are obliged to persuade their colleagues of the significance of their approach with regard to central, long-standing issues or problems within the field. In disciplines of this type, there is an attempt to demonstrate, in Whitley's words, the superiority of "their interpretation to the central issues of the field."³⁹

With regard to postmodern philosophy or literary criticism, while there is a theoretical emphasis on multiple interpretations, there is also an attempt to show that the Derridian, the Lyotardian, or the Rortyan interpretation of the current state of knowledge and knowing provides an important contribution to the general field of philosophy or related problems in the humanities. Essentially, the contributions of these individuals "tapped-into" the concern over long-standing problems of the field. If we compare this with a discipline such as sociology where the goals are extremely pluralistic and the

³⁹ Whitley, The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences, 1984, pp. 92-93. It could also be argued that in the American context the philosophy departments that adapted and promoted postmodernism were ones where continental philosophy has had a prominent position. Departments with a continental focus have traditionally been on the margins of mainstream American philosophy.

functional dependence is quite low and the resulting knowledge output is fragmented, we can envision how social organization influenced postmodernism's ability to become part of the philosophy and humanities intellectual landscape. Postmodern practitioners, such as Rorty, Lyotard, and Derrida, were able to demonstrate the importance of their approach to long standing philosophical questions about language, rationality, and universal foundations. They were successful in convincing their colleagues that their knowledge style offered novel and innovative solutions to shared problems.

However, this factor alone does not give us a firm sense of why postmodernism became influential. Another central aspect was its ability to recruit allies and disseminate its knowledge style in a number of related fields. Since the goals of Philosophy and Literary Criticism lack prescribed procedures of knowledge production, the recruitment of allies was perhaps a more difficult (and perhaps more critical) task than in fields where functional dependence is high. However, since knowledge production of this type is often located at central knowledge producing institutions, there is an opportunity to establish and promote their particular knowledge commodity at other, less prestigious institutions or centers.

An illuminating example of the importance of ally recruitment and the dissemination of information in the production of postmodern theory has been articulated by Michele Lamont.⁴⁰ Lamont uses Derrida as an example of how interpretive theories can be located and analyzed within the cultural, institutional, and social conditions that produce them. For Lamont, the popularity of Derrida's deconstructionism is, in part, an outcome of two related elements. First, Derrida's philosophy was able to appeal to a broad spectrum of intellectuals. Secondly, it was very successful in developing institutional support networks to "spread the word."

With regard to the first point, Derrida has been "successful" by "directing his work to several already constituted publics rather than to a shrinking philosophy public..."⁴¹ During the 1960's and 70's, the French government attempted to limit philosophy requirements in lycees.⁴² This was accompanied by both a continued assault directed by the social sciences against the position and content of traditional philosophy and a general decline in the interest of the broader intellectual public. The intellectual public had always been an

⁴⁰ Michele Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida," *American Journal of Sociology*, 93, 1987, pp. 584-622.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 587.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 596.

important audience and backer of philosophy and the humanities. Within Lamont's analysis, what Derrida's position accomplished was that it reformulated the philosophical project while "attacking the logocentrism" of social scientific critiques.⁴³ Furthermore, it did this while simultaneously creating an intellectual issue that was adaptable and modifiable in other closely related disciplines. These disciplines also felt the impact of the growing loss of the attention of the general intellectual public, which they rely on for support, and the onslaught of the social scientific critique. Since these fields already have a high degree of permeability (i.e., vague distinctions and boundaries between public and professional discourse), Derrida's work served as protection against these onslaughts while providing them with a novel intellectual avenue for their own disciplinary purposes.

Latour has pointed out that often the success of a scientific theory or position is an outcome of an ironical sense of control. The individual producer must "enrol others so that they believe it, buy it and disseminate it across time and space" while he or she must also "control them so that what they borrow and spread remains more or less the same."⁴⁴ The individual producer must maintain

⁴³ Ibid., p. 596.

⁴⁴ Bruno Latour, Science in Action, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 121.

control over his/her intellectual product, while at the same time allowing room for the product to be adapted to the specific needs of other knowledge producers.

Essentially, this is what deconstructionism was able to do. First, it appealed to those who felt that philosophy was under threat of being contaminated by the interests of outsiders (e.g., the French government and social science). Deconstructionism helped redefine the blurring boundary between philosophy and social science. In Durkheimian terms, it redrew a line between "us" and "them." Secondly, deconstructionism allowed related disciplines the room to adapt it to their own intellectual concerns and problems (e.g., literary criticism, neo-pop art, architectural theory, urban studies, etc.). It served, to use Olga Amsterdamska's phrase, as a "strategy of reinvestment."⁴⁵ Since these fields have a loose type of social organization and a conversational symbolic code, yet rely on certain "trend setting" institutions and individuals, Derrida's philosophical position became an important "cultural investment" for many allied disciplines.

Related to this recruitment of allies is the dissemination of information. For an idea to be "successful" and influential, it must establish networks of

⁴⁵ Olga Amsterdamska, "Institutions and Schools of Thought: The Neogrammarians," *American Journal of Sociology*, 91, 1985, p.335 (pp. 332-358).

dissemination. The more elaborate and encompassing the network, the more "successful" a position can become. Within Lamont's analysis, Derrida's popularity can be partly attributed to his involvement with journals such as *Tel Quel* and *Critique*.⁴⁶ These journals published essays in both philosophy and literary criticism. They were directed towards an eclectic group of French intellectuals. In addition to these "intellectual journals," Derrida's work received attention by the more "main-stream cultural media." The tendency of this media form is, in Lamont's words, to "cater to the intellectual culture of the upper-middle class, and their control over access to that market is a structural feature of the French intellectual scene."⁴⁷ Derrida's deconstructionism became part of the intellectual scenery of the upper middle-class world. To be a member of the educated elite and to not know Derrida became as atrocious of an act as not having the "proper" dialect, "civilized manners," or drinking the right wine. Furthermore, it "epitomized dangerously seductive qualities of style; as intellectual fashion goes, it was flashy, different, ingenious, and slightly exotic."⁴⁸ It became

⁴⁶ Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher, 1987, pp. 597-598.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 598.

⁴⁸ Maria Ruegg, "The End(s) of French Style: Structuralism and Post-Structuralism in the American Context," *Criticism*, 29, 1979, p. 193.

indispensible for the conduct of "intellectual life" and for being in "vogue" (we will return to this point later on in the chapter).

Finally, we can turn to our third point. Here, the ideas of postmodernism serve to challenge the established hierarchy of philosophy and literary criticism departments and centers of knowledge production. As pointed out earlier, this is the setting in which ideas or theories become weapons in the battle for organizational control. Postmodernism became a means for younger or marginal academics to challenge the "old academism" of their philosophical or literary predecessors and for less prestigious centers to counter established knowledge producing-institutions.⁴⁹ With regard to the first issue, Derrida, Althusser, and Foucault all resisted writing a dissertation. They chose not to "play by the rules," yet managed to win the game.⁵⁰ For them, the dissertation did not represent the culmination of academic training, it served as a means for controlling and limiting the types of intellectual contributions that could be made (e.g., in controlling recruitment, graduates, and guild membership). It was a form of intellectual censorship made by the "gatekeepers" of disciplinary authority. As such, it

⁴⁹ Cf. Bourdieu, Homo Academicus, 1988.

⁵⁰ Cf. Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher," 1987, p. 605.

represented the "old academism" and its strangle-hold over "legitimate" knowledge of the world. However, we can argue that such a move is only possible when there is a setting marked by low functional dependence. If this were a field where functional dependence was high, the ability to avoid the strategic interactions and organizational requirements necessary for the establishment of rigid knowledge would have severely limited the impact these individuals could make. The organization of philosophy and literary criticism make it possible to make contributions to the central problems of the field while avoiding official channels of authority and legitimation (from a socio-cultural standpoint, it can be said that this is truer of France than the U.S., of Europe than North America).

Secondly, the content of postmodernism proved to be a powerful means of shifting and realigning not only the internal organization of these fields but also the centers of knowledge-production. For example in the United States, centers of deconstructionism developed not only at the traditional literary centers of Yale, Cornell, and Johns Hopkins but also at the University of California-Irvine and SUNY-Binghamton.⁵¹ Postmodernism became an avenue for both the reconstruction of the philosophical and literary enterprises and a realignment of the sites of knowledge

⁵¹ Cf. Jonathan Arc, et al. (eds.), The Yale Critics: Deconstructionism in America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

dissemination.

When we combine the three points discussed above, we have a means for understanding postmodern knowledge as a social construct. First of all, it was manufactured within organizational confines which allowed for knowledge of this type to be formed. Secondly, it was successful in recruiting allies from a number of related fields (e.g., those fields that have traditionally looked to philosophy for information). Finally, it served as an ideological weapon in the battle for redefining the philosophical enterprise and relocating sites of intellectual production. Essentially, it became a tool for gaining and legitimating a new form of political control. As a consequence, we can conclude that sociological factors played an important role in the "success" of postmodernism. Without these organizational and interactional factors, postmodernism would probably not have been developed or disseminated in the style that it was. It perhaps would have remained, like many theories or assumptions, a set of "illegitimate" ideas on the fringe of mainstream philosophical and literary discourse.

If postmodernism was simply a set of academic theories we would have been able to end our discussion here. However, due to postmodernism's success in recruiting allies in related fields and in becoming an important form of "cultural capital" for the "educated public," it has had

the distinction of being a movement which has affected a number of culture-producing and consuming realms and a number of social groups. This being the case, we must in some way provide a marketing account, that is, of the "audience structure" and the subsequent consumption of postmodern.

The New Bourgeoisie and the Reception of Postmodern Culture

If we were to ask a farmer in Iowa or a miner in West Virginia to describe the impact that postmodern culture has had on his or her life, we would find, after the laughter or blank stare had ceased, that it has had none. However, if we were to ask an educated upper middle-class professional in a larger metropolitan area the same question, we would perhaps find answers ranging from the introduction of postmodern teapots, to the impact of postmodern MTV, to a discussion of the impact of Umberto Eco or Italo Calvino on contemporary literature. Within the anatomy of our argument, what this social distinction reveals is not a difference in the ontogenetic ability of people to understand the complexity of "high culture" or the relativistic "different strokes for different folks," but that the reception of postmodern culture, like its production, is context and group specific. The culture audience, like the knowledge/culture producer, has a group structure and a cognitive style.

Only the "trained eye" can recognize postmodernist culture and its often critical irony (cf. our discussion of the Plaza d'Italia in Chapter 6). Only certain groups or classes possess the cultural capital necessary to "get the joke" and only they can promote it as a means for distinguishing themselves from other culture-consuming groups near their situs in the social hierarchy. It is, to use another Bourdieu-type term, an outcome of the social "habitus" of a particular group.⁵² By habitus, Bourdieu means the different classification schemes which structure the cognitive distinctions and action pathways of a given social group. Each group uses this habitus to define itself (i.e., We/Them) and to distinguish itself from other groups in the occupational structure of a society. Culturally, each social group struggles to impose the "taxonomy most favorable to its characteristics, or at least to give to the dominant taxonomy the content most flattering to what it has and what it is."⁵³

Within this Bourdieu-based argument, those who ascribe to the anti-aural and anti-authentic characteristics of neo-pop art or to the ironical aesthetics of the AT&T Building in New York, or for that matter the philosophy of

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. by R. Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). While Bourdieu is concerned with French distinctions, his general analysis of class cultures is applicable to other Western societies.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 476.

Lyotard or Derrida, are using these cultural goods as a form of capital to purchase status. They are engaged in defining the boundary of their group and in distinguishing themselves from other groups. They are, to invoke Durkheim, attempting to forge a new version of the sacred. They, like the religious practitioners and the "primitive classifiers," are imparting mana to new symbolic objects. These groups are using postmodernism as part of a rite of intensification. This being the case, the questions become; who and why? Below we will attempt to answer these questions.

In societies with a complex division of labor and a competitive hierarchical structure, intellectual and cultural products tend to be highly used as status markers. Historically, this is specifically true for the European and American upper-middle class or bourgeoisie, whose location in the stratification system has made them an important niche for dissemination and consumption of "new" and "in vogue" forms of culture. Due to this group's general lack of social cohesion and its relatively "high" place in the stratification system or hierarchical and control structure, cultural goods within it tend to be used as a means of individual and group differentiation. In other words, cultural goods come to have symbolic exchange value.

This characteristic is particularly true for the so-called "new middle-class" or service class. Since this group, specifically its upper echelon, is becoming a more integral and powerful aspect of the post-industrial socio-economic environment, its cultural tastes and expressions are often used as a means of distinguishing itself from the old bourgeoisie (i.e., the industrial capitalists). This parallels the old industrial bourgeoisie's use of cultural goods to distinguish itself from the landed aristocracy.⁵⁴ Just as ideas become ammunition in the battle for control in knowledge producing communities, cultural style becomes a battle ground for the struggle to control the tastes and cognitive styles of fellow members and society as a whole.

The new middle class must distinguish itself by employing new cultural symbols or by giving new meaning to old ones. Describing the cultural patterns of this new class in France, Bourdieu writes,

(They) have abandoned the champagne of the vieille France industrialists (and the whole view of the world, and of France, and of France in the world, which went with it) for the whisky of American style managers, the cult of 'literature' (delegated to their wives) and economic news which they read in English.⁵⁵

In the French case, whiskey, literature, and economic news become part of a general lifestyle which displays their

⁵⁴ Cf. Stuart Ewen, All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture (New York: Basic, 1988), pp. 26-32.

⁵⁵ Bourdieu, Distinctions, 1984, pp. 314-15.

status position. Lifestyle becomes a personal comment on belonging and a political statement on social position.

The French service class, like their American, British, or German counterparts, is systematically employing culture as a means of differentiation and potential domination--of making their hegemonic mark. To paraphrase Marx, cultural "property is man's personal, distinguishing and hence essential existence."⁵⁶

In addition to the upper echelons of the new, post-industrial bourgeoisie, the lower echelons of this group tend also to be important sites of contemporary cultural innovation. This echelon tends to be manifest in occupations such as advertising, sales, magazine journalism, TV and video production, counseling, marriage therapy, etc.⁵⁷ Often this group has experienced downwardly mobility compared to their initial status during early family socialization. They have acquired a high level of cultural capital, yet possess a relatively low level of economic capital. The new petit bourgeoisie is generally engaged in what Bourdieu refers to as the "symbolic work of producing needs."⁵⁸ This group is

⁵⁶ Karl Marx, "Excerpts from James Mill's Elements of Political Economy" in Early Writings (New York: Penguin, 1974), p. 266.

⁵⁷ Scott Lash and John Urry, The End of Organized Capitalism (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 295.

⁵⁸ Bourdieu, Distinctions, 1984, p. 345.

engaged in the promoting of information technologies and the marketing and selling of symbolic products. This class "had to produce the need for them in potential consumers by a symbolic action tending to impose norms and needs, particularly in the areas of life-style...or cultural consumption."⁵⁹ Generally, they can be classified as "need merchants."⁶⁰ They can become members of the upper echelons of the new bourgeoisie through the "successful" deployment of the "symbolic violence needed to create and sell new products."⁶¹

With regard to cultural patterns, this group is very likely to consume and promote products that have been deemed illegitimate by other hierarchically-higher social groups. Objects which had been deemed "low brow," camp, or kitschy by the old or new bourgeoisie undergo "refiguration" in the hands of the new petit bourgeoisie. These objects become reinterpreted and made desirable. Describing the cultural preference of this group in the French context, Bourdieu writes,

Their ambivalent relationship with the educational system, inducing a sense of complicity with every form of symbolic deviance, inclines them to welcome all the forms of culture which are, provisionally at least, on the (lower) boundaries of legitimate culture--jazz, cinema, strip cartoons, science fiction--and to flaunt (for example) American fashions

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 345.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 365, emphasis added.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 358, emphasis added.

and models--jazz, jeans, rock or the avant-garde
underground...⁶²

In the American context, "fifties furniture" and "fifties anti-sex and anti-drug films" are reinterpreted by this class and made acceptable and "in." These objects are stripped of their old meaning and replaced with an interpretation which expresses the cognitive orientation of the new petit bourgeoisie, i.e., as new consumables.

This group, it is apparent, is a prime site for the reception of postmodern cultural products. The symbolic deviance of postmodernism, coupled with the symbolically-oriented professions of the petit bourgeoisie make postmodernism a prime vehicle of symbolic identification and differentiation. In other words, this class uses postmodernistic culture as a weapon in its resentment and assertiveness of status. Describing the "art of living" adapted by this group, Bourdieu writes,

Guided by their anti-institutional temperament and the concern to escape everything redolent of competitions, hierarchies and classifications and, above all, of scholastic classifications, hierarchies of knowledge....these new intellectuals are inventing an art of living...they adopt the most external and most easily borrowed aspects of the intellectual life-style, liberated manners, cosmetic or sartorial outrages, emancipated poses and postures, and systematically apply the cultivated disposition to not-yet-legitimate culture (cinema, strip cartoons, the underground), to everyday life (street art), the personal sphere (sexuality, cosmetics, child-rearing, leisure) and the existential (the relation to nature

⁶² Ibid., p. 360.

love death).⁶³

It is a social group that seeks to rebel against form itself (cf. Simmel discussion of modernism in Chapter 3): Breaking form will allow it to make its cultural mark. Like the early twentieth century Dadaist, this group seeks to use "illegitimate" cultural products to distinguish itself, to promote its rather weak hierarchical position, and to alter the hierarchy of society as a whole.

Essentially, we can conclude that this petit bourgeoisie group is--to use Mary Douglas' terminology--low on both group and grid. It has, in Lash and Urry's terminology, "a pre-eminently destructured and decentered habitus."⁶⁴ Since this group is characterized by looser group and grid distinctions, it promotes a sense of symbolic and hierarchical decenteredness. Members of this group refuse to "be pinned down in a particular site in social space."⁶⁵ They see themselves as "unclassifiable, 'excluded,' 'dropped out,' 'marginal,' anything rather than categorized, assigned to a class, a determinate place in social space."⁶⁶ This self-identification leads them, not only to see themselves as "unclassifiable" and

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 370-71.

⁶⁴ Lash and Urry, Disorganized Capitalism, 1987, p. 296.

⁶⁵ Bourdieu, Distinctions, 1984, p. 370.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 370.

indeterminate, but also ipso facto the social and natural world. As a consequence of this decentered habitus, this group uses object reinterpretation to shake the old system of classification, differentiation, and stratification. Postmodernistic culture with its decenteredness and anti-hierarchical stance becomes a prime means of group identification and differentiation. It becomes an instrument for the formation and expression of a new form of "semiotic power."⁶⁷

We may conclude that such an organizational and hierarchial structure produces a cognitive style that is universalistic, skeptical, and indeterminate. As Mary Douglas has pointed out, "Sustained skepticism is a feasible stance for those who do not expect to command or unify society, but stand apart from it."⁶⁸ The new petit bourgeoisie is in an ironical societal position. It is an emerging group that is becoming more influential in terms of sheer numbers, yet their access to power is overshadowed by the financial and cultural capital of the upper echelons of the new bourgeoisie. Consequently, their cultural strategy becomes one of breaking down hierarchical boundaries and their corresponding cultural forms. Postmodernism becomes both this group's cultural and

⁶⁷ Cf. John Fiske, Reading the Popular (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 132.

⁶⁸ Douglas, "Pascal's Great Wager," 1985, p. 19.

political expression.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to show how postmodernism is socially-produced, promoted, and maintained. From the position outlined herein, postmodernism can be viewed as the outcome of various social and organizational dynamics and their related production and consumption patterns. In regard to the production of postmodern knowledge, the organization of knowledge producing communities illustrates how a knowledge system of this type could be produced. Skepticism is a problem, not because it is a natural outcome of "deep investigation," but because certain disciplines lack the organization necessary to, in Latour's terms, form black boxes, i.e., sealed knowledge or "truth." However, this does not mean that these fields are immature or worthless. In fact, politically they may be liberating since they are more likely to promote a sense of openness, conversation, and debate. Like the production of postmodernism, its consumption also has social origins. The new, postindustrial bourgeoisie, particularly the lower echelons, are more likely to consume and promote postmodernism due to their decentered habitus. In short, we may conclude that postmodernism is a social construct. It is social through and through.

One final point. The treatment presented in the chapter should in no way suggest that postmodernism is an "invalid" or "irrational" theoretical or cultural expression. Such a stance represents the type of asymmetrical argument which we have tried to avoid. Our treatment simply means that postmodernism, like all forms of knowledge, must be socially established, maintained, and disseminated within the confines of social organization. It is not outside of the social processes that produce and shape all forms of knowledge. In this regard, our approach has been in keeping with the deconstructivist orientation postmodernism has taken toward modern discourses. However, in our case we sought to describe a sociological deconstruction of its organizational hierarchical structure. In our final chapter we will discuss some of the implications of our analysis of postmodernism.

CHAPTER IX

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Readers of this work may conclude that they have been led full circle. What began as a description of postmodernism's undermining of modern culture's search for epistemological certitude, or in Derridian terms "presence," has led back to the reestablishment of what Lyotard referred to as a master narrative of modernity-- only this time the Emperor has sociological clothes. In this final chapter, I wish to show why this is not the impression that should be left or the conclusion that should be drawn. Here, I want to restate some of the central points made and discuss the purpose and possible objections to the critique of postmodernism rendered in this dissertation. Specifically, I will reemphasize three issues: (1) The outline of the general postmodern framework discussed herein; (2) what a social or constructivist epistemology can contribute to a rethinking of postmodernism's collapse of all meaning and leveling of distinctions between science and literature; and (3) how social organization structures knowledge production and culture consumption. I will discuss each of these three points below.

The Postmodern Framework

The first part of this dissertation was concerned with providing a general postmodern framework. In other words, we were concerned with outlining some of the general assumptions and theoretical positions of postmodernism. Here, we used postmodernism, not as a unified phenomenon or as a logical "movement of history," but as a heuristic device to capture and describe a number of related practical and theoretical changes occurring in contemporary culture (e.g., movements such as post-structuralism, neo-pop art, architecture). We concluded that postmodernism can be seen as a philosophical and cultural rebellion against three overlapping modernistic principles; correspondence referentiality, subject centered explanatory and creative models, and the teleological progression of rationality.

We also emphasized that it is important to resist the tempting strategy of placing modernism and postmodernism in exclusive categories. Each cultural and theoretical position can perhaps best be seen as a social truth movement. Each movement seeks to define what knowledge and culture are. They are, and have been, in competition with one another over defining reality (cf. A. Touriane's conceptualization of society as being composed of a series of social movements). What we call "reality," "knowledge," "truth," and "society" are the outcomes of this struggle.

Certainly, the positions we outlined do not exhaust all the complexities, idiosyncrasies, and varieties of postmodernism, but they do, I believe, enable us to construct an overall vision of the postmodern perspective.

Essentially, the postmodernists argue that language and power shape our experience of the world to the extent that no reliable and universalistic knowledge is possible. It is no longer possible to adhere to the Enlightenment principles that language is merely a medium for the conveyance of the real world, that human subjectivity provides a pure, uncontaminated realm for knowledge acquisition or creative expression, or that the progression of rationality leads to personal and societal emancipation. Instead, knowledge acquisition is shaped by the dynamics of power, pre-existing linguistic hierarchies, and cultural biases. Revealing that knowledge is shaped by power and linguistic hierarchies leads postmodernists to level all meaning (i.e., no interpretation, lay or professional, is philosophically superior) and collapse all distinctions between literature and science (i.e., no discourse has a privileged access to the real). The outcome for many is to become, to invoke Nietzsche, "accomplished nihilists"-- joyfully welcoming the end of all meaning (cf. our discussion of Baudrillard in Chapter 7).

The critique of postmodernism rendered in this work accepts postmodernism's anti-foundational revelations

(i.e., its deconstruction of first principles), yet it rejects the nihilistic conclusions that the postmodernists reach. From the perspective outlined herein, levels of meaning and the distinctions between literature and science were never grounded in pure ideational differentiations. They are and have been socially constructed distinctions. From our position, postmodernism does not go far enough. It employs an anti-idealistic "methodology," but in the end it draws idealistic conclusions. Postmodernism illustrates how social interests act upon ideational distinctions, (e.g., Lyotard's language games, Foucault's intrusion of power, Derrida's biased hierarchies) but in its conclusions it often abandons this social perspective for an idealistic "end of meaning" argument. In other words, when it is revealed that philosophical or cultural foundations are biased, postmodernism tends to announce that it is no longer possible to have any validity claims. From our perspective, these issues are best understood from a constructivist or social epistemological perspective. This move leads to our second point, the importance of a social epistemology in evaluating postmodernism's conclusions.

Social Epistemology

When postmodernism is reduced to its finest dimension it can be seen as a specific answer to the long-standing epistemological question: How do we know? As discussed

above, for the postmodernists, the traditional philosophical answers to this question are no longer plausible. Reliable knowledge of the world can no longer be grounded in the Cartesian or Rousseauian subject, the progression of history, a simplified language, a self-evident hierarchical logic, or any other foundational position. Power, language, and culture exert too much of an influence over knowledge for the question, "how do we know?," ever to be secured and settled. This being the case, it is no longer possible to make philosophical distinctions between true and false knowledge forms. In the words of Lyotard, we can merely "gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species..." or in Neo-Nietzschian terms, enjoy the Dionysian ecstasy associated with the end of meaning.¹

The account presented in this dissertation agrees with the postmodern deconstruction of traditional philosophical truth, yet it draws very different conclusions as to what that deconstruction of traditional philosophy means. Essentially, it can be argued that this deconstruction leads in three directions. One is the path taken by many postmodernists. They believe that once the act of knowing has been reduced to a power based-rhetoric, all meaning effectively ends. It is no longer possible systematically

¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxv.

to make the distinction between the correct and the incorrect or the right and the wrong. As such, we are adrift in a cosmos of meaninglessness. We are no longer able to legitimize our theoretical differentiations. Another path is the one taken by neo-rationalists such as Habermas and Davidson. This position argues that Enlightenment rationality may have been mistaken in grounding rationality in the condition of subjectivity (i.e., in the Cartesian rational self or the Rousseauian expressive self), but there are other human or social conditions that can be used as means for developing a reconstructed rationality. For this position, truth (or a foundation) exists but not in its traditional hiding places. Finally, a third position--the one we have attempted to chart. This position parallels postmodernism's linking of rationality and power, yet it reaches very different conclusions. Instead of arguing that all meaning collapses into a sea of confusion and nihilism, as the postmodernists do, or arguing that rationality resides in new places, as the neo-rationalists do, this position argues that meaning is created and recreated within the confines of social interaction and organization. Simply revealing that truth is an outcome of power or a biased hierarchy or that knowledge is culturally determined does not disqualify it completely. From this position, truth remains a socially contingent and

constituted ideology that is created by knowledge/culture producers.

A critic of the constructivist epistemology outlined in this dissertation is likely to respond that if truth is merely a social construct existing within a power nexus, then how can we critique any knowledge or political system? How can we say that a position is incorrect or that a political order is exploitative? Doesn't our position inevitably make might right? This, I believe, is a danger only if we adhere to the traditional foundational view of epistemology and politics--that is, that a truth claim and a political program (e.g., liberalism, conservatism, socialism) are grounded in some supreme access to the actual, unmediated workings of the world or in some type of human essence. As Marx stated in the "Thesis on Feuerbach," "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory, but is a practical question...man must prove the truth."² Marx recognized that truth is a political product. Political and scientific truth, do not lie hidden waiting for the proper methodology, political party, or charismatic personality to uncover and act upon them. They are forged and constructed through practical action. Truth is human, all too human--it is political. As Marx recognized,

² Karl Marx, "Thesis on Feuerbach," in Marx and Engels, The German Ideology (New York: International Publishers, 1985), p. 121 (pp. 121-123).

scientific and political "truth" do not need a philosophy to ground them or to give them "objective" meaning. All the foundation necessary is, and can be, developed through praxis. Consequently, we need not languish over having no theoretically-privileged position from which to critique a truth claim, war, exploitation, or the political order. We must simply realize that any critique must be constructed. We need not wait for the "truth" to reveal itself to the those with the proper level of rationality or the "politically correct" and suddenly to shower down on the misinformed (i.e., those with "belief" or "false consciousness").

Social Organization and Postmodern Skepticism

The final central point we sought to develop in this work is that ideational skepticism, including postmodernism's, is a problem only for certain forms of knowledge. Philosophical skepticism is not a universal or ahistorical problem that is the outcome of some type of in-depth analysis. It is not inevitable as Nietzsche thought. The social organization of certain knowledge-producing and consuming communities influence the degree of skepticism that is produced.³ For those organizations with a tight

³ Some have also pointed out that the scattering of meaning and the resulting skepticism may be tied to the late or multi-national phase of capitalism (cf. Jameson, 1984). Although we have not pursued this line of inquiry, a connection could be established, specifically with regard

and rigid group and hierarchical boundaries, skepticism is not a problem. As Latour points out, if a position is not attacked "people know exactly what nature is...", i.e., what is right.⁴ Translating this statement into our account, we may conclude that if there is an organizational environment which does not spawn, suppress, or channel dissenting opinions and if a position has the endorsement of the power brokers or matrix, that position becomes "true." There is literally no "outside" from which to launch a critique. On the other hand, those organizations which have a loose organizational structure are likely to spawn skepticism, since they have few formalized codes for determining legitimate and non-legitimate knowledge. Furthermore, fields of this type lack closed boundaries between who is and is not a legitimate knowledge producer, which further complicates the divisions between sureness and unsureness. Consequently, the ability of a position to be attacked and for skepticism or nihilism to develop is dependent upon the type of organization present. A similar type of dynamic also occurs for culture-consuming groups. Those groups with what was referred to as a "decentered habitus" (Bourdieu's term) are more likely to promote the anarchistic style of postmodern culture.

to the issues of style over substance and appearance over reality in a consumer society.

⁴ Bruno Latour, Science in Action (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 206.

The Durkheimian-based connection of cognitive style and organizational structure has often been interpreted in a conservative manner. In other words, the social-control school which uses Durkheim as a point of reference, often interprets this revelation as arguing for stronger, more rigid form of control to counterbalance the loss of authority and meaning. This need not be the case. As Mary Douglas points out, when we debate the appropriateness of knowledge systems for determining the structure of the world, we are not selecting the true from the false, the rational from the irrational, or knowledge from belief.⁵ Essentially, we are debating the type of social organization we want to have. Do we want to have a tight-knit group with a rigid hierarchy or do we want loose social relations and a pluralistic and indeterminate hierarchy? We can have truth and a firm distinctions between true and false and right and wrong if we are willing to forgo autonomous social relations and forge a restrictive group boundary, group code, and mobility structure (not that this is necessarily an individual choice). However, the price for this sureness and righteousness may be too high. Perhaps, a loose type of organizational control is more conducive to the type of world which we would want to inhabit or the one we believe

⁵ Cf., Mary Douglas (ed.), Essays in the Sociology of Perception (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 5.

we can construct--but again this is a political rather than purely philosophical decision.

Summary

What we have tried to accomplish in this dissertation is not a standard sociological critique of a belief or knowledge system. I think such a standard realist-based critique is impossible--if by critique we mean unveiling some hidden element that is the root cause of postmodern thought and culture. It is impossible for the sociologist, philosopher, or cultural critic to look down from a secure pedestal of positivistic or realist epistemology and proclaim that what postmodernism actually reflects is the crisis of late capitalism (Jameson, 1983), the differentiation of society (Lash, 1990), or the further fragmentation of modernist culture (Bell, 1976). As both postmodernism and the sociology of knowledge clearly demonstrate, this type of realist based critique is no longer possible.

However, one of the critical points argued in this dissertation is that while a realist epistemology is unacceptable, we are not left without the ability to produce any knowledge. We can argue that postmodernism is a result of social factors as long as we realize that we are forming a construct of postmodernism within the confines of pre-existing social organization. We must

dismiss the idea that critiques are launched by "free-floating" intellectuals who miraculously capture an issue such as postmodernism as it "really exists." In other words, our critiques do not reveal the truth of postmodernism. It is through our critiques that we construct the meaning of postmodernism (or any movement, problem, or issue). Inevitably some of these constructed meanings will go further than others. This perhaps has little to do with their accurate correspondence with the real, but with the ability of various positions to disseminate information and recruit allies within pre-designed organizational confines.

Essentially, what we have done, or attempted to do, is provide a construction of postmodernism. This, I believe, is different from both the realist and interpretative approaches. A constructivist account recognizes that it, like all knowledge, is forged and produced. This account, like all accounts, assumes that it has something to contribute; otherwise, it would be unproductive to point out that the world has meaning or it does not have meaning. In this regard, our account has employed the same types of rhetorical styles and maneuvers that can be found in other knowledge claims to establish its view of representing "what is going on." Yet, from a social epistemological position this does not discredit it. It only points to one of the means in which all knowledge is produced or

constructed.

While it would be tempting to argue that sociology should attempt to hasten the move from an epistemological to a socio-logical or constructivist way of approaching the issues of truth and knowledge, this, I believe, would prove non-useful and contradictory. The sociology of knowledge position does not demand that all disciplines "see the light" and interpret the world as sociologists do: This would be in direct contradiction with its position. As Mary Hesse has pointed out, the sociology of knowledge does not "remove the motivation for epistemological studies nor emasculate philosophical theories....such a consequence only follow for those who retain a rationalist theory of knowledge."⁶ In other words, since we are not saying we have a privileged position from which to launch accurate critiques, we abandon the rationalistic premise that one knowledge form must prove its superior access to truth. Sociology cannot claim that it has the true narrative about how knowledge comes about, a narrative that philosophy has somehow missed. Sociology can only claim that it has a certain role to play in the construction of knowledge. This is achieved not through uncovering a new version of the real, but through the establishment of the authority to

⁶ Mary Hesse, "The Strong Thesis of Sociology of Science," in Revolutions and Reconstructions in Philosophy of Science, ed. by M. Hesse (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 46.

define "hard knowledge" of the social. This, of course, does not make it more "valid," only more socially "legitimate."

As P. Bourdieu says in his book, Homo Academicus, sociologists can overcome the dichotomy of objectivistic explanation and subjectivistic understanding by turning upon themselves the very tools of objectivism that they routinely employ upon others. In other words, sociology may be an instrument of intervention in the politics of intellectual life.⁷

Durkheim and Mauss end Primitive Classification with the following statement:

As soon as they (philosophical problems) are posed in sociological terms, all these questions, so long debated by metaphysicians and psychologists, will at last be liberated from the tautologies in which they have languished. At least, this is a new way which deserves to be tried.⁸

Our position does not retain Durkheim's and Mauss' optimistic belief in full disclosure or that a social epistemology is the answer to old philosophical problems, but their basic point summarizes what we have tried to illustrate about a sociological construction of postmodernism. Philosophical distinctions may be ideationally unsupportable, but they remain powerful and

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, Homo Academicus (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁸ Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, Primitive Classification, trans. by R. Needham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 88.

confining social constructs. God may be dead but the church lives on.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Binary Oppositions: A term used by structuralists to refer to the dual code existing within a language and culture (e.g., delineations between beautiful/ugly, knowledge/belief, good/bad, etc.).

Bio-power: A term used by Foucault to refer to the body as a construct of historically and socially constituted power. This may be contrasted with a natural conception of the body which argues that the body is an unchanging and stable entity.

Correspondence referentiality: A term used to describe the belief that the mind captures and languages reports unmediated reality. There are no differences between word and world (cf. nominalism).

Decentering the subject: For postmodernists the term refers to the process of removing the Cartesian subject from the center of knowledge or removing the Rousseauian subject from the center of expression.

Deconstructionism: A process of reading a text where the underlying philosophical hierarchy is revealed and shown to be rhetorically favoring one term over another rather than being a philosophically "real" distinction.

Habitus: A term used by Bourdieu to describe the social space and underlying logical or binary code which orients action and thought within a given social group or class.

Ideal speech: A term used by Habermas to refer to the ideal conditions of a non-distorted and non-power contamination discourse. For Habermas, this is a normative prescription for contemporary problems.

Langue: A term used by Saussure to refer to an underlying, pre-conscious linguistical logic which provides the rules for the construction of everyday speech.

Logocentrism: A term used by Derrida and the postmodernists to describe the privileging of speech over writing in Occidental thought. It illustrates the search of Western thought for a firm foundation and a final word on nature and society.

Metanarrative: A term used by Lyotard to refer to the supporting meta-theoretical positions which have been used as an underlying rationale or logic in modernity (e.g., scientific accumulation, emancipation, creation of wealth).

Nominalism: A philosophical position which argues that languages and definitions do not refer to things but deal with the terms we attach to things.

Parole: A terms used by Saussure to describe everyday speech patterns which are shaped by an underlying langue.

Performative contradiction: A term used by Habermas to refer to the inability of Adorno and Horkheimer and the post-structuralist to account for their rational denouncement of rationality.

Presence: A term used by Derrida to refer to Western philosophy's search for unmediated reality. The goal of traditional philosophy has been to eliminate the encumbrances for bringing the object under the direct light of investigation and explanation.

Text: A term used by deconstructionists to refer to everything (i.e., "there is nothing outside of the text"). Within deconstructionism literal everything can be seen as a text and investigators/scientists as literary critics.

The Problem of Reflexivity: Within the sociology of science the term refers to the inability of sociologists to state how their truth claims are superior to other truth claims.

Theory of Communicative Action: Habermas's social theory which argues that the linguistical rules of the life-world can serve as a foundation for examining all discursive acts and for launching a critique of power.

Totalizing Discourse: A term used by postmodernists to describe any position which seeks to give a complete and all-encompassing explanation of a phenomenon.