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Marxism and Postmodernism

Marxism and postmodernism: people often seem to find this combination peculiar or paradoxical, and somehow intensely unstable, so that some of them are led to conclude that, in my own case, having 'become' a postmodernist, I must have ceased to be a Marxist in any meaningful (or in other words stereotypical) sense.* For the two terms (in full postmodernism) carry with them a whole freight of pop nostalgia images, 'Marxism' perhaps distilling itself into yellowing period photographs of Lenin and the Soviet revolution, and 'postmodernism' quickly yielding a vista of the gaudiest new hotels. The over-hasty unconscious then rapidly assembles the image of a small, painstakingly reproduced nostalgia restaurant—decorated with the old photographs, with Soviet waiters sluggishly serving bad Russian food—hidden away within some gleaming new pink and blue architectural extravaganza. If I may indulge a personal note, it has happened to me before to have been oddly and comically identified with an object of study: a book I published years ago on structuralism elicited letters, some of which addressed

me as a 'foremost' spokesperson for structuralism, while the others appealed to me as an 'eminent' critic and opponent of that movement. I was really neither of those things, but I have to conclude that I must have been 'neither' in some relatively complicated and unusual way that it seemed hard for people to grasp. As far as postmodernism is concerned, and despite the trouble I took in my principal essay on the subject to explain how it was not possible intellectually or politically simply to celebrate postmodernism or to 'disavow' it (to use a word to which I will return), avant-garde art critics quickly identified me as a vulgar-Marxist hatchet man, while some of the more simplehearted comrades concluded that, following the example of so many illustrious predecessors, I had finally gone off the deep end and become a 'post-Marxist' (which is to say, a renegade and a turncoat).

I am therefore particularly grateful to Doug Kellner for his thoughtful introductory demonstration of the ways in which this new topic is not alien to my earlier work but rather a logical consequence of it, something I want to rehearse again myself in terms of the notion of a 'mode of production', to which my analysis of postmodernism claims to make a contribution. It is first worth observing, however, that my version of all this—which obviously (but perhaps I haven't said so often enough) owes a great debt to Baudrillard, as well as to the theorists to whom he is himself indebted (Marcuse, McLuhan, Henri Lefebvre, the situationists, Sahlins, etc., etc.)—took form in a relatively complicated conjuncture. It was not only the experience of new kinds of artistic production (particularly in the architectural area) that roused me from the canonical 'dogmatic slumbers': I will want to make the point later on that as I use it, 'postmodernism' is not an exclusively aesthetic or stylistic term. The conjuncture also offered the occasion for resolving a long-standing *malaise* with traditional economic schemas in the Marxist tradition, a discomfort felt by a certain number of us not in the area of social class, whose 'disappearance' only true 'free-floating intellectuals' could be capable of entertaining, but in the area of the media, whose shock-wave impact on Western Europe enabled the observer to take a little critical and perceptual distance from the gradual and seemingly natural mediatization of North American society in the 1960s.

A Third Stage of Capitalism

Lenin on imperialism did not quite seem to equal Lenin and the media, and it gradually seemed possible to take his lesson in a different way. For he set the example of identifying a new stage of capitalism that was not explicitly foreseen in Marx: the so-called monopoly stage, or the moment of classical imperialism. That could lead you to believe, either that the new mutation had been named and formulated once and for all; or that one might be authorized to invent

* This essay, reprinted from *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Maisonneuve Press, Washington D.C. 1989), concludes and responds to a collection of fourteen other essays commissioned to assess the relations of Marxism, poststructuralism and postmodernism.

yet another one under certain circumstances. But Marxists were all the more unwilling to draw this second, antithetical conclusion, because in the meantime the new mediatic and informational social phenomena had been colonized (in our absence) by the Right, in a series of influential studies in which the first tentative Cold War notion of an 'end of ideology' finally gave birth to the full-blown concept of a 'post-industrial society' itself. Ernest Mandel's book *Late Capitalism* changed all that, and for the first time theorized a third stage of capitalism from a usable Marxian perspective.¹ This is what made my own thoughts on 'postmodernism' possible, which are therefore to be understood as an attempt to theorize the specific logic of the cultural production of that third stage, and not as yet another disembodied culture critique or diagnosis of the spirit of the age.

It has not escaped anyone's attention that my approach to postmodernism is a totalizing one. The interesting question today is then not why I adopt this perspective, but why so many people are scandalized (or have learned to be scandalized) by it. In the old days, abstraction was surely one of the strategic ways in which phenomena, particularly historical phenomena, could be estranged and defamiliarized; when one is immersed in the immediate—the year-by-year experience of cultural and informational messages, of successive events, of urgent priorities—the abrupt distance afforded by an abstract concept, a more global characterization of the secret affinities between those apparently autonomous and unrelated domains, and of the rhythms and hidden sequences of things we normally remember only in isolation and one by one, is a unique resource, particularly since the history of the preceding few years is always what is least accessible to us. Historical reconstruction, then, the positing of global characterizations and hypotheses, the abstraction from the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of immediacy, was always a radical intervention in the here-and-now and the promise of resistance to its blind fatalities.

But one must acknowledge the representational problem, if only to separate it out from the other motives at work in the 'war on totality'. If historical abstraction—the notion of a mode of production, or of capitalism, fully as much as of postmodernism—is something not given in immediate experience, then it is pertinent to worry about the potential confusion of this concept with the thing itself, and about the possibility of taking its abstract 'representation' for reality, of 'believing' in the substantive existence of abstract entities such as Society or class. Never mind that worrying about other people's errors generally turns out to mean worrying about the errors of other intellectuals. In the long run there is probably no way of marking a representation so securely as representation that such optical illusions are permanently forestalled, any more than there is a way to ensure the resistance of a materialistic thought to idealistic recuperations, or to ward off the reading of a deconstructive formulation in metaphysical terms. Permanent revolution in intellectual life and culture means that impossibility, and the necessity for a constant reinvention of precautions against what my tradition calls conceptual reification.

¹ Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, NLB/Verso, London 1975.

The extraordinary fortunes of the concept of postmodernism are surely a case in point here, calculated to inspire those of us responsible for it with some misgivings: but what is needed is not the drawing of the line and the confession of excess ('dizzy with success', as Stalin once famously put it), but rather the renewal of historical analysis itself, and the tireless reexamination and diagnosis of the political and ideological functionality of the concept, the part it has suddenly come to play today in our imaginary resolutions of our real contradictions.

There is, however, a deeper paradox rehearsed by the periodizing or totalizing abstraction which for the moment bears the name of postmodernism. This lies in the seeming contradiction between the attempt to unify a field and to posit the hidden identities that course through it and the logic of the very impulses of this field, which postmodernist theory itself openly characterizes as a logic of difference or differentiation. If what is historically unique about the postmodern is thus acknowledged as sheer heteronomy and the emergence of random and unrelated subsystems of all kinds, then, or so the argument runs, there has to be something perverse about the effort to grasp it as a unified system in the first place: the effort is, to say the least, strikingly inconsistent with the spirit of postmodernism itself; perhaps, indeed, it can be unmasked as an attempt to 'master' or to 'dominate' the postmodern, to reduce and exclude its play of differences, and even to enforce some new conceptual conformity over its pluralistic subjects? Yet, leaving the gender of the verb out of it, we all do want to 'master' history in whatever ways turn out to be possible: the escape from the nightmare of history, the conquest by human beings of control over the otherwise seemingly blind and natural 'laws' of socio-economic fatality, remains the irreplaceable will of the Marxist heritage, whatever language it may be expressed in. It can therefore not be expected to hold much attraction for people uninterested in seizing control over their own destinies.

System and Differentiation

But the notion that there is something misguided and contradictory about a unified theory of differentiation also rests on a confusion between levels of abstraction: a system that constitutively produces differences remains a system, nor is the idea of such a system supposed to be in kind 'like' the object it tries to theorize, any more than the concept of dog is supposed to bark or the concept of sugar to taste sweet. It is felt that something precious and existential, something fragile and unique about our own singularity, will be lost irretrievably when we find out that we are just like everybody else: in that case, so be it, and let's know the worst; the objection is the primal form of existentialism (and phenomenology), and it is the emergence of such things and such anxieties that needs to be explained. In any case, objections to the global concept of postmodernism in this sense seem to me to recapitulate, in other terms, the classical objections to the concept of capitalism: something scarcely surprising from the present perspective, which consistently affirms the identity of postmodernism with capitalism itself in its latest systemic mutation. Those objections

turned essentially around one form or another of the following paradox: namely that although the various pre-capitalist modes of production achieved their capacity to reproduce themselves through various forms of solidarity or collective cohesion, the logic of capital is on the contrary a dispersive and atomistic, 'individualistic' one, an anti-society rather than a society, whose systemic structure, let alone its reproduction of itself, remains a mystery and a contradiction in terms. Leaving aside the answer to the conundrum ('the market'), what may be said is that this paradox is the originality of capitalism and that the verbally contradictory formulas we necessarily encounter in defining it point beyond the words to the thing itself (and also give rise to that peculiar new invention, the dialectic). We will have occasion to return to problems of this kind in what follows: suffice it to say all this more crudely by pointing out that the very concept of differentiation (whose most elaborate development we owe to Niklas Luhmann) is itself a systemic one, or, if you prefer, turns the play of differences into a new kind of identity on a more abstract level (it being understood that one must also distinguish between dialectical oppositions and differentiations of this random, dispersive type).

The 'war against totality' has finally its political motivation, which it is the merit of Horne's essay to reveal.² Following Lyotard, he makes it clear that the fear of Utopia is in this case our old friend 1984, and that a Utopian and revolutionary politics, correctly associated with totalization and a certain 'concept' of totality, is to be eschewed because it leads fatally to Terror: a notion at least as old as Edmund Burke, but helpfully revived, after innumerable restatements during the Stalin period, by the Cambodian atrocities. Ideologically, this particular revival of Cold War rhetoric and stereotypes, launched in the demarxification of France in the 1970s, turns on a bizarre identification of Stalin's Gulag with Hitler's extermination camps (but see Arno Mayer's remarkable *Why Did the Heavens not Darken?* for a definitive demonstration of the constitutive relationship between the 'final solution' and Hitler's anti-communism³); what can be 'post-modern' about these hoary nightmare images, except for the depoliticization to which they invite us, is less clear. The history of the revolutionary convulsions in question can also be appealed to for a very different lesson, namely that violence springs from counterrevolution first and foremost, indeed, that the most effective form of counterrevolution lies precisely in this transmission of violence to the revolutionary process itself. I doubt if the current state of alliance or micro-politics in the advanced countries supports such anxieties and fantasies; they would not, for me at least, constitute grounds for withdrawing support and solidarity from a potential revolution in South Africa, say; finally, this general feeling that the revolutionary, Utopian or totalizing impulse is somehow tainted from the outset and doomed to blood by the very structure of its thoughts does strike one as idealistic, if not finally a replay of doctrines of original sin in their

² Haynes Horne, 'Jameson's Strategies of Containment', in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, op. cit., pp. 268-300.

³ Arno J. Mayer, *Why the Heavens Did Not Darken: the 'Final Solution' in History*, New York 1988.

worst religious sense. At the end of this essay I will return to more concrete political issues and considerations.

The Social Determinants of Thought

Now, however, I want to return to the question of totalizing thought in a different way, interrogating it not for its truth content or validity but rather for its historical conditions of possibility. This is then no longer to philosophize exactly, or if you prefer to philosophize on a *symptomal* level, in which we step back and estrange our immediate judgments on a given concept ('the most advanced contemporary thinking no longer permits us to deploy concepts of totality or periodization') by way of asking the question about the social determinants that enable or shut down thought. Does the current taboo on totality simply result from philosophical progress and increased self-consciousness? Is it because we have today attained a state of theoretical enlightenment and conceptual sophistication, which permit us to avoid the grosser errors and blunders of the old-fashioned thinkers of the past (most notably Hegel)? That may be so, but it would also require some kind of historical explanation (in which the invention of 'materialism' would surely have to intervene). This hybris of the present and of the living can be avoided by posing the issue in a somewhat different way: namely, why it is that 'concepts of totality' have seemed necessary and unavoidable at certain historical moments, and on the contrary noxious and unthinkable at others. This is an inquiry which, working its way back on the outside of our own thought and on the basis of what we can no longer (or not yet) think, cannot be philosophical in any positive sense (although Adorno attempted, in *Negative Dialectics*, to turn it into a genuine philosophy of a new kind); it would certainly lead us to the intensified sense that ours is a time of nominalism in a variety of senses (from culture to philosophical thought). Such nominalism would probably turn out to have several pre-histories or overdeterminations: the moment of existentialism, for instance, in which some new social sense of the isolated individual (and of the horror of demography, or of sheer number or multiplicity, particularly in Sartre) causes the older traditional 'universals' to pale and lose their conceptual force and persuasiveness; the age-old tradition of Anglo-American empiricism as well, which emerges from this death of the concept with renewed force in a paradoxically 'theoretical' and hyper-intellectual age. There is of course a sense in which the slogan 'postmodernism' means all this too; but then in that case it is not the explanation, but what remains to be explained.

Speculation and hypothetical analysis of this kind that bears on the weakening of general or universalizing concepts in the present is the correlative of an operation that can often look more reliable, namely the analysis of moments in the past when such conceptuality seemed possible; indeed, those moments in which the emergence of general concepts can be observed have often seemed to be historically privileged ones. As far as the concept of totality is concerned, I am tempted to say about it what I once said about Althusser's notion of structure, namely that the crucial point to be made is this: we can acknowledge

the presence of such a concept, provided we understand that there is only one of them: something otherwise often known as a 'mode of production'. Althusserian 'structure' is that, and so is 'totality', at least as I use it. As for 'totalizing' processes, that often means little more than the making of connections between various phenomena: thus, to take an influential contemporary example, although Gayatri Spivak offers her conception of a 'continuous sign-chain' as an alternative to dialectical thought,⁴ on my usage that conception would also stand as a specific (and non-dialectical) form of 'totalizing'.

We must be grateful to the work of Ronald L. Meek for the prehistory of the concept of a 'mode of production' (as that will later be worked out in the writings of Morgan and Marx), which in the 18th century takes the form of what he calls the 'four stages theory'.⁵ This theory comes together in the mid-18th century, in France and in the Scottish Enlightenment, as the proposition that human cultures historically vary with their material or productive basis, which knows four essential transformations: hunting and gathering, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce. What will then happen to this historical narrative, above all in the thought and work of Adam Smith, is that, having now produced that object of study which is the specifically contemporary mode of production, or capitalism, the historical scaffolding of the pre-capitalist stages tends to fall away and lend both Smith's and Marx's model of capitalism a synchronic appearance. But Meek wants to argue that the historical narrative was essential to the very possibility of thinking capitalism as a system, synchronic or not;⁶ and something like that will remain my own position with respect to that 'stage' or moment of capitalism which projects the cultural logic of what some of us now seem to be calling 'post-modernism'.

I am here however essentially concerned with the conditions of possibility of the concept of a 'mode of production', that is to say, the characteristics of the historical and social situation which make it possible to articulate and formulate such a concept in the first place. I will suggest, in a general way, that thinking this particular new thought (or combining older thoughts in this new way) presupposes a particular kind of 'uneven' development, such that distinct and co-existing modes of production are registered together in the life world of the thinker in question. This is how Meek describes the preconditions for the production of this particular concept (in its original forms as a 'four stages theory':

My own feeling is that thinking of the type we are considering which lays primary emphasis on the development of economic techniques and socio-economic relationships, is likely to be a function, first, of the rapidity of contemporary economic advance, and second, of the facility with which a contrast can be observed between areas which are economically advancing and areas which are still in 'lower' stages of development. In the 1750s and

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York 1987, p. 198.

⁵ Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, Cambridge 1976.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 219–21.

60s, in cities like Glasgow and in areas such as the more advanced provinces in the north of France, the whole social life of the communities concerned was being rapidly and visibly transformed, and it was fairly obvious that this was happening as a result of profound changes taking place in economic techniques and basic socio-economic relationships. And the new forms of economic organization which were emerging could be fairly easily compared and contrasted with the older forms of organization which still existed, say, in the Scottish Highlands, or in the remainder of France—or among the Indian tribes in America. If changes in the mode of subsistence were playing such an important and 'progressive' role in the development of contemporary society, it seemed a fair bet that they must also have done so in that of past society.⁷

Historical Paradigms

This possibility of thinking the new concept of a mode of production for the first time is sometimes loosely described as one of the newly emergent forms of historical consciousness, or historicity. It is not necessary, however, to have recourse to the philosophical discourse of consciousness as such, since what are being described might equally well be termed new discursive paradigms, and this more contemporary way of talking about conceptual emergence is reinforced, for literary people, by the presence alongside this one of yet another new historical paradigm in the novels of Sir Walter Scott (as Lukács interprets them in *The Historical Novel*).⁸ The unevenness that allowed French thinkers (Turgot, but also Rousseau himself!) to conceptualize a 'mode of production' probably had as much as anything else to do with the pre-revolutionary situation in the France of that period, in which feudal forms stood out ever more starkly in their distinctive difference against a whole newly emergent bourgeois culture and class consciousness.

Scotland is in many ways a more complex and interesting case, for, as last of the emergent First World countries, or first of the Third World ones (to use Tom Nairn's provocative idea, in *The Break-up of Britain*), Enlightenment Scotland is above all the space of a coexistence of radically distinct zones of production and culture: the archaic economy of the Highlanders and their clan system, the new agricultural exploitation of the Lowlands, the commercial vigour of the English 'partner' over the border, on the eve of its industrial 'take-off'. The brilliance of Edinburgh is therefore not a matter of Gaelic genetic material, but rather owing to the strategic yet eccentric position of the Scottish metropolis and intellectuals with respect to this virtually synchronic coexistence of distinct modes of production, which it is now uniquely the task of the Scottish Enlightenment to 'think' or to conceptualize. Nor is this merely an economic matter: Scott, like Faulkner later on, inherits a social and historical raw material, a popular memory, in which the fiercest revolutions and civil and religious wars now inscribe the coexistence of modes of production in vivid narrative form. The condition of thinking a new reality and articulating a new paradigm for it therefore seem to demand a peculiar conjuncture and

⁷ Ibid, pp. 127–28.

⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, Lincoln, Nebraska 1983.

a certain strategic distance from that new reality, which tends to overwhelm those immersed in it (this would be something like an epistemological variant of the well-known 'outsider' principle in scientific discovery).

All of which, however, has another secondary consequence of greater significance to us here and which bears on the gradual repression of such conceptuality. If the postmodern moment, as the cultural logic of an enlarged third stage of classical capitalism, is in many ways a purer and more homogeneous expression of this last, from which many of the hitherto surviving enclaves of socio-economic difference have been effaced (by way of their colonization and absorption by the commodity form), then it makes sense to suggest that the waning of our sense of history, and more particularly our resistance to globalizing or totalizing concepts like that of the mode of production itself, are a function of precisely that universalization of capitalism. Where everything is henceforth systemic the very notion of a system seems to lose its reason for being, returning only by way of a 'return of the repressed' in the more nightmarish forms of the 'total system' fantasized by Weber or Foucault or the 1984 people.

But a mode of production is not a 'total system' in that forbidding sense, and includes a variety of counterforces and new tendencies within itself, of 'residual' as well as 'emergent' forces, which it must attempt to manage or control (Gramsci's conception of hegemony): were those heterogeneous forces not endowed with an effectivity of their own, the hegemonic project would be unnecessary. Thus, differences are presupposed by the model, something which should be sharply distinguished from another feature which complicates this one, namely that capitalism also produces differences or differentiation as a function of its own internal logic. Finally, to recall our initial discussion of representation, it is also clear that there is a *difference* between the concept and the thing, between this global and abstract model and our own individual social experience, from which it is meant to afford some explanatory difference but which it is scarcely designed to 'replace'.

A number of other reminders about the 'proper use' of the mode of production model are probably also advisable: that what is called a 'mode of production' is not a productionist model, it always seems worth saying. What also seems worth saying, in the present context, is that it involves a variety of levels (or orders of abstraction) which must be respected, if these discussions are not to degenerate into random shouting matches. I proposed a very general picture of such levels in *The Political Unconscious*, and in particular the distinctions that have to be respected between an examination of historical events, an evocation of larger class and ideological conflicts and traditions, and an attention to impersonal socio-economic patterning systems (of which the well-known thematics of reification and commodification are examples). The question of agency, which arises often in these pages, has to be mapped across these levels.

The Place of Cultural Production

Featherstone, for example, thinks that 'postmodernism' on my use is a specifically cultural category:⁹ it is not, and was rather for better and for worse designed to name a 'mode of production' in which cultural production finds a specific functional place, and whose symptomatology is in my work mainly drawn from culture (this is no doubt the source of the confusion). He therefore advises me to pay closer attention to the artists themselves and to their publics, as well as to the institutions which mediate and govern this newer kind of production: nor can I see why any of those topics should be excluded, they are very interesting matters indeed. But it is hard to see how sociological inquiry at that level would become *explanatory*: rather, the phenomena he is concerned with tend at once to reform into their own semi-autonomous sociological level, one which then at once requires a diachronic narrative. To say what the art market is now, and the status of the artist or the consumer, means saying what it was before this transformation, and even at some outside limit leaving a space open for some alternate configuration of such activities (as is the case, for example, in Cuba, where the art market, galleries, investments in painting, etc., do not exist). Once you have written up that narrative, that series of local changes, then the whole thing gets added into the dossier as yet another space in which something like the postmodern 'great transformation' can be read.

Indeed, although with Featherstone's proposals concrete social agents seem to make their appearance (postmodernists are then those artists or musicians, those gallery or museum officials or record company executives, those specific bourgeois or youth or working class consumers), here too the requirement of differentiating levels of abstraction must be maintained. For one can also plausibly assert that 'postmodernism' as an ethos and a 'life style' (truly a contemptible expression that one) is the expression of the 'consciousness' of a whole new class fraction that largely transcends the limits of the groups enumerated above: this larger and more abstract category has variously been labelled as a new petty bourgeoisie, a professional-managerial class, or more succinctly as 'the yuppies' (each of these expressions smuggling in a little surplus of concrete social representation along with itself).¹⁰

This identification of the class content of postmodern culture does not at all imply that 'yuppies' have become something like a new ruling class or 'a subject of history'—merely that their cultural practices and values, their local ideologies, have articulated a useful dominant ideological and cultural paradigm for this stage of capital. It is indeed often the case that cultural forms prevalent in a particular period are not furnished by the principal agents of the social formation in question (businessmen who no doubt have something better to do with their time, or are driven by psychological and ideological motive

⁹ Mike Featherstone, 'Postmodernism Cultural Change and Social Practice', in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, op. cit., pp. 117–38.

¹⁰ See also Fred Pfeil, 'Makin' Flippy-Floppy: Postmodernism and the Baby-Boom PMC', in *The Year Left I*, Verso, London 1985.

forces of a different type). What is essential is that the culture-ideology in question articulate the world in the most useful way functionally, or in ways that can be functionally reappropriated. Why a certain class fraction should provide these ideological articulations is a historical question as intriguing as the question of the sudden dominance of a particular writer or a particular style. There can surely be no model or formula given in advance for these historical transactions; just as surely, however, we have not yet worked this out for what is being called postmodernism. Meanwhile, another limitation of my own work on the subject (not mentioned by any of the contributors) now becomes clear, namely that the tactical decision to stage the account in cultural terms has made for a relative absence of any identification of properly postmodern 'ideologies'. Indeed, since I have been particularly interested in the formal matter of what I call some new 'theoretical discourse', and also because the paradoxical combination of global decentralization and small group institutionalization has seemed to me an important feature of the postmodern tendential structure, I have seemed mainly to single out intellectual and social phenomena like 'poststructuralism' and the 'new social movements': thus, against my own deepest political convictions, all the 'enemies' have still seemed to be on the Left, an impression I will try to rectify in what follows.

But what has been said about the class origins of postmodernism has as its consequence the requirement that we now specify another higher (or more abstract and global) kind of agency than any so far enumerated. This is of course multinational capital itself: it may as a process be described as some 'non-human' logic of capital, and I would continue to defend the appropriateness of that language and that kind of description, in its own terms and on its own level. That that seemingly disembodied force is also an ensemble of human agents, trained in specific ways and inventing original local tactics and practices according to the creativities of the human freedom—this is also obvious, from a different perspective, to which one would only wish to add that for the agents of capital also the old dictum holds that 'people make their history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing'. It is within the possibilities of late capitalism that people glimpse 'the main chance', 'go for it', make money, and reorganize firms in new ways (just like artists or generals, ideologists or gallery owners).

What I have tried to show here is that although my account of the postmodern may seem in the eyes of some of its readers and critics to 'lack agency', it can be translated or transcoded into a narrative account in which agents of all sizes and dimensions are at work. The choice between these alternate descriptions—focalizations on distinct levels of abstraction—is a practical rather than a theoretical one. It would however be desirable to link up this account of agency with that other very rich (psychoanalytic) tradition of psychic and ideological 'subject positions'. If it is now objected that the descriptions of agency described above are merely an alternative version of the base-superstructure model—an economic base for postmodernism on the one account, a social or class base on this other—then so be it, provided we understand that 'base and superstructure' is not

really a model, but a starting point and a problem, something as undogmatic as an imperative simultaneously to grasp culture in and for itself, but also in relationship to its outside, its content, its context, and its space of intervention and of effectivity. How one does that, however, is never given in advance. Gross's beautiful adaptation of Benjamin—postmodernism as the 'afterimage' of late capitalism¹¹—reminds us not only how wonderfully supple Benjamin was in his formulations of this relationship (elsewhere he says that the 'superstructure' is the *expression* of the 'base', something that also radically modifies our stereotypes), but also how many new paths of exploration the new figure opens up and entails. Afterimages are objective phenomena which are also mirages and pathologies; they dictate attention to optical processes, to the psychology of perception, and also to the dazzling qualities of the object, and so on and so forth. I have proposed a 'model' of postmodernism, which is worth what it's worth and must now take its chances independently; but it is the construction of such a model that is ultimately the fascinating matter, and I hope it will not be taken as a knee-jerk affirmation of 'pluralism' if I say that alternate constructions are desirable and welcome, since the grasping of the present from within is the most¹² problematical task the mind can face.

Most of my commentators and critics do not however propose alternate models of this kind (I have noted that whatever their positions they seem to take the modernism/postmodernism distinction as a given and as a meaningful category); but they do quite properly feel the need to judge my construction pragmatically, that is to say, in terms of its political consequences, which include consequences for the politics of culture. Thus Shumway's subtle and profound article turns on the positioning of poststructuralism within my scheme of things, although he has a remarkable lesson for me about Ricoeur (which I acknowledge with gratitude):¹² he could not be aware how close I am to him on the significance of Gadamer (since my work on *Truth and Method* has not yet been published), any more than Huhn could be in a position to know how much more of his Adorno reading I would be prepared to endorse than he thinks¹³ (but here the slip-page results from the term 'ideology,' which Adorno uses in a relatively restricted and old-fashioned sense, but which I wish to open up and generalize in ways consonant with a good deal of contemporary thought, whatever the language we decide to use for these matters). If I continue to assert that contemporary theory (that is to say essentially 'poststructuralism,' to be sure) is to be grasped as yet another postmodern phenomenon, bearing a family likeness to my other more cultural exhibits, this is because I am interested in the formal structure of the new 'theoretical discourse', which seems to me radically different from the language and textual operations of what we may call 'traditional philosophy': of course the content of 'theor-

¹¹ David Gross, 'Marxism and Resistance: Fredric Jameson and the Moment of Postmodernism', in *ibid.*, pp. 96–116.

¹² David Shumway, 'Jameson/Hermeneutics/Postmodernism', in *ibid.*, pp. 172–202.

¹³ Thomas Huhn, 'The Postmodern Return, with a Vengeance of Subjectivity', in *ibid.*, pp. 249–67.

etical discourse' is determined and modified by the new form (as it could not but be), while the return to an older philosophical discourse today is no optional or simple matter. Nor would I dream of denying Shumway's assertion of the radical political uses of much of post-structuralism (but then the crucial tactical question would be: under what circumstances and to what ends, and for whom?).

A New Anarchism?

I do tend to feel that something is lost when an emphasis on power and domination tends to obliterate the displacement, which made up the originality of Marxism as such, towards the economic system, the structure of the mode of production, and exploitation as such. Once again, matters of power and domination are articulated on a different level from those systemic ones, and no advances are gained by staging the complementary analyses as an irreconcilable opposition, unless the motive is to produce a new ideology (in the tradition, it bears the time-honoured name of *anarchism*), in which case other kinds of lines are drawn and one argues the matter differently.

Indeed, I suspect that my most vigorous critics here are those who are in one way or another inspired by an anarchist and populist spirit. Thus Featherstone notes my 'acknowledgment' of the emergence in postmodernism, of a more democratic and culturally literate public everywhere in the world today; but he wonders whether I celebrate this development with sufficient enthusiasm, and perhaps he is right to be suspicious. His own remarks about the new unemployment might have inspired different kinds of doubts as to the political role of some new mass culture among people thus radically disempowered. Goldstein meanwhile goes so far as to assert that I 'disavow' 'the "merely" progressive feminist, Afro-American, working-class, or third-world struggles to alter and to expand the traditional canon and literary study's limitation'.¹⁴ Leaving aside the silliness of the verb (what would it mean to 'avow' such things, and who am I to 'disavow' them or to 'avow' them either?), it is presumptuous of Goldstein to read my mind, and to attribute political attitudes to me which I 'disavow' in any case; far from being opposed to the projects he enumerates, I strongly endorse all of them (he seems to have me confused with Lynne Cheney or William Bennett). He is however kind enough to spill the beans in his next sentence: 'As an engaged insider, a feminist, an Afro-American, a working class, or a third-world critic seeks to change and to improve literary institutions in a "progressive" but not a utopian direction. In a reformist manner, such scholars ameliorate the 'ideological' present and do not map the utopian future; they critique their institution's racist, chauvinist, or elitist discourses, not the irrationality of the whole modern era.'

Here Goldstein is putting words into other people's mouths, I hope as erroneously as he has done with me. This formulation of the old antithesis between reform and revolution does indeed strike me as

¹⁴ Philip Goldstein, 'The Politics of Fredric Jameson's Literary Theory: A Critique', in *ibid.*, pp. 249–67.

disastrous; but there is no need to make it, and Mao Zedong used to talk about 'walking on two legs'. Local struggles and issues are not merely indispensable, they are unavoidable; but as I have tried to say elsewhere, they are effective only so long as they also remain figures or allegories for some larger systemic transformation. Politics has to operate on the micro- and the macro-levels simultaneously; a modest restriction to local reforms within the system seems reasonable, but often proves politically demoralizing.

Radhakrishnan¹⁵ offers me a different kind of lesson in alliance politics, but his example of the Rainbow coalition is singularly inappropriate, since Jackson's force and appeal has always consisted in a mediatory opposition which some might even think of as a kind of totalization: I have indeed never heard a Jackson speech which did not seek to unite its multiple 'subject-positions' and constituencies by way of the common situation they share as working-class people. The concept of class thus seems alive and well in the very heart of the most promising recent Northamerican left political experiment.

Saul Landau has observed, about our current situation, that there has never been a moment in the history of capitalism when this last enjoyed greater elbow-room and space for manoeuvre: all the threatening forces it generated against itself in the past—labour movements and insurgencies, mass socialist parties, even socialist states themselves—seem today in full disarray when not in one way or another effectively neutralized; for the moment global capital seems able to follow its own nature and inclinations, without the traditional precautions. Here then we have yet another 'definition' of postmodernism, and a useful one indeed, which only an ostrich will wish to accuse of 'pessimism'. This is a transitional period between two stages of capitalism, in which the earlier forms of the economic are in the process of being restructured on a global scale, including the older forms of labour and its traditional organizational institutions and concepts. That a new international proletariat (taking forms we cannot yet imagine) will reemerge from this convulsive upheaval it needs no prophet to predict: we ourselves are still in the trough, however, and no one can say how long we will stay there. This is the sense in which two seemingly rather different conclusions to my historical essays on the current situation (one on the Sixties and one on postmodernism) are in reality identical: in the first, I anticipate the process of proletarianization on a global scale which I have just evoked here; in the second I call for something mysteriously termed 'cognitive mapping' of a new and global type.

But 'cognitive mapping' was in reality nothing but a code word for 'class consciousness' (as Steve Best notes in his shrewd and wide-ranging analysis¹⁶): only it proposed the need for class consciousness of a new and hitherto undreamed of kind, while it also inflected the

¹⁵ R. Radhakrishnan, 'Poststructuralist Politics: Towards a Theory of Coalition', *ibid.*, pp. 301–32.

¹⁶ Steven Best, 'Jameson, Totality and the Poststructuralist Critique', in *ibid.*, pp. 333–68.

account in the direction of that new spatiality implicit in the postmodern (which Ed Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* now places on the agenda in so eloquent and timely a fashion¹⁷). I occasionally get just as tired of the slogan of 'postmodernism' as anyone else, but when I am tempted to regret my complicity with it, to deplore its misuses and its notoriety, and to conclude with some reluctance that it raised more problems than it solves, I find myself pausing to wonder whether any other concept can dramatize the issue in quite so effective and economical a fashion. 'We have to name the system': this high point of the Sixties finds an unexpected revival in the postmodernism debate.

¹⁷ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, Verso, London 1989.

Friends of Roger Burbach / CENSA

Roger Burbach is an outstanding solidarity activist and writer who has been in the forefront of opposition to US intervention in Latin America and the Philippines. He is the founder of the Center for the Study of the Americas (CENSA) in Berkeley, and author (with Orlando Nunez) of the award-winning *Fire in the Americas* (Verso/Haymarket 1987).

This spring, while on a working trip to Nicaragua, Roger was seriously injured in an accident which has left him paralysed from the chest down. Hopes are not high that he will ever walk again. Yet throughout his ordeal, Roger has maintained his characteristic courage and sense of humour, expressing his pride in Nicaragua for the medical care it has been able to provide in spite of limited facilities.

None of us knows the full measure of a colleague until a tragedy strikes. Each of us has been inspired by Roger's example and his many contributions. Now that his income sources are suspended, and he is faced with continuing medical bills, we are trying to ensure that CENSA can survive, and that Roger can return to the frontlines where he belongs. Please join with us.

Cheques (tax deductible in the US) should be made out to CENSA, 2288 Fulton, # 103, Berkeley, CA 94704, USA.

Signed: Thomas E. Ambrogi: Institute for Food and
Development Policy
Fred Ross: Neighbor-to-Neighbor
Sandy Close: Pacific News Service
Mike Davis/Mike Sprinker: Haymarket Service
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