
PART I

The Four Maxims
of Modernity

‘Modernity’ as a concept is so often associated with modernity that it comes as something of a shock to find the word ‘modern’ in use as far back as the fifth century AD.¹ In the usage of Pope Gelasius I (494/5) it simply distinguishes the contemporaries from the older period of the Church fathers, and implies no particular privilege (save the chronological one) for the present. Present and immediate past are here in continuity, both of them sharply distinguished from that unique historical time in which witnesses saw Jesus alive. So far, then, the Latin *modernus* simply means ‘now’ or ‘the time of the now’, thereby replicating Greek, which has no equivalent for *modernus* as such.² Yet in the work of Cassiodorus, writing at much the same time, after the conquest of Rome by the Goths, the term has acquired a new overtone. For *modernus*, in the thought of this essentially literary scholar, now knows a substantive antithesis, in what Cassiodorus terms *antiquas*. From the Pope’s standpoint, the new Gothic empire scarcely marked a break in the Christian theological tradition; for the man of letters, it signifies a fundamental dividing line between a henceforth classical culture and a present whose historic task lies in reinventing that culture. It is this break that is crucial in the endowment of the term ‘modern’ with the specific meaning it has continued to bear down to our own time. Nor does it matter that for Cassiodorus the term is freighted with the melan-

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choly of *Epigonentum*, while for the various Renaissances (the Carolingian as well as those of the twelfth century and of Burckhardt's Italy) the new historic mission is taken up with exultation.

What is at stake here is the distinction between *novus* and *modernus*, between *new* and *modern*. Can we sort this out by observing that everything modern is necessarily new, while everything new is not necessarily modern? This is, it seems to me, to differentiate between a personal and a collective (or historical) chronology; between the events of individual experience and the implicit or explicit recognition of moments in which a whole collective temporality is tangibly modified.

In the case of the new, the thus predicated subject is distinguished from its predecessors as an (isolated) individual with no particular reference or consequence; in the case of the modern, it is grasped in connection with a series of analogous phenomena and contrasted with a closed and vanished phenomenal world of a different type.³

What role does the existence of the new word play in the consciousness of this distinction? For the structural lexicologists of this tradition,⁴ the availability of distinct terms and variants is certainly a fundamental precondition: 'where no specific differentiation of a field is available, no radically different temporal space can be delimited either'.⁵ Yet causality is not thereby assigned, nor does it have to be: we can imagine the proliferation of terms in one space, and their appropriation by some emergent consciousness in another.

However, it is crucial at this stage not to underestimate the anomalous dynamics of a word like *modernus*. We have at least two competing models for the comprehension of

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such a term. The first offers to deal with it in the framework of temporal categories, which eventually resolve themselves into those of the tenses as such (future, future anterior, perfective past, imperfective past, etcetera). We can then, with Reinhart Kosselek,⁶ generate a history of ideas in which the emergence of new time-words is evidence for a narrative about the evolution of historical consciousness. Philosophically, however, this approach founders on the antinomies of temporality itself, about which it has authoritatively been said that 'it is always too late to speak about time'.⁷

The other obvious model, which approaches the problem not from the side of meaning and consciousness but from the side of the material signs themselves, is that of linguistics. It can be argued that 'modern' demands to be ranged under the category of what Jespersen called 'shifters':⁸ namely those empty vehicles of 'deixis' or reference to the context of the enunciation, whose meaning and content vary from speaker to speaker throughout time. Such are the pronouns (I, me and you), the words for place (here and there), and of course the time-words as well (now and then). In fact, well before modern linguistics, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* famously opens with a discussion of precisely such shifters, which as he points out might at first seem the most concrete words of all, until we grasp their portable variability.⁹ Yet shifters exist, however incoherent they may be philosophically; and the well-known case of yesterday's 'modern' fashions suggested that the term 'modern' might well be included among them. In that case, however, the paradoxes of the modern are reduced to those of the merely new; and the existence of shifters in every known language tends to deprive our current object of inquiry of even that historicality that it was the merit of the preceding model to have underscored.

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Yet the internal contradictions of both approaches, while disqualifying them in the absolute, tend also to suggest some fundamental ambiguity in that object itself (which may well therefore impose a set of procedural measures and precautions). Jauss's magisterial overview suggests two further developments in the history of the concept of modernity which heighten that suspicion even further and demand to be taken into account before some final evaluation.

One is the emergent distinction between what Jauss calls 'cyclical' and 'typological' versions of the modern.¹⁰ We are certainly familiar with cyclical thinking when it comes to historical moments like the Renaissance ('Maintenant toutes disciplines sont restituées, les langues instaurées');¹¹ it is less obvious that the category of the 'generation' always brings a certain cyclical movement with it, while at the same time requiring intense collective self-consciousness about the identity and uniqueness of the period in question (generally, as in the 1960s, felt to be revolutionary in a specific way that identifies the content of the 'cyclical' return).

Meanwhile, by the 'typological', Jauss means not only the sense in which a given period feels itself to be fulfilling or completing a moment in the past (as when the New Testament completes the figural anticipations of the Old). This relationship certainly holds for the Renaissance or for the positions of the so-called modernists in the 'Querelle des anciens et des modernes': but is less evidently relevant for situations of simple emulation or imitation, as in Cassiodorus's reverence for the literature of paganism, or the respect for the past of the twelfth-century *moderni*, who famously thought of themselves as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. Yet, as the history of the Querelle itself demonstrates, the felt inferiority or superiority of present over past may be less important than the establishment of an

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identification between two historical moments, an identification that can be evaluated either way.

There is, however, a further incoherence here: namely that, when we look at the opposition more closely, its two poles seem to vanish into one another; and the cyclical proves to be fully as typological, in this sense, as the typological is cyclical. The distinction is therefore to be reformulated in another, less evident way: in reality, it involves a kind of Gestalt alternation between two forms of perception of the same object, the same moment in historical time. It seems to me that the first perceptual organization (the one identified as 'cyclical') is better described as an awareness of history invested in the feeling of a radical break; the 'typological' form consists rather in the attention to a whole period, and the sense that our ('modern') period is somehow analogous to this or that period in the past. A shift of attention must be registered in passing from one perspective to the other, however complementary they may seem to be: to feel our own moment as a whole new period in its own right is not exactly the same as focusing on the dramatic way in which its originality is set off against an immediate past.

The other opposition noted by Jauss can then serve to complete and to clarify this one. It is an opposition that historically contrasts the characterizations of 'classic' and 'romantic', but which can also be found to have a more general significance. To be sure, when late romanticism comes to feel dissatisfaction with what is still perceived to be a reactive stance against the classical, then the concept of *modernité* is born, and Baudelaire mints a usage that is presumably still with us, and whose signal advantage seems to lie in its new-found independence from all such historical oppositions and antitheses.

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marked by the coming into being of the category of the classical itself, which no longer coincides with what used to be identified as 'antiquity' (or 'les anciens'). It is a momentous development, in which a good deal of the nostalgia and the fascination with the past, along with the pain of the Epigone's inferiority, have fallen away. Indeed, the most dramatic moment in Jauss's narrative of the fortunes of 'modernus' comes precisely at this point: when the 'quarrel' between the ancients and the moderns as it were unravels and undoes itself, and both sides unexpectedly come to the same conviction, namely that the terms in which the judgement is to be adjudicated – the superiority or not of antiquity, the inferiority or not of the present and of the modern times – are unsatisfactory. The conclusion on both sides is then that the past, and antiquity, is neither superior nor inferior, but simply different. This is the moment of the birth of historicity itself: and the historically new consciousness of historical difference as such now reshuffles the deck and leaves us with a new word for the present's opposite: the classical, which Stendhal will then virtually at once describe as the modernity (or the 'romanticism') of this or that moment of the past.¹² Jauss concludes his narrative at this point, only touching in passing on that other indispensable dimension of historicity, which is the future. Yet the future's inevitable judgement on both our past and the actuality of our own present – already evoked by the Abbé de Saint-Pierre in 1735¹³ – will play an equally significant role in our own dealings with the modern and modernity.

It is now time to draw some provisional formal conclusions before examining some of the most current and widespread theories of modernity today. What we have tried to isolate is a dialectic of the break and the period, which is itself a moment of some wider dialectic of continuity and rupture (or, in other words, of Identity and Difference). For the latter process is dialectical in that it cannot be arrested and 'solved' in and for itself, but generates ever new forms and categories. I have observed elsewhere that the choice between continuity and rupture is something like an absolute historiographic beginning, that cannot be justified by the nature of the historical material or evidence, since it organizes all such material and evidence in the first place.¹⁴ But of course every such choice or grounding can itself be reconstructed as a simple fact which demands its own prehistory and generates its own causalities: in this case, the simplest version would underscore the taste of our own period and postmodernity in general for breaks rather than continuities, for decisionism rather than tradition. One could go on to evoke the temporalities of late capitalism, its reduction to the present, the loss of the sense of history and continuity, and so forth. It is at least minimally clear that this establishment of a new chain of causality involves in fact the construction of a new narrative (with a rather different starting point than that of the historiographic problem from which we began).

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This situation, in which new narratives and new starting points are generated out of the limits and the starting points of older ones, may also be suggestive of the new dialectical moment we want to consider now, namely the dialectic of the break and the period. What is at stake here is a twofold movement, in which the foregrounding of continuities, the insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, slowly turns into a consciousness of a radical break; while at the same time the enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period in its own right.

Thus, the more we seek to persuade ourselves of the fidelity of our own projects and values with respect to the past, the more obsessively do we find ourselves exploring the latter and its projects and values, which slowly begin to form into a kind of totality and to dissociate themselves from our own present as the living moment in the continuum. This is of course the moment of the latecomers' melancholy reverence and the inferiority into which our own late moderns have long since passed.

At that point, then, simple chronology becomes periodization, and the past comes before us as a complete historical world to which we can take any number of existential attitudes. This is no doubt the moment most often called *historicism*; and it becomes productive, no doubt, only when the stance so energetically defined by Schelling becomes available:

How few people really know what a past is: There can in fact be no past without a powerful present, a present achieved by the disjunction [of our past] from ourselves. That person incapable of confronting his or her own past antagonistically really can be said to have no past; or

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better still, he never gets out of his own past, and lives perpetually within it still.¹⁵

Schelling thus here isolates a unique moment, in which the past is created by way of its energetic separation from the present; by way of a powerful act of dissociation whereby the present seals off its past from itself and expels and ejects it; an act without which neither present nor past truly exist, the past not yet fully constituted, the present still a living on within the force field of a past not yet over and done with.

It is this vital energy of the present and its violent self-creation that not only overcomes the stagnant melancholies of the epigones, it also assigns a mission to a temporal and historical period which ought not yet to have the right to be one. For the present is not yet a historical period: it ought not to be able to name itself and characterize its own originality. Yet it is precisely this unauthorized self-affirmation that will finally shape that new thing we call actuality, and for various forms of which our contemporary usage of modern and modernity are made to stand. For Jauss, we do not meet this stage of history until Romanticism (let us say that with Baudelaire 'late romanticism' produces the concept of *modernité* as a way of throwing off its own Epigonentum with respect to Romanticism proper); nor does the Renaissance exactly meet these requirements, since it is still turned towards the re-creation of a past beyond its own immediate past, and intent on ideal emulation and imitation rather than on historically new creativities of its own.

But romanticism and its modernity come into being, as has already been suggested, only after history itself, or rather historicity, the consciousness of history and of being historical, has appeared (in the dissolution of the Querelle). It is thus history as such that enables this new attitude towards

the present, in such a way that one is tempted to add a fifth and final form (if it is not already implicit in the preceding one). This is the judgement of the future on the present, which has been attributed to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, and of which we find strong forms all the way down to Sartre (in *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*). I am tempted to argue that the present cannot feel itself to be a historical period in its own right without this gaze from the future, which seals it off and expels it as powerfully from time to come as it was able to do with its own immediate precedents. We need not overemphasize the matter of guilt (which, however, rightfully clings to every form of praxis) so much as that of responsibility which cannot perhaps be affirmed without the suspicion of guilt: for it is the present's responsibility for its own self-definition of its own mission that makes it into a historical period in its own right and that requires the relationship to the future fully as much as it involves the taking of a position on the past. History is to be sure both dimensions; but it is not sufficiently understood that the future exists for us not merely as a Utopian space of projection and desire, of anticipation and the project: it must also bring with it that anxiety in the face of an unknown future and its judgements for which the thematics of simple posterity is a truly insipid characterization.

But now we need to turn to the other, complementary moment, in which the break becomes a period in its own right. Such is the case, for example, with that moment traditionally identified in the West as the Renaissance, in which a certain break, a certain instauration of 'modernity', has the effect of opening up a whole new period, aptly termed the Middle Ages, as the unmarked other of a present felt to be the reinvention of that older or first modernity of the Romans (in which the modern conception of abstraction

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and of philosophy itself, along with a certain conception of history as something distinct from the chronicle, first appear). We will come to the other surprising feature of this illustration – namely the emergence of two breaks, that of the Renaissance with its pre-modernity, that of the ancients with theirs – in a later section. Here what needs to be stressed is the way in which the modern break itself expands into a whole new period of the past, namely the medieval age. The strangeness of this emergence – before it, there only existed the break with the classical past, as in Cassiodorus; but not this later closure, which seals the Middle Ages off into a period in their own right – can be judged by the way in which, for contemporary historiography, striking effects of rewriting can be achieved by pushing the boundaries of ‘modernity’ ever further back into the former Middle Ages, and affirming some modern break and some new modern beginning – now rebaptized ‘the early modern’ – at a point deep in formerly medieval territory (such as Petrarch, or the twelfth century, or even nominalism).

Nor is this some unique occurrence: for if the break is initially characterized as a perturbation of causality as such, as the severance of the threads, as the moment in which the continuities of an older social and cultural logic come to an incomprehensible end and find themselves displaced by a logic and a form of causality not active in the older system, then the renewed and mesmerized contemplation of the moment of such a break, as it begins to detect causalities and coherences not previously visible to the naked eye, is bound to expand that break into a period in its own right. Such is, for example, the drama of Etienne Balibar’s theorization of a so-called transitional period (to which we will return), in which, by the very force of things, the logic of the period, or the moment, or the system, necessarily turns back

on the idea of the transition and dispels it. So it is that, in Marxist periodization, the 'eighteenth century' also offers the example of a radical break which slowly develops into a whole period, and an earlier form of modernity as such.

But this peculiar movement back and forth from the break to the period and the period to the break at least allows us to frame a first, provisional maxim, about periodization as such. For it has become clear that the terms 'modern' and 'modernity' always bring some form of periodizing logic with them, however implicit it may at first be. Nor does the argument propose itself as a defence of periodization, exactly: indeed, the burden of this whole first part will consist in the denunciation of the abuses of the term 'modernity', and thereby, at least implicitly, of the very operation of periodization itself. Meanwhile, in Part II, we will be concerned to denounce the sterility of the standard aesthetic move, which consists in isolating 'modernism' as a standard by which to compare a whole series of historically and artistically incomparable writers (or painters or musicians).

Indeed, I want to insist on something more than the simple abuse of periodization: I want to argue that this operation is intolerable and unacceptable in its very nature, for it attempts to take a point of view on individual events which is well beyond the observational capacities of any individual, and to unify, both horizontally and vertically, hosts of realities whose interrelationships must remain inaccessible and unverifiable, to say the least. In any case, what is unacceptable about periodization, at least to the contemporary reader, has already been exhaustively recapitulated in the attacks, in a structuralist idiom, on 'historicism' (or in other words, on Spengler).

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Now, however, we need to consider the most obvious consequence of some repudiation of periodization, which would take the form of a historiography of the break as such, or in other words that endless series of sheer facts and unrelated events proposed, in their very different ways, by Nietzsche as well as by Henry Ford ('one goddamned thing after another'). It would be too simple to observe that this method of dealing with the past amounts to a reversion to the chronicle as a mode of storing and registering information: insofar as historicity is itself presumably a modern invention, the critique and repudiation of the modern is bound to generate at least the option of a regression to this or that pre-modern operation.

I would prefer to recall here our initial hypothesis (outside the frame of this particular investigation, of modernity as such): namely that there can always be expected to be a return of the repressed of narrative itself, something one would certainly expect to find in any enumeration of breaks (and which the dialectic of the transformation of the break into a period in its own right goes a long way towards verifying). But now we may specify this 'law' (if it is one) in terms of our immediate issue, namely periodization itself. In this context, we may then frame a more specific maxim (the first of four to come in the present part), which, while acknowledging the objections to periodization as a philosophical act, nonetheless finds itself brought up short against its inevitability: or in other words,

1. We cannot not periodize.

The maxim, which seems to encourage a resignation to defeat, would also appear to open the door to a thorough-

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going relativization of historical narratives, just as all the critics of postmodernity feared. But we will not know whether 'everything goes' in this sense until we examine the dominant narratives themselves.

'Modernity' always means setting a date and positing a beginning, and it is in any case always amusing and instructive to make an inventory of the possibilities, which tend to move around in chronological time, the most recent – nominalism (and also McLuhanism) – being among the oldest. The Protestant Reformation obviously enjoys a certain priority for the German tradition in general (and for Hegel in particular). For the philosophers, however, Descartes's thoroughgoing break with the past constitutes not only the inauguration of modernity but already a self-conscious or reflexive theory of it; while the cogito itself then stages reflexivity as one of modernity's central features. In hindsight – the hindsight of the twentieth century and decolonization – it now seems clear that the conquest of the Americas brought with it a significant new element of modernity,¹⁶ even though traditionally it has been the French Revolution, and the Enlightenment that prepared and accompanied it, that is credited with modernity's most momentous social and political break. Yet the reminder of science and technology suddenly sends us all the way back to Galileo if we are not content to affirm the existence of an alternate revolution in the Industrial one. But Adam Smith and others make the emergence of capitalism an unavoidable narrative option; while the German tradition (and more recently the Foucault of *The Order of Things*) affirms the significance of that

special kind of reflexivity that is the historicist kind, or the sense of history itself. After that, modernities fly thick and fast: secularization and the Nietzschean death of God; Weberian rationalization in the second or bureaucratic/monopoly stage of industrial capitalism; aesthetic modernism itself with the reification of language and the emergence of formal abstractions of all kinds; and, last but not least, the Soviet revolution. In recent years, however, breaks that would once have been characterized as so many modernities have tended rather to be termed postmodern. Thus the 1960s brought momentous changes of all kinds, which it somehow seems superfluous to call a further modernity.

That makes some fourteen proposals: one can be sure that many more are lurking in the wings, and also that the 'correct' theory of modernity is not to be obtained by putting them all together in some hierarchical synthesis. Indeed, it will already have been understood that, on my view, it is not to be obtained at all: since what we have to do with here are narrative options and alternate storytelling possibilities, as which even the most scientific-looking and structural of purely sociological concepts can always be unmasked.¹⁷ Is this not then to return to that frightening possibility of an utter relativism, which always seems to make its reappearance in any discussion of the postmodern (narrativity is thought to be an essentially postmodern slogan), bringing with it the ultimate threat of the disappearance of Truth as such? But the truth in question is not that of existentialism or psychoanalysis, nor that of collective life and political decisionism; but rather the static epistemological kind an older generation of scientists clings to, along with its Platonic translation into a 'value' by an older generation of aesthetes and humanists.

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It may be reassuring to observe that even in some untrammelled and 'postmodern' reign of narrativity as such, we may expect some narratives to be less persuasive or useful than others: that is, even if the search for some true or even correct narrative is vain and doomed to every failure but the ideological one, we can certainly go on talking about false narratives, and we may even expect to isolate a certain number of themes in terms of which the narrative of modernity must *not* be told (see Chapter 4). Meanwhile, there exists something like narrative elucidation, and we may presume that to use the narrative of modernity in this way, as the explanation of a historical event or problem, puts us on a more productive track. Causality is itself, after all, a narrative category; and its identification as such clarifies both its appropriate use and the conceptual dilemmas it inevitably brings with it. In any case, this new secondary or auxiliary status of 'modernity' as an explanatory feature rather than an object of study in its own right helps exclude a certain number of false problems.

One of those problems is bound to be the alternation we have already identified in the dialectic of the break and the period. This is, as has already been shown, a kind of Gestalt fluctuation between the perception of modernity as an event and its apprehension as the cultural logic of a whole period of history (one which is by definition – at least until the onset of theories of postmodernity – still with us). The event thus seems to contain within itself synchronically the very logic or dynamic of some diachronic unfolding over time (perhaps, indeed, it is this for which Althusser reserved the term 'expressive causality'). In any case this is also the very logic of storytelling itself, in which the teller of the tale can expand a given datum at great length, or compress it into a

narrative fact or point; and in which the axis of selection is projected onto the axis of combination (as in Jakobson's famous formula for poetry).¹⁸

Indeed, perhaps this can initially be conveyed more forcefully in terms of classical rhetoric (which it was the historical merit of Jakobson, among others, to have reintroduced into theory). In that case, 'modernity' is then to be considered a unique kind of rhetorical effect, or, if you prefer, a trope, but one utterly different in structure from the traditional figures as those have been catalogued since antiquity. Indeed, the trope of modernity may in that sense be considered as self-referential, if not performative, since its appearance signals the emergence of a new kind of figure, a decisive break with previous forms of figurality, and is to that extent a sign of its own existence, a signifier that indicates itself, and whose form is its very content. 'Modernity' then, as a trope, is itself a sign of modernity as such. The very concept of modernity, then, is itself modern, and dramatizes its own claims. Or to put it the other way around, we may say that what passes for a theory of modernity in all the writers we have mentioned is itself little more than the projection of its own rhetorical structure onto the themes and content in question: the theory of modernity is little more than a projection of the trope itself.

But we may also describe this trope in terms of its effects. First of all, the trope of modernity bears a libidinal charge: that is, it is the operator of a unique kind of intellectual excitement not normally associated with other forms of conceptuality (or if any of the latter arouse such excitement, one may suspect that a certain premise of modernity is concealed within such seemingly unrelated discourses). This is, no doubt, a temporal structure, distantly related to emotions like joy or eager anticipation: it seems to concen-

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trate a promise within a present of time and to offer a way of possessing the future more immediately within that present itself. It is in this sense something of a Utopian figure, insofar as it includes and envelops a dimension of future temporality; but then in that case one would also add that it is an ideological distortion of the Utopian perspective, and constitutes something of a spurious promise intended in the long run to displace and replace the Utopian one. What I want to underscore in this first point, however, is the way in which to affirm the 'modernity' of this or that historical phenomenon is always to generate a kind of electrical charge: to isolate this or that Renaissance painter as the sign of some first or nascent modernity¹⁹ is – as we shall see in a moment – always to awaken a feeling of intensity and energy that is greatly in excess of the attention we generally bring to interesting events or monuments in the past.

In one sense, the trope of modernity is closely related to that other chronological or historicizing, narrative, trope of 'for the first time', which also reorganizes our perceptions around the premise of a new kind of time line. But 'for the first time' is individual, and 'modern' is collective: the former only isolates a single phenomenon, even though closer enquiry may well press and force it to the point at which it mutates into a sign and symptom of modernity proper. Of 'for the first time' we may say that it announces a break without a period, and is thereby not subject to the temporal and narrative antinomies of 'modernity' as such.

This is then also to say that the trope of 'modernity' is always in one way or another a rewriting, a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms. Indeed, when one comes to recent thought and writing, the affirmation of the 'modernity' of this or that generally involves a rewriting of the narratives of modernity itself which are already in

place and have become conventional wisdom. In my opinion, then, all of the themes generally appealed to as ways of identifying the modern – self-consciousness or reflexivity, greater attention to language or representation, a materiality of the painted surface, and so on and so forth – all these features are themselves mere pretexts for the rewriting operation and for securing the effect of astonishment and conviction appropriate to the registering of a paradigm shift. This is not to say that those features or themes are fictive or unreal; it is merely to affirm the priority of the rewriting operation over the alleged insights of historical analysis.

The process is best observed in examples less world-historical than the absolute breaks enumerated at the beginning of this Chapter: although to refocus all of those as so many versions of the beginning of *Western* modernity does tend to reduce them to tropes of the kind I want to illustrate here. Thus while Luther or German objective idealism may well offer self-evident though dramatic starting points for some worldwide modernity, to reread Hitler as the agent and the very fulfilment of a specifically German modernity²⁰ is surely to offer a powerful defamiliarization of the recent past as well as a scandalous rewriting procedure. The trope reorganizes our perception of the Nazi movement, displacing an aesthetic of horror (the Holocaust, Nazi racism and the genocides) along with other ethical perspectives (the well-known ‘banality of evil’, for example) and even those political analyses in which Nazism is seen as the ultimate unfolding of the substance of radical right ideology in general, with a very different developmental narrative context which operates on at least two levels.

The first, more fundamental one posits the ‘final solution’ of the problem of feudalism, and the sweeping away of all those feudal and aristocratic or Junker survivals that char-

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acterized Germany's uneven development in 'modern' times and its class dynamics as well as its legal and social institutions. 'Hitler' is then here a kind of 'vanishing mediator'²¹ which includes both the Nazi politics as such and the immense devastation of the war, which clears the slate of everything 'residual' (in Raymond Williams's expression): indeed, it might well be suggested that the trope of modernity in this sense always has the structure of a vanishing mediator (and also that the latter is to be seen as a trope in its own right); nor is the content of this example altogether innocent, as we shall see in a moment.

But we can also here observe the projection of the trope of modernity on that more secondary expressive level of technology as well. Here, not only the utilization by Hitler of any number of very 'modern' communicational systems (the radio, the airplane), leads to the invention of the modern politician-demagogue and the wholesale reorganization of representational politics; we must also register the virtual creation of a 'modern' everyday life, as witness the VW and the autobahn, not to speak of that electrification whose arrival in the village function in Edgar Reisz's remarkable television series *Heimat* stands as the very marker of the Nazi seizure of power.

Thus a whole historiography can be organized around the clearly unverifiable deployment of the trope of modernity as a rewriting strategy for the Nazi period in Germany. The example might be repeated in any number of very different contexts from this one. Thus, we might also have examined Giovanni Arrighi's positioning of the beginnings of some properly capitalist modernity in the double bookkeeping and 'internalization of protection costs' of sixteenth-century Genoa.²² Or, in a very different context, we might evoke Kierkegaard's celebration of Christianity's essential modern-

ity²³ and the implicit retheologization of the culture critique it imposes. Or Weber's identification of the beginnings of Western rationalization (his word for modernity) in the medieval monastic orders (if not in the beginnings of tonality in Western music).²⁴

But I prefer to conclude the list with a somewhat different deployment of the modernity effect, as we find it in a striking page of Proust devoted to the mysteries of travel and displacement:

Unhappily those marvellous places, railway stations, from which one sets out for a remote destination, are tragic places also, for in them the miracle is accomplished whereby scenes which hitherto have had no existence save in our minds are about to become the scenes among which we shall be living, for that very reason we must, as we emerge from the waiting-room, abandon any thought of presently finding ourselves once more in the familiar room which but a moment ago still housed us. We must lay aside all hope of going home to sleep in our own bed, once we have decided to penetrate into the pestiferous cavern through which we gain access to the mystery, into one of these vast, glass-roofed sheds, like that of Saint-Lazare into which I went to find the train for Balbec, and which extended over the eviscerated city one of those bleak and boundless skies, heavy with an accumulation of dramatic menace, like certain skies painted with an almost Parisian modernity by Mantegna or Veronese, beneath which only some terrible and solemn act could be in process, such as a departure by train or the erection of the Cross.²⁵

This is something like Proust's embodiment of the 'Querelle des anciens et des modernes', whose canonical form is to be found in the characterization of Tante Léonie, in despotism

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fully as much in punctilious insistence on ceremony and repetition, as Louis XIV. Here also, the banal 'modern' train trip drinks, as it were, the blood of the past and re-emerges in the full-blown tragic drama of the Crucifixion: modernity gets reinvented as tragic solemnity, but only by way of a detour characterizing the great tragic painters of the past as 'modern' (and as Parisian at that!). But we scarcely need to argue the case for reading Proust as a systematic rewriting of the present in terms of the cultural past; and in any case his own theory of metaphor is very specifically one of that defamiliarization that he himself discovered at much the same time as the Russian Formalists.

I want to open a parenthesis here, and to suggest that we can take a further step and attempt to restore the social and historical meaning of the rewriting operation by positing it as a trace and an abstraction from a real historical event and trauma, one which can be said to amount to a rewriting and a surcharging of the social itself in its most concrete form. This is the moment of the overcoming of feudalism by capitalism, and of the aristocratic social order of castes and blood by the new bourgeois order which at least promised social and juridical equality and political democracy. This is to locate the referent of 'modernity' in a new way, via the ancient ghostly forms of the experience itself rather than in some one-to-one correspondence between the alleged concept and its equally alleged object. It is also to mark some fundamental differences in the various national situations. For while in Europe itself this convulsive transformation, not really complete in some places until World War II, left real scars behind it, which the ghostly abstract repetition in the mind recapitulates and reproduces, in the US notoriously the schema does not apply; and in the various countries of the Third World what might have seemed to constitute remnants

of feudalism have now been reabsorbed into capitalism in a very different fashion (here we find the urgency of the whole debate about whether the *latifundia* really constitute survivals of feudalism or not). In any case – and this is the deeper justification for tracing the formal operations of the trope of modernity back to its traumatic historical emergence – our situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century has nothing to do with this any longer. Conceptualities from the revolutionary eighteenth century – such as the notion of civil society – are no longer relevant to the age of globalization and the world market and the moment of some tendential commodification of agriculture and culture itself by a new kind of capitalism. Indeed, this historical distinction between an old social trauma and a very new one (which does not exactly constitute a violent rewriting in our first sense) goes a long way towards denouncing the ideological character of the revival of the concept of modernity in the first place.

At this point, however, it may be enough to conclude this Chapter with the formulation of a second maxim on the uses of the ‘concept’ of modernity. For just as Danto showed that all non-narrative history is susceptible to translation into a properly narrative form, so I would also want to argue that the detection of tropological underpinnings in a given text is itself an incomplete operation, and that tropes are themselves the signs and symptoms of a hidden or buried narrative. So it is at least with what we have been describing as the trope of modernity, with its various vanishing mediators. We may therefore wish to draw the conclusion that

2. Modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category.

In that case, we will not only wish to abandon the vain attempt to formulate a conceptual account of modernity as

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such; but we will find ourselves likely to wonder whether the modernity effect is perhaps not best reserved exclusively for the rewriting of moments of the past, which is to say of previously existing versions or narratives of the past. To eschew all uses of modernity in our analyses of the present, let alone our prognoses of the future, would certainly offer one effective way of discrediting a certain number of (ideological) narratives of modernity. But there are other ways of achieving that aim as well.

It is probably well to begin with that moment that has always been taken as the epitome of the absolute beginning, namely that of Descartes and the cogito. It is certainly an appearance systematically fostered by the philosopher himself, who anticipates Schelling's formula by a wholesale public repudiation of the past in general: 'je quittai entièrement l'étude des lettres',²⁶ which is to say, I stopped reading books altogether. This not altogether veracious statement combines with another happy incident, namely, the state of non-discipleship in which his failure to find or choose a single master²⁷ left the kind of intellectual void or blank slate given a kind of corporeal analogy in the experiment at the beginning of the Third Meditation: 'I will now close my eyes, stop up my ears, withdraw all my senses [from their objects], I will even erase the images of physical things from my thought', etcetera.²⁸ The result of this well-nigh phenomenological epochē will then be that consciousness in which the cogito rises. It has been astutely observed (many times!) that a consciousness that requires such elaborate preparations and systematic negations can scarcely be considered to be a primary phenomenon or reality. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it is, in reality as well as in its concept, a construction: a term that will shortly put us on the path of Heidegger's thrilling reinterpretation.

First, however, we need to say something about the cogito

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as a representation, and as a representation of consciousness or subjectivity at that. For it is on the strength of this representation that Descartes has so often been taken to be the inaugurator of that subject/object split which constitutes modernity as such and from which we all allegedly continue to suffer today. This is indeed no doubt the meaning of the paradoxical fact that Descartes is not only the founder of modern philosophical idealism, he is also the founder of modern philosophical materialism as well. (We will return to his materialism, and his 'scientific method', later in Part I.) Yet to put it in any of these ways is to assume that modern discussions of subjectivity (if not the latter's experience) spring from Descartes; which is to say that in some fashion, with Descartes, we should be able to witness the emergence of the subject, or in other words, of the Western subject, that is to say, the modern subject as such, the subject of modernity.

Yet we could witness such an emergence only if we had some representation of what thereby emerged. It is precisely this I want to place in doubt: for we only seem to have a name for this state of consciousness, unless it is that rather different and even more peculiar thing, a name for this event which is the coming to consciousness. It is a very peculiar name indeed, reminding us of those archaic and allegorical personifications who wander about carrying their identification written on their back: 'I think', or 'cogito'. But a name is not a representation, and one might even conjecture that, in this case, it is the substitute and as it were the 'placeholder' (the Lacanian *tenant-lieu*) for such a representation, about which it only remains to conclude that it must be impossible in the first place. There are any number of reasons why consciousness should be pronounced to be unrepresentable. Colin McGinn's suggestive volume reminds us, about

the empiricist dictum ‘nothing in the mind that was not previously in the senses’, that what we call consciousness was certainly never in the senses.²⁹ Meanwhile, Kant famously pronounced the subject to be a noumenon rather than a phenomenon; which means by definition that consciousness, as a thing-in-itself, cannot be represented, inasmuch as it is what representations are represented to and for. From there to the Lacanian position on the subject – Žižek dramatizes it as an ‘include me out!’³⁰ – it is but a step; and Lacan usefully reminds us that, after the abandonment of the *Entwurf*, Freud resolutely bracketed the problem of consciousness as such and systematically left it outside his problematic.³¹

We may also return to the matter from a different angle by observing that, whatever the force of such arguments, the cogito is most often taken to be a representation anyway, and that that representation itself is most often described as a point, insofar as the latter is something without dimension or extension.³² Indeed, we might want to include location in this account as well, for it is the disembodied location in space of the point that also seems to capture something of consciousness’s situatedness in the world, while at the same time it denies itself any even symbolic reification, any type of substantiality about which one could affirm this or that property or trait. But this confronts us with a dialectical outcome in which the emergent subject is somehow generated out of the space of the object world, and becomes describable (pure location) only when the space of the latter has been reorganized into pure homogeneous extension. Or if you prefer, consciousness and the subject are representable only by way of the indirection of the object world, and of the moment of an object world itself historically produced at that. Now what is modern about the cogito turned out to

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be, not subjectivity, but extension; and if there is any causality at all in this attempt at an absolute beginning, it is then the object that constitutes the subject over against itself, along with its own distance from that subject and vice versa (the famous subject/object split): but that object is in any case the outcome of a specific historical process (that of the universal production of homogeneous space). But where does this last come from? And how to imagine an absolute beginning, a kind of primal rupture, in which subject and object possess equal rights of causality? The mythologies of the German ‘idealist’ philosophers (Fichte and Schelling) tried to reconceptualize such beginnings,³³ about which to be sure only primal myths offer any representational hints. But *muthos* in Greek means narrative or story; and I would therefore prefer to conclude that this version of modernity’s absolute beginning is also a narrative than to fall back on the sceptical and unproductive formula that it is simply a myth.

But perhaps this is the moment to examine Heidegger’s version of this particular beginning, in which we would indeed be hard put to assign priority to either subject or object; in which each side produces the other by producing itself at one and the same time – subject and object resulting from this initial act of positing through separation, of separating through positing. In fact we here touch on the narrative problem posed by any form of relationship, about which and virtually by definition and in advance we are obligated to do equal justice to the difference between two things at the same time that we affirm their unity within the relationship, no matter how momentary and ephemeral that may be.

Heidegger’s ‘solution’³⁴ – an immensely influential one which may be said to have influenced all the newer theories of ideology in the 1960s (or in so-called poststructuralism)

from *Tel quel* to film theory – turns on a characteristic wordplay (related to his notorious folk etymologies), namely a segmentation of the German word for representation (*Vorstellung*). For, to anticipate, the notion of representation is itself Heidegger's solution: for him it means exactly the same thing as the subject/object split; only the word 'representation' underscores the mutual interaction of these two poles while the other formula separates them by giving each a separate name, namely subject on the one hand and object on the other.

But how does representation come to serve as the key for the interpretation of the Cartesian cogito? It is very simple: Heidegger brings to bear the immense weight of his classical learning – so palpable in his stunning readings of the philosophical texts of the tradition – on a lexical point. On contextual evidence,³⁵ he wants us to agree that 'thinking' is too narrow and restricted a reading of 'cogitare', and that it is precisely by 'representation' that this crucial verb must be rendered. But now 'representation' – the German *Vorstellung* – must be deployed and put through its paces: its combined sections convey the meaning of a placing something before us, of a positioning of the putative object in such a way that it is reorganized around its being perceived. *Vorstellen*, the equivalent of the Cartesian *per-cipere*, designates for Heidegger the process of bringing a thing before one's self, and thereby *imagining* it (the German word is the same), perceiving it, thinking or intuiting it, or as Heidegger puts it, 'etwas in Besitz nehmen', taking possession of it.³⁶ On this reading of *Vorstellung*, the *esse* of the object is its *percipi*; provided one adds the proviso that then in that case the object did not previously exist in that form at all; but also that this is not an idealist formulation and the object is not here reduced to my 'idea' of the object, since as yet no perceiving subject

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exists (we will come to the emergence of a subject pole in representation in a moment).

The more contemporary and postmodern slogan of construction will make all this clearer: what Heidegger calls representation is a way of constructing the object in a specific way. We may trace the Heideggerian influence up to the present day in order to identify a privileged example of the construction of an object in representation: this is perspective, in painting and then in the related ideological analysis of film theory.³⁷ Perspective clearly reconstructs the object as a phenomenon, in Kant's sense, as an object perceptible and conceptualizable for us. To claim, as Heidegger sometimes does, that the era of representation is also the reign of Western metaphysical subjectivism does not mean that the object in perspective is merely a figment, an idea for me, a projection or a product of my own subjectivity. It merely offers a certain construction of the real among other conceivable ones (and the representational object of perspective in painting is also very much, for Heidegger, the object of modern scientific experimentation).

But what is the purpose of this construction? Nothing less, Heidegger tells us, than the construction of *certainty*;³⁸ and as every reader of Descartes knows, this can only be achieved by way of a preliminary construction of *doubt*. The undoubtedness of Cartesian certainty – *fundamentum absolutum inconcussum veritatis* – can only come about by the systematic dispelling of a doubt which one must therefore produce in advance and marshal. It is only by way of this newly achieved certainty that a new conception of truth as correctness can emerge historically; or in other words, that something like 'modernity' can make its appearance.

Yet where is the subject and 'subjectification' to be found in this process? The reading proposes two further textual

steps: the first is the alternate Cartesian formula of a *cogito me cogitare*,³⁹ which seems to lay in place a rather conventional idea of self-consciousness (a term Heidegger himself uses approvingly). But in the context of a construction of the object by representation, this self that seems automatically to accompany the cogito and the focus on the represented object must also be grasped as a construction. The best way to make this point is to underscore the illusions generated by a substantive like 'self', which suggests something like a person or a 'me' located within and behind the whole process of perception. What Heidegger's model suggests, however, is rather a purely formal account of this emergence of the subject: the construction of the object of representation as perceptible formally opens a place from which that perception is supposed to take place: it is this structural or formal place, and not any kind of substance or essence, which is the subject. And this is indeed the sense in which the later critiques of representation denounce perspective and related structures as being ideological in and of themselves, without the intervention of subjective opinions and the ideological 'positions' of an individual. But this is also the sense in which, in Heidegger's narrative, the object may be said to produce the subject (rather than, as with the *fiat* of a Fichte or a Schelling, the other way round).

And then there is the matter of the troublesome 'ergo', about which Descartes himself had already insisted that it had nothing to do with a logical conclusion or the movement of a syllogism in Aristotelian logic. For as Heidegger points out, the assertion of being is already at one with the process of representation, since this new metaphysics reorganizes our very categories of Being itself, which is now identified as representation: *Sein ist Vorgestelltheit*.⁴⁰ In that case, *ergo*

does not so much mean ‘therefore’, as in a logical conclusion, but rather something like ‘that is to say’.

This account of the emergence of modernity as representation truly seems to offer us ‘a history without a subject or a telos’⁴¹ and in that sense may well be preferred to any number of vapid humanist just-so stories. (The alleged convergence of the Heideggerian narrative – *Vorstellung* as *Herrschaft* – with the Frankfurt School conception of ‘instrumental reason’ does tend to lower these standards and to generate a more conventional ‘culture critique’.) But before drawing more specific lessons for any doctrine of modernity, we need to examine the account as a narrative. Is self-creation, in other words, a narrative? Is this unique and somehow self-creating event – the production of the subject by the object and the object reciprocally by the subject – a genuine story, a kind of historical narrative, or instead little more than a myth in the privative sense of an uncaused event without a narrative context?

In fact, however, we have withheld that context until now. It is this context alone that secures the essential modernity of the Cartesian cogito, since it alone allows us to read that seemingly absolute act as a gesture of liberation, and very precisely as an emancipation from that very context itself. The reference is the conventional one which sees the Cartesian moment as a break with medieval scholasticism and indeed with a theological world in general (which, as the eponymous essay directs us, it would be wrong to characterize as a ‘world picture’ or ‘world view’, since those secular terms really only apply to modernity itself).⁴²

But the narrative of the break enables Heidegger to set in place as it were the pre-history of the motif of certainty, and to specify its uses in Descartes as a function of the role it

played in the previous system, where it meant the certainty of salvation. It is then this that allows us to read the Cartesian gesture of liberation in a narrative way:

. . . this liberation, although without knowing it, is always still freeing itself from being bound by the revelational truth in which the salvation of man's soul is made certain and is guaranteed for him. Hence liberation *from* the revelational certainty of salvation had to be intrinsically a freeing *to* a certainty [*Gewissheit*] in which man makes secure for himself the true as the known of his own knowing [*Wissens*]. That was possible only through self-liberating man's guaranteeing for himself the certainty of the knowable. Such a thing could happen, however, only insofar as man decided, by himself and for himself, what, for him, should be 'knowable' and what knowing and the making secure of the known, i.e., certainty, should mean. Descartes's metaphysical task became the following: to create the metaphysical foundation for the freeing of man to freedom as the self-determination that is certain of itself. That foundation, however, had not only to be itself one that was certain, but since every standard of measure from any other sphere was forbidden, it had at the same time to be of such a kind that through it the essence of the freedom claimed would be posited as self-certainty. And yet everything that is certain from out of itself must at the same time concomitantly make secure as certain that being for which such certain knowing must be certain and through which everything knowable must be made secure. The *fundamentum*, the ground of that freedom, that which lies at its foundation, the *subiectum*, must be something certain that satisfies the essential demands just mentioned. A *subiectum* distinguished in all these respects becomes necessary.⁴³

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We can now specify the two modes of Heidegger's narrative of modernity. In the first mode, a feature that had a specific function in the first historical system – in this case, the 'certainty' of salvation – is abstracted from that context, in which alone it had a functional content, and transferred to a new system, where it is endowed with an altogether different function. It is a model we will encounter again (in Foucault and Althusser) as a more overt attempt to account for the transition from one mode of production to another. Heidegger wants to insist as well on the insufficiency of narratives that posit simple continuities (he expressly singles out the unsatisfactory notion of 'secularization'⁴⁴), and also on what we have called the second mode of the narrative in question, namely that of the survival and persistence of residual elements belonging to the older system: in this case the well-known medieval features still present in Descartes's language:

Here we have the most palpable example of earlier metaphysics impeding a new beginning for metaphysical thought. A historiological report on the meaning and nature of Descartes' doctrine is forced to establish such results. A historical meditation on the inquiry proper, however, must strive to think Descartes' principles and concepts in the sense he himself wanted them to have, even if in so doing it should prove necessary to translate his assertions into a different 'language'.⁴⁵

It is this insistence on the systemic character of the thoughts in question – the radical difference between Descartes and his theological 'predecessors', the relative continuity between the new Cartesian system and Nietzsche's apparent break with it – that marks Heidegger as a thinker of periodization.

We will confront the structural problems of such periodizing narratives shortly.

At this point, however, it is necessary to draw some conclusions from this investigation of the cogito and its modernity. But here Heidegger's characteristic language will cause us some initial problems and confusions: by the word traditionally rendered in English as representation (*Vorstellung*) he means, as we have seen, a whole (metaphysical) process of reorganizing the world and producing a new category of being under the sign of epistemology. Descartes's cogito is then the first symptom of this global transformation which makes up the essence of Heidegger's theory of modernity: it is the word for a new rearrangement of subject and object in a specific relationship of knowledge (and even domination) towards each other: the object coming to be only as it is known or represented, the subject only as it becomes the locus and the vehicle for such representation.

However, the traditional reading of the cogito is as the quintessence of consciousness itself, indeed as its representation in the sense of a rather different German word, *Darstellung*, which brings overtones of the theatrical and the scenic. My argument has been that in that sense the cogito is a failure, because consciousness cannot be represented at all; and the accounts of the cogito in terms of luminous dots without extension go a long way, in their figural impoverishment, towards making the point. Whatever it means as an operation and a construction, therefore, the cogito must be read as some first and still unequalled attempt to *render* consciousness as such (using Henry James's term for artistic representation), to convey this unique object in its purity. If so, it then necessarily also has the meaning of the failure of all such attempts, and their impossibility; and we must draw another lesson from it, namely that – in that sense of

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Darstellung – consciousness, as an experience, as what we are all the time, cannot be represented; cannot be an object of representation. Consciousness is unrepresentable, along with the lived experience of subjectivity itself (which is not to say that the ego or personal identity cannot be represented: it is in any case already an object and a representation; as is the structure of the Unconscious which Freud and his followers mapped out allegorically).

But there follows a momentous consequence from all this in the area of theories of modernity: namely that henceforth no theory of modernity in terms of subjectivity can be accepted. For if no representations of consciousness are possible, then it becomes evident that theories that attempt to locate and describe modernity in terms of shifts and changes in consciousness are equally vitiated. For the most part, of course, the theories denounce themselves: and it is easy enough to identify pop-psychological accounts of cultural change (narcissism, the weakening of the Oedipus complex, momism, the death of God or paternal authority, etcetera, etcetera) as so much ideological fodder. But three of the more august conceptions of modernism and its subjectivity do seem to remain firmly fixed in place; and it then becomes useful to single them out and to denounce them. In particular, one has the feeling that the notion that modernity is at one with some unique type of Western freedom is still very much with us. Yet by this notion of freedom is certainly meant something subjective and a fundamental modification of consciousness as such. What it was before that is less often said, although one can assume that the otherness of the pre-modern must necessarily go hand in hand with unfreeness, obedience, and the subjection of a slave mentality and an irredeemably subaltern life-stance. (Thus 'free' imperceptibly modulates into 'bourgeois'.)

At this point in the classical celebration of modernity, however, a second characterization generally intervenes, and that is the idea of individuality. Modern people are individuals, and what is unfree about the others is then obviously enough their lack of individuality. But it should be clear that individuality is also an illicit representation of consciousness as such: it purports to characterize the inner climate of the liberated individual and his (sic!) relationship to his own being and his own death as well as to other people. When this second characterization begins to break down – it is not so easy to invent plausible descriptions of the inner atmosphere of something so unfigurable as consciousness – then the third option is grasped for.

That option involves the evocation of modernity in terms of self-consciousness or reflexivity: here then we suddenly seem to have reached a philosophically more viable concept under which both the attributes of freedom and of individuality can be argued. For it is easier to say of some ‘pre-modern person’ that he is conscious but not self-conscious in the Western philosophical sense than to assert that he is not an individual: as for freedom, the slippage of its acceptance from a metaphysical to a social or political attribute makes its non-ideological deployment a particularly delicate operation.

Yet if consciousness cannot be represented, how much the more must this be so for self-consciousness, which is normally imagined to be a kind of doubling of consciousness itself (but the figures for this new entity – mirrors, equations, reflected light, etcetera, – are even more flimsy than the cogito’s initial ‘point’). In fact, it should be obvious that if traditionally it was supposed to be a fundamental philosophical problem whether you could tell that other people were conscious or not – think only of Descartes’s own automata⁴⁶ – it will be even more difficult to decide whether the attribute

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of self-consciousness can safely be assigned to them. I therefore feel that it is justified to frame some new or third maxim, according to which we assert that

3. The narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity (consciousness and subjectivity are unrepresentable).

This proposition preserves much of the spirit of the anti-humanism of the 1960s and of the 'poststructuralist' critique of the subject (or of the centred subject, by which was meant none other than our old friend the cogito or consciousness). Yet even after this linguistic turn, as it is sometimes called, and the various theoretical and philosophical proposals for some radical decentring of subjectivity and consciousness, it seems to have proved very difficult to shed the older habits and to give such categories up. Thus, the omnipresent notion of reflexivity needs to be unmasked as little more than a code word for self-consciousness (however non-anthropomorphic its context may seem to be): indeed, the theme of self-reference or indexing is as we shall see central to one of the most ambitious philosophical and sociological oeuvres of our time, that of Niklas Luhmann. Meanwhile the multitudinous theories of language and communication today mostly tend to perpetuate such older philosophies of subjectivity under their scientific guises: one can be sure, whenever the slogan of intersubjectivity arises, that one is still in an essentially humanist discursive world.

Nonetheless the status of the maxim in question does demand a specific clarification: it is not to be understood as an ontological proposition, that is, it does not affirm that no such thing as subjectivity exists. It is rather a proposition about the limits of representation as such, and means simply to assert that we have no way of talking about subjectivity

or consciousness that is not already somehow figural: those words are indeed themselves pre-eminently figurations and buried or forgotten metaphors if, as Nietzsche urged, we follow them far enough back into history.⁴⁷ But who says figuration evokes a failure of representation: a figure is always necessarily a substitute, a second-best, an admission of linguistic and expressive defeat (from which defeat, to be sure, poetic language itself emerges). But I would not want this diagnosis of failure to be understood to entail the additional consequence that all such figurations of subjectivity are necessarily false, let alone incorrect (or even untrue). I'm not sure what that could mean in a situation in which there is no literal language and in which every possibility was always figural to begin with.

Yet in fact our pessimistic third maxim does not leave us in the midst of some impenetrable Wittgensteinian silence in which nothing can any longer be said. On the contrary, it merely excises a certain number (a rather considerable number!) of 'culture critiques' which prove to be ideological through and through and whose intents, when more closely examined, are almost always very doubtful indeed. But this does not mean that we cannot tell the narrative of modernity at all.

In fact, Heidegger's own narrative of the process – however ideological it may turn out to be in its own right – has some methodological lessons for us. In particular, we need to note the coexistence in it of two temporalities: there is the internal temporality of representation, of the subject-object split (or difference-and-identity) as that rises into being like a self-caused event; and then there is an external temporality (that of the theme of certainty) in which a theological or medieval conception of the certainty of salvation overlaps the emergence of the new system for one last moment and

coexists with it long enough to allow the function of certainty to pass from the outgoing structure into the new one, in some wholly different form. What has happened here is that a rather mythic narrative of the event that is a cause of itself has been grounded in a narrative situation or set of preconditions in which the emergence can be plausibly told in narrative form. This is not a matter of old-fashioned causality any more, of the type that plagued old-fashioned intellectual history as it attempted to decide between antecedents and genealogies, predecessors and family likenesses. Perhaps Althusser's notion of structural causality is more appropriate (we will return to it below). The movement is rather the one charted by Hegel in his *Logic* from a dialectic of oppositions to the emergence of a 'ground' or *Grund* (which also means 'cause' or 'reason for').⁴⁸ We will have occasion to look into other versions of this peculiar structure, about which it suffices now to say, that any theory of modernity must both affirm its absolute novelty as a break and at one and the same time its integration into a context from which it can be posited as breaking.

The word for this structure – promoted into a properly philosophical discourse first by Jaspers and then by Sartre – is the word 'situation', a narrative term that attempts to square this particular circle and to hold its contradictory features of belonging and innovation together within itself. We will then want to affirm, as a further qualification of our maxim, that one can only tell a given narrative of modernity in terms of its situation, or better still, completing the formula, that

3. The narrative of modernity cannot be organized around categories of subjectivity; consciousness and subjectivity are unrepresentable; only situations of modernity can be narrated.

Unfortunately, we do not get rid of Heidegger as easily as that; and on closer examination we discover a conceptual or formal embarrassment we failed to acknowledge during the previous discussion. It is that Heidegger has at least two theories of modernity. That, in a pinch, one could resolve by talking about his evolution, his various ‘turns’, the multiple models within his thought, and so forth. I prefer to put it in a different way, namely that in Heidegger there is not one modern break, but rather at least two.

Indeed, alongside the Cartesian break of representation and the emergence of the epistemological ‘world picture’, with its stark opposition between subject and object, there persists an older break, which we may call the Roman or Imperial break. Here we have to do with the loss of the Greek experience of Being as this is reflected in the reification of Greek thinking when it is appropriated by the Roman mentality through translation into Latin (and it should be remembered that for Heidegger Greek and German are comparable in their authenticity – freedom from the contamination of other languages, and etymological closeness to some original experience of Being). Reification (although perhaps as a term the very example of what it designates) is then not an inappropriate or anachronistic word for the translation process, insofar as Heidegger’s first illustration charts the transformation of the presence of beings into what

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it would not be too fanciful to describe as the 'reified things' of the Roman empire (*res, ens*):

These names are not arbitrary. Something that can no longer be shown here speaks in them, the basic Greek experience of the being of entities in the sense of presence [*Anwesenheit*]. By these designations, however, the interpretation of the thingness of the thing that henceforth becomes standard is founded, and the Western interpretation of the being of entities is established. The process begins with the appropriation of Greek words by Roman-Latin thought. 'Hypokeimenon' becomes *subiectum*; 'hypostasis' becomes *substantia*; 'symbebēkos' becomes *accidens*. This translation of Greek names into the Latin language is in no way the inconsequential process it is taken to be even today. Beneath the apparently literal and thus faithful translation there is concealed, rather, a translation of Greek experience into a different kind of thinking. *Roman thought appropriates the Greek words without the corresponding experience, equally original, of what they say, without the Greek word.* The groundlessness of Western thought begins with this translation.⁴⁹

It is certain that for Heidegger Roman conceptual reification is the beginning of a 'metaphysical' process that is still very much with us (as the survival of the Latin terms on into the European vernacular languages testifies). A certain modernity begins with the Roman appropriation and transformation, itself infused with domination and leading on into the catastrophes of modern Western history.⁵⁰ The very broad periodization of 'Western metaphysics' (which is perhaps Derrida's greatest philosophical debt to a figure who clearly both fascinates and repels him) is laid in place by this particular historical narrative. Is it inconsistent with the Descartes-oriented theory of modernity as representation

that we have outlined above? This is very much an interpretive choice: and to be reified about it, one might argue that Heidegger's Descartes merely adds a reified subject to the reified Roman object world. Still, this makes two breaks rather than one, and allows us to return to theories of modernity generally with some interesting suspicions.

(Nor is any of this simplified by the postwar emergence of yet another possible break, a third one. Heidegger's conception of technology is certainly far more ideological than either of these two earlier philosophical theories; but it would seem to mark an even more dramatic version of modernity and its emergence, not merely with its pessimistic and well-nigh apocalyptic overtones, but also with its very premise: namely, the complication of the relationship of representation between subject and object in the older theory by way of the addition of a new relay, namely the enigmatic *Gestell* in which what has been translated as a kind of 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*) enables energy to be stored up for later use.⁵¹ This reusable excess or remainder (of the original act of exchange) is very much like that original surplus from which the earliest forms of political power derive; it may even be comparable to the (far more complex) Marxian analysis of capital itself. Yet as a culture critique and a philosophical concept it does not seem immediately reconcilable with the earlier critique of representation (although it certainly has its family likeness with the latter); nor does Heidegger himself attempt such a reconciliation. In that case, we have three breaks, three moments of the emergence of modernity, three narratives of the process, rather than a single one.)

Heidegger's multiplication is not an isolated instance; we have therefore some interest in examining this strange periodizing proliferation in another writer (distantly inspired by

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Heidegger), for whom the act of periodization is now the central preoccupation and the fundamental interpretive gesture: I mean Michel Foucault, and in particular the Foucault of *Les Mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), which may certainly be said to offer a history, as well as a theory, of modernity.

It will be remembered that Foucault's monumental archaeology is organized around four historical moments. The first is a kind of pre-modern moment, in which elements of the medieval are combined with the more superstitious features of the Renaissance to convey a timeless mythical world in which reality is a book or text that its interpreters read. It is a text organized around microscopic and macroscopic resemblances (conventia, aemulatio, analogy and sympathy),⁵² in which the predominance of grotesque catalogues and encyclopedias, bestiaries, fantastic histories, is not to be thought of as error or superstition in any modern sense, but only reflects a radically different kind of interest, focus and attention: an interest in 'everything that has been *seen* or *heard*, everything that has been *narrated*, either by nature or by men, by language of the world, by tradition or by the poets'.⁵³ These luminous pages form a kind of anteroom to the history proper, which begins at once as we shall see with modernity: in this world of figures and resemblances, of echoes and signatures, there is as yet no 'real' history (in the modern sense), and therefore questions about causality, beginnings and scope have no purchase here. To denounce the rest of the narrative as Eurocentric is to overlook this mythic, well-nigh African universe that precedes it; to ask how classical Greece fits in here, or China, or India, is to ask false questions.

We are entitled to raise such questions as soon as Western modernity begins: about what we are calling the second

period or moment, for example – that moment of what Foucault calls ‘representation’ (not at all in Heidegger’s sense), and what he also calls the ‘classical period’ (following a French usage that may seem parochial to the other national traditions), namely the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We are then even explicitly authorized to raise the historical question about our third period, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, insofar as this period is itself the very moment of the invention of modern history as such, the moment of historicism, vitalism and humanism, and of the construction of the so-called human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). As for what I am calling the fourth period, this is a shadowy and prophetic realm, a realm of language and death, which lives in the interstices of our own modernity as its negation and denial: a realm nourished by structuralism but in no way premonitory of postmodernism, since virtually by definition it cannot itself be realized as a separate historical period, yet one whose Utopian promise, very much like Heidegger’s, lies in the disappearance from it of anthropomorphism and humanism, of Heideggerian ‘representation’, such that, famously, ‘man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’.⁵⁴

Neither the first or the fourth of these moments, therefore, can technically be called a historical period. For that very reason they are most instructive about the way in which periodization necessarily constructs a frame around itself, and builds on the basis of a subtle interplay between two forms of negation, the contrary and the contradictory, between differentiation and outright opposition, between the locally distinguished and the absolute negation, antagonistic and non-antagonistic, the non- and the anti-. In this sense, the first, Renaissance world would seem to constitute a universe of the non-modern, while the last moment, the

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underside of humanism, can be taken to be its radical negation or the pre-eminently anti-modern (which unlike the postmodern somehow remains modern in its very denial and resistance, its aesthetic indeed coming to seem the very quintessence of modernism, rather than a break from it). At any rate we may register some first production of non- and anti-modern spaces which is part and parcel of the very positing or affirmation of modernity as such.

Our basic concern here, however, has to do with the positing of two moments of the modern as such: namely our second and third moments, which alone can properly be described as historical periods. And here, even though the periodization is the traditional French one, it seems to me the other national traditions have their own rough equivalents (substitute Luther for Descartes in the German tradition, or Bacon in the English one), and that the double standard of the two moments or versions of modernity – the scientific one of the seventeenth century, the industrial one of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – is a doxa so widely held as to be largely commonsensical and unchallenged. But that lack of ideological vigilance simply reflects a slippage back into empirical history: what could be more normal, after all, than a historiography that puts Galileo before the steam engine, that enumerates merchant capital and commerce first and industrial capitalism only after that, that sees the various moments, in other words, as so many stages or progressions within the same process? The merit of Foucault (and his interest for us here) is then evidently to assign these moments to radically different historical systems, and to turn that very succession or progression into a historiographic and even a philosophical problem.

This is the moment to say something more about the Foucauldian break, so central to his whole philosophical

ideology, with its insistence on the message of discontinuity and its attacks on the continuities of humanist historiography (whether in the 'history of ideas' or in the 'stages' of the Stalinist dialectical materialism or evolutionism, which Foucault so often confused with Marxism *tout court*). These breaks – which Foucault inherited from Althusser's inheritance of Bachelard's famous 'coupure épistémologique' – are the very content of Foucault's vision of history (to use another reprehensibly humanist expression) and up to the very end (and the seemingly more humanist and mellow reflections on the self), each break officially posited seems to bring a flurry of new ones in its wake, as though in fear of eventual totalizations. For along with the breaks comes the insistence on the merely partial and incomplete, never-to-be-completed or totalized object of study: here for example Foucault wishes to stress the seemingly random and arbitrarily selected nature of his ostensible objects of study, namely language, life and labour (or in the older system, signs, natural history and riches), or, from some contemporary disciplinary standpoint, linguistics, biology and economics. (This insistence on partial sets then conveniently serves to distract us from the cunning formal symmetries and effects Foucault will derive from this selection.)

But what also needs to be stressed is that along with the ostentatiously anti-totalizing gesture, Foucault here proceeds in a profoundly dialectical manner. For one way in which the dialectic can be defined is as a conceptual coordination of incommensurabilities. Our first-level processes of abstraction, in other words, produce universals under which are ranged phenomena that exhibit similar or even identical dynamics and laws: such are the abstractions of traditional logic, and traditionally the relationship between universals and particulars, genus and species, concepts and exemplars,

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have been thought of in this way as a collecting and a grouping of identities. With Hegel, however, the problem arises of the coordination of analogous phenomena that have wholly different internal dynamics and laws. The fundamental conceptual shock here comes from the discovery of the mode of production in the eighteenth century by the Scottish Enlightenment;⁵⁵ here we have an abstraction or a universal – the mode of production, as the organization and reproduction of any social formation whatsoever – each of the embodiments of which has its own unique inner dynamics and structure which are incomparable with any other, the inner laws of tribal society or feudalism, for example, operating in a wholly different way than those of capitalism. Meanwhile, as the structural elements or constituents of each mode of production are determined by their function, we cannot abstract them from either and assume simple equivalences between them from one mode to another: to grasp each element, such as this or that technology, or gold and currency, or property laws, we must first refer back to the totality of which they are functioning parts. The dialectic is thus proposed as a kind of new language strategy, in which both identity and difference are given their due in advance and systematically played off against each other (in ways that for non- or pre-dialectical thought will seem to break the law of non-contradiction). Thus even the term ‘mode of production’ is an abuse since the phenomena ranged under it are virtually by definition utterly unlike and indeed incommensurable. But the dialectic comes into being as an attempt to hold these contradictory features of structural analogy and the radical internal differences in dynamic and in historical causality together within the framework of a single thought or language.

But this is precisely what Foucault finds himself very self-

consciously doing; and indeed his moments or epistemes – which are alleged to describe only the historical systems of what counts as knowledge – function very much like modes of production in the older sense. This means that the classical and the humanist moments – the moment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century representation and that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century vitalism and evolutionism – not only have radically different, indeed, incomparable inner structures, but also obey utterly different laws of causality. In our present context this means that the breaks between them, the transitions and the reconstructions, the passage on to new systems, will also not be comparable: but to pose a different type of historical causality for each such break is to demand a kind of thinking that only the dialectic can offer.

Yet as has been observed in passing, we must also acknowledge that Foucault cheats a bit in order to bring his *tour de force* off; and indeed his three levels or zones of reality – he calls them ‘systems of elements’, ‘codes of a culture’, or forms of ‘order’⁵⁶ – constitute the guiding thread or identity on which the radical historical changes can be rung and against which the mutations from one moment to another can be registered. Thus, in that first ‘modernity’ which is Foucault’s second or classical moment, we are asked to isolate three sectors or forms of knowledge which are those designated by the terms ‘riches’, ‘natural history’, and ‘signs’. These three sectors of reality are then demonstrated to be homologous, in the way in which each is organized around a static tableau, as most strikingly in the tables of the various zoological species. Time and history here take the form of a meditation on origins, as witnessed by the centrality of etymologies; and the crucial act of knowledge is found in the linguistic proposition, which affirms the

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relationship between noun or name (the same word covers both in French) and thing.

About this extraordinary account, we have now to ask, first, how such a system comes into being: or in other words, how is this first break, between the pre-modern and this modern (the moment of Galileo and Descartes, of the Port-Royal Grammar, of Newton, indeed of the *Encyclopédie*), to be conceptualized (or narrated)? A disquisition on *Don Quixote* is offered in place of an answer to this question, which however clearly turns on the ‘sundering of similitude from the sign’.⁵⁷

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, during the period that has been termed, rightly or wrongly, the Baroque, thought ceases to move in the element of resemblance. Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion of error, the danger to which one exposes oneself when one does not examine the obscure region of confusions. ‘It is a frequent habit,’ says Descartes, in the first lines of his *Regulae*, ‘when we discover several resemblances between two things, to attribute to both equally, even on points in which they are in reality different, that which we have recognized to be true of only one of them.’ The age of resemblance is drawing to a close. It is leaving nothing behind it but games.⁵⁸

We may therefore imagine this transition as one in which the weakening of the omnipresent power of resemblance releases hitherto bound elements – such as the ‘sign’ – around which in time a whole new system will form. The other breaks or transitions in Foucault are more generously characterized: yet this one nonetheless allows us to make a preliminary observation about the transitional process in general in *Les Mots et les choses*. I am tempted to say that

in Foucault such breaks or transitions are neither conceptualized nor are they represented: a general scheme is laid in place, namely that the old system breaks up, and among its ruins (as in Piranesi's eighteenth-century views of classical Rome) a new system forms which has nothing to do with its predecessor. The latter does not figure in the former's genealogy, nor is it in any way the agent of its destruction. Indeed, causality seems to be absent from these purely structural descriptions, and this is why I have concluded that they are not conceptualized, and that Foucault does not offer us a theory of change or transition exactly. Rather, it seems to me that he gives us the elements with which to form our own representations of the processes (something I have largely done above, under the cautionary verb 'to imagine'). He does not himself offer full representations, rather his characteristic multiplicity of figures nudges us in this direction, while withholding any definitive figure of his own devising. It is a procedure that certainly causes us to wonder whether there is something fundamentally unrepresentable about such moments of radical structural change, of the break or the transition, in the first place.

Two other brief observations are worth making about this first or classical moment of modernity. Its episteme, which in other areas (such as physics and astronomy) certainly counts as what we would today recognize as knowledge, can at the very least, even in the three today-outmoded areas in question (value, animal species and grammar), and in particular by contrast with the situation that precedes it, be said to constitute a framework in which – 'for the first time' – meaning as such emerges.

The other point to be made is that consciousness has no place in the classical system (it should be noted that Foucault here reduces Descartes to a footnote, just as he does with

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that ‘minor Ricardian’ Marx in the next historical system): it is a tabulation within which elements of the human are distributed here and there, but which does not – unlike our next historical moment – make ‘man’ the measure of all things (here Foucault sharply diverges from Heidegger’s account, which we have outlined above).

But this systemic absence is precisely what lends Foucault’s narrative its polemic force: for the account of the third moment – that of the invention of History, that of evolutionism in biology, of Marxism in economics, and of the great linguistic tradition of Bopp and Grimm – is something like an anti-humanist pamphlet, despite the fullness of scholarly detail. But here the nature of the transition (or the break between the classical and the historicist moment) is much more fully developed; and Foucault’s figuration is far more pronounced. I will summarize it briefly: the catastrophe that strikes the system of representation is the weakening and disappearance of homology, or in other words, of the structural parallelism that held the three levels together. We may note that there is a sense in which this disappearance is merely an intensification of what happened in the first transition: there it was resemblance that was weakened (and then logically absorbed into various local operations); now it is that form of structural resemblance called homology whose binding power is loosened and discredited. In this sense it is as though the movement of the historical narrative can also serve as a defence of Foucault’s valorization of the break, the discontinuity of radical Difference (and perhaps even of the dissolving power of Thanatos) as opposed to Identity, resemblance, sameness, continuity and the like.

Simultaneously with this dissolution – but one cannot say whether it is exactly to be grasped as an effect of the latter – there takes place an autonomization of the three areas. Each

begins to develop into a system in its own right, and the three slowly begin to move away from each other: it is a well-nigh geological process, and conveyed by the image of tectonics: layers of older continents shift and move apart, resulting in new land masses and the overlap of unstable plates, themselves doomed to further lawful and yet incomprehensible and unpredictable slippage. Meanwhile the distance between these three land masses will play a significant role in the new nineteenth-century developments.

Yet there is something of a sleight of hand in Foucault's rhetoric of difference and autonomization here: for it is clear enough, and on his own account, that the three new areas of linguistics, economics and biology have much in common with each other; and that that 'much' (which remains the homology between them) can be summed up in the word 'historicism', in particular as it is crystallized in various evolutionary theories (whether of economic crisis and development, sound change in linguistic history, or Darwinism itself). Oddly, however, Foucault does not take historicism on directly (to assign it to a specific historical system is already to deprive it of its truth claim), but rather focuses on its other face which is that of humanism and the emergence of a concept of 'man' or of human nature.

But this is precisely not a form of knowledge: it emerges in the interstices between the three positive forms of knowledge under investigation here. Human nature (and the various *Geisteswissenschaften* and humanist ideologies that accompany it) is something like the gap between them and the attempt to fill that gap as well and to construct a complete metaphysical system. We can say this another way by underscoring a shift in the very nature of knowledge itself, when it comes to the three positive domains of economics, biology and linguistics. For if knowledge in the

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classical period always in one way or another sought to answer the question why? and to search for origins, that question has disappeared from this third historical moment in which only empirical facts and arbitrary and contingent laws remain. Such positivities are therefore also mysteries: life, labour and language; and they are non-human mysteries at that, to which alone such strange new anti-humanist 'methods' or disciplines like (structural) anthropology or ethnology and psychoanalysis correspond (significantly, Foucault finds no correspondingly 'economic' approach to the underside of the positivities).

What this whole account registers and stresses is a fundamental gap or split, in this second moment of the modern, between the empirical and the transcendental; a gap whose theorization puts us on the track of Foucault's ambition for this dense and unclassifiable book, neither history or philosophy exactly, but also pamphlet and aesthetic at the same time. The shadowy yet central and even preponderant role played by Kant here, particularly in the appropriate historical moment (the transition from representation to history) suggests that the writer imagines a similar historical position for himself in some late modern great transformation. I am thus tempted to say that, if the classical period was the moment in which meaning appeared, this new historicist or humanist period is that in which the limits of meaning now begin to emerge; in which the boundaries of what is humanly thinkable and indeed of knowledge itself become as obsessive and as problematic as the content of that knowledge. Foucault's operation, then, like Kant's, lies in tracing those boundaries and in mapping out what can count as thinking and what cannot. But like Kant's, Foucault's achievement overshoots the mark, and far from this very modest and reasonable programme, with its careful limits and precau-

tions and its sober catalogue of positivities, the marking of the limit exacerbates the will to transgress it and to pass over into what is forbidden.

It is that zone of non-knowledge which we have characterized above as something like a fourth historical moment, even though in another sense it coexists with our own daytime world of historicism and the human sciences as their photographic negative. We therefore here confront yet a third type of 'transition', if it can still be called that, a third kind of representational (or even dialectical) problem. For although this fourth moment is occasionally evoked in the prophetic mode – the famous 'effacement of man from the sand', the fleeting 1960s hope and glimpse of some new proto-structuralist transformation of thought and life which one finds briefly echoed in Lévi-Strauss and Derrida as well⁵⁹ – most often its promise is sought (and found) in the nooks and crannies of our own system: in the rediscovery of the great madmen, for example, of Hölderlin and Artaud; and the aesthetic foregrounding of a language beyond bourgeois consciousness, a language with the density of an existent, a language that wishes not to mean but to persist on the very limits of meaning, or beyond them. One here recognizes the affinities with the aesthetic of Maurice Blanchot (to which we will return in Part II), rather than with Heidegger (despite the solemnity of these evocations) – for that luminous and light-filled clearing promised by Heideggerian ontology and poetics has here become as dark and ominous as a black hole. To be sure, as in Heidegger, what is here prophetically demanded, as desperate need and Utopian vision alike, is the overcoming of humanism. It remains, however, to enquire whether this is the same as what at the high point of World War II the Japanese fatefully called 'the overcoming of modernity'.⁶⁰

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It is a question that returns us to the issue of the two breaks, in Foucault and Heidegger alike, and in the mystery of the two modernities. Foucault's scheme, indeed, makes clear what was obscured by Heidegger's insistence that the whole development of Western metaphysics up to our own time (and to himself) was already implicit in Descartes's inaugural gesture. In Foucault, it is as if this historical narrative of Heidegger's were split into two moments: the first one offers the modernity of simple representation, so to speak, the first modern or 'scientific' translation of the world into mathematical tables and signs. It is only in the second moment that the subject appears (or what we used to call self-consciousness): in good Lacanian and even Kantian spirit, it is inauthentic when claiming existence as a positivity – humanism, human nature, individuality, and so forth – and authentic only when registered as an impossible absence – either in the logic of the 'fourth moment' as a late aesthetic phenomenon, or as far back as the seventeenth century in the empty subject-positions of Velasquez's *Las Meniñas*. But the aesthetic – in both Foucault and Heidegger – seems to have more in common with modernism as such (or with that somewhat different thing, the aesthetic of modernism) than it does with anything postmodern that might conceivably lay claim to some more fundamental and decisive break with modernity as such. The trouble lies in the way in which a genuine repudiation of modernity's solemnities – for these modern philosophers a very solemn gesture indeed – seems on the contrary to demand the very opposite of solemnity, if not to say frivolity, trivialization, flippancy, camp, decoration, and the like: but that is a question better raised in our aesthetic enquiry into the matter in Part II.

Here, we need only to make two remarks in conclusion. The first is that at least one feature of Foucault's analysis of

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the modern will be retained and far more richly developed in another theoretical tradition. This is the idea that at least the second modernity is characterized by a logic of separation (most notably when the three realms of life, labour and language begin to move away from each other geologically and to become relatively autonomous). In a later section we will see that the interpretation of a break or gap in terms of separation is a promising starting point for a rather different theory of the modern.

As for the two breaks and yet some third one they seem to promise (in the uncertainty as to whether some fourth historical period will really be forthcoming), their proliferation has a crucial lesson for us in the peculiar inner dynamics of that narrative category called modernity itself. It is as though the intensification of our attention to modernity turned upon itself, and began to distinguish the detail of what was somehow less modern in modernity from what was more so, thereby generating a kind of pre-modern moment within modernity as such. The pre-bourgeois (seventeenth- and eighteenth-century) moderns are thus already modern and yet at one and the same time not yet so: the thinkers of the classical period are no longer part of some traditional world, and yet they are not fully admissible to what we recognize as the broad daylight of full modernity as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lived and experienced it. Even when we turn to that more modern modernity, however, it can also begin to strike us as strangely antiquated and old-fashioned (and ever more stylistically obsolete the nearer it comes to us in time). It will be said that as the thinking of modernity folds back into the attempt to think temporality as such, it comes to encounter all the latter's antinomies and conceptual contradictions.

But this is to wash away all the unique structural peculi-

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arities of the idea of the modern itself; and in particular to overlook the idiosyncratic rhythm of its thinking, which does not begin with the earliest facts and data like an archaeologist, but rather frames a global notion of the modern in the here-and-now, which is transferred wholesale to the past before the kinds of chronological doubts and discriminations embodied in the proliferation of breaks can begin to appear.

We can put this another way by suggesting that it is just this multiplicity of breaks that corresponds to what Hegel notoriously called 'the negation of the negation', but it is a negation which does not, as Engels and Stalin thought, govern the future, but rather the past, which it ceaselessly differentiates into ever further others of the other. It is a process that holds fully as much for breaks as for the periods themselves, which in any case as we have shown turn back and forth into one another by virtue of the same rhythm.

At this point, before proceeding we must lay in place the most systematic and rigorous model of the succession of modes of production, a theorization we owe to the Althusserians and in particular to Etienne Balibar. It has been said that you could consider Althusser a structuralist (despite his own protestations) only on condition you posit that for him there is only one structure, namely, the mode of production. The latter is therefore a universal set of elements and relationships, whose historical transformations ought to be susceptible to graphic description, and at the same time to evade the terminological and conceptual problems we associated with the dialectic above. In fact, the Althusserians take pains to stress precisely this dialectical nature of their objects of analysis: ‘we do not really find the same “concrete” elements when we move from one variant to the next. Nor is their particularity defined by a mere place, but rather as an effect of the structure, differing every time, i.e., an effect of the combination which constitutes the mode of production.’⁶¹ In fact, what makes up the difficulty of the Althusserians’ rhetoric is the fact that they are fighting a war on two fronts, on the one hand against ‘structuralism’ (into which their Marxian analyses threaten to be swallowed without a trace), and on the other against the Hegelian dialectic (which they essentially associate with Stalin and with Soviet Marxism). Thus here Balibar systematically uses

the word 'combination' for the 'structuralist' word 'structure', and his deployment of it as a dialectical totality has the unintended side benefit of revealing the dialectical tendencies within structuralism itself.

The most obviously dialectical problem raised by the Marxian accounts of the mode of production is that having to do precisely with production itself, which is said to be a single element within the tripartite structure of the mode (along with distribution and consumption), while at one and the same time constituting the fundamental essence of all modes of production in general.⁶² The second assertion makes production look like an old-fashioned universal, a general abstraction under which a number of different concrete phenomena are ranged; while the first assertion seems to allow for exactly the kind of dialectical variability stressed by Balibar in the passage just quoted. Meanwhile the seeming rigidity of the base/superstructure distinction (in any case only mentioned once by Marx, in a not very central place)⁶³ is loosened up by a play of oppositions between the 'determinant' (always production itself) and the 'dominant', which can take the form of religion, civic politics, kinship, and the like, thus giving each mode of production its own cultural and ideological specificity, if not indeed its own unique lawfulness and internal dynamic.

But the most troublesome passage in Marx has to do with the emergence of a new mode of production, or in other words very specifically with the problem of transition we have been discussing in the course of this whole section. The parturitional figure is well known although not absolutely indispensable: 'new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society'.⁶⁴ The organic overtones have often been an embarrassment, particularly

since the mother normally survives the birth of the child, while the older mode of production presumably does not.

Still, Balibar will try to give a more rigorous theoretical formulation of Marx's insight, combining the Althusserian analysis of social reproduction in general with the specific problem of transition (about which it does not seem quite right to insist, as Balibar does, that 'the forms of transition are in fact necessarily modes of production in themselves').⁶⁵ Briefly, we may sum up the results of this complicated analysis with a quotation:

Periods of transition are . . . characterized by the coexistence of several modes of production, as well as by these forms of non-correspondence. . . . Thus it seems that the dislocation between the connexions and instances in transition periods merely reflects the coexistence of two (or more) modes of production in a single 'simultaneity', and the dominance of one of them over the other.⁶⁶

We thus have two distinct systems coexisting (means of production, forces of production, categories of property, etcetera) in such a way that the dominance of the first over the second will gradually be overturned into a dominance of the second over the first. It is clear that this scheme is motivated by the intent to exclude continuity and 'evolutionism': in it the elements of the old system do not gradually evolve and 'turn into' the elements of the new. Rather, they coexist from the outset, and it is merely the preponderance of the one set or combination over the other that changes.

But now it is much clearer where Foucault's images of transition come from. As Althusser cautiously puts it in a note to the English edition of *Reading Capital*: 'Foucault . . . was a pupil of mine, and "something" from my writings has passed into his.'⁶⁷ If indeed we remove the Marxist language

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and conceptuality from Balibar's model of transition, it becomes very consistent with the more catastrophic figuration of the Foucauldian breaks: the ruins of the older system in the midst of which a newer system is in formation.

As for the time of the formation process, Lévi-Strauss had already pointed out that you never have a piece of a system without the rest: systems appear all at once, fully formed; even language must be assumed, as a synchrony, to have emerged completely and not piecemeal in some 'evolutionary' way. (Clearly enough, various notions of what is implicit in a system, what have to be developed or unfolded later on, can usefully complexify this rather stark and mythic picture of emergence.) The presupposition here is that synchrony is not a temporal category; and that if diachrony is to be considered such a category, it will have revealed itself as conceptually subsequent to and dependent on some logically prior notion of synchrony and system.

It is another great merit of the Althusserians to have spelled all this out in terms of history and the social: temporality as an existential phenomenon, as a modality of lived experience, is something generated by the mode of production itself. Each mode of production has its own system of temporalities. Indeed, 'instead of the structures of history depending on those of time, it is the structures of temporality which depend on those of history. The structures of temporality and their specific differences are produced in the process of constitution of the concept of history.'⁶⁸ And in fact, it turns out that the diachronic is itself not temporal or experiential at all: it is a specific mode of analysis, different from the synchronic one. So ultimately the Althusserians turn the tables on us, and withdraw the very problem itself from the agenda: synchrony now becomes the mode of analysis of a mode of production and its reproduction, while

'the concept of diachrony will . . . be reserved for the time of the transition from one mode of production to another, i.e., for the time determined by the replacement and transformation of the relations of production which constitute the double articulation of the structure'.⁶⁹

None of this has as yet any immediate relevance for theories of modernity, unless one posits the obvious, namely that for Marx modernity is simply capitalism itself: a substitution that indeed dispels many of the theoretical issues confronted in the course of the preceding discussion, while reinforcing one's sense that the 'concept' of modernity raises more problems than it solves. On the other hand, the history of the uses of this word and of its ideological functions is real enough and is not to be disposed of so easily.

But now we must also point out that with the juxtaposition of Foucault's 'model' with that of Balibar a peculiar and striking coincidence strikes the eye,⁷⁰ namely, that in the latter's account of transition, the emergence of the new system remains as mythic and unaccountable, as uncaused and unprecedented, as in the case of Foucault's epistemes. Both are, after all, still engaged in a polemic against historicism and evolutionism, and the formulations of both take pains, in their very different ways, to foreclose any possibility of continuous change.

Yet Balibar's formulation does allow us to grasp the mechanisms of these narratives more fully: we have spoken of the way in which a mythic narrative – the emergence of the new *ex nihilo* or as a kind of cause of self – finds itself embedded within a ground that lends it a semblance of narrative form and continuity. This 'ground' or context is what the Russian Formalists called the 'motivation of the device', the way in which, after the fact, a narrative rationalization is supplied for a linguistic fact that otherwise

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remains inexplicable. In Heidegger, we found this context to be that of medieval salvation; in Foucault, the previous historical moment, in its collapse, served as the framework for the event; here finally in Balibar we grasp it as the older mode of production as such, so that the newer emergence becomes associated with a new mode of production in its own right. This does not conceptualize the emergence as such; but it does suggest that periodization is not some optional narrative consideration one adds or subtracts according to one's own tastes and inclinations, but rather an essential feature of the narrative process itself.

The preceding discussion (or parenthesis) did not confront that feature of Foucault's analysis of the second modernity that seemed not only to mark it in radical disjunction from the homologies of the first modernity, but also to project another possible connection with the Marxian analysis of structure, I mean the idea of separation. In Foucault, separation was evoked to characterize the movement of the various disciplines henceforth autonomized as life, labour and language; but he insisted on the centrality to this development of finitude and death, and underscored their relationship to new and more onerous forms of labour.⁷¹ In Marx, of course, it is the notion of separation that is used to characterize capitalist modernity and the new situation of the worker, 'freed' from his means of production, separated from land and tools and thrown upon the free market as a commodity (his henceforth saleable labour power). Indeed, the operative trope of separation is everywhere in Marx, and can be detected at work in the final tradition of modernity we will examine here.

Yet few enough of the thematic slogans of this tradition reflect the centrality of separation as such: Max Weber's conception of rationalization seems to focus on planning and organization; Lukács's theme of reification seems to refer back to Marx's commodity fetishism; Luhmann's differentiation alone is officially organized around a trope of separa-

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tion, even though it seems at first glance to have more to do with the emergence of the separate disciplines than with the realities of everyday life.

But although Weber often took as his object of study the organization of the firm in late-nineteenth-century capitalism, and is most often considered to be the theoretician *par excellence* of bureaucracy, the affinities of his work with Taylorism and the reorganization of the labour process along 'rational' lines are equally significant.⁷² For Weber, 'rationalization' is a process whose fundamental precondition lies in the dismantling of traditional activities, not least traditional forms of craft skills, as those survive on into the factor process. Separation is registered in Weber's theory as the *analysis* offered by Taylor and scientific management in the etymological sense of that word: the 'unloosing' of the parts from each other, the breaking into component segments of those traditional units of work which seemed natural and which were generally performed by a single person. The meaningless parts are now reshuffled according to criteria of efficiency: and Ford's assembly line comes into view, along with a considerable bonus for the manager in the loss of control over the process of the worker himself, who no longer sees and grasps it as a meaningful whole, or, as Lukács puts it, as a 'totality'. Now the 'separation' of manual and mental labour is completed by the passage of control and planning to the manager and the 'scientific' experts, while the worker is left with those segmentary and repetitive gestures that Frank Gilbreth called 'therbligs', the smallest indivisible units of kinetics most famously satirized by Chaplin in *Modern Times*. The process can be described as the bracketing of the Aristotelian final cause and the reorganization of the labour process in terms of the formal and material causes: a truncation the Frankfurt School memorably renamed

'instrumental reason', a reason reoriented exclusively around means rather than ends (and already dialectically foreshadowed in Hegel's notion of *Verstand* or understanding as that is opposed to *Vernunft* or reason).

Once this process has been isolated and identified in contemporary social life, where it can function as a radical break with the past and as a far more complex and philosophical theory of technological and industrial processes than most of what passes for a description of the so-called Industrial Revolution, its genealogies can then be sought for in the past: in particular, for Weber, the monasteries and the rules of certain religious orders mark the separation off of crucial enclaves in which 'rationalization' is cultivated (in everything from agriculture to the organization of the hours of the day).⁷³ But rationalization is also, in Weber, a mediatory concept, and the formal properties of the concept make it as suitable for the analysis of culture as for the investigation of the firm or the labour process: thus tonality in Western music becomes a fundamental symptom of the 'great transformation' taking place in Europe and in the West, but not in other parts of the world.⁷⁴

Indeed, this relatively formal concept can function on both micro- and macro-levels; which lends an allegorical cast to Weber's thought. Thus, the break-up of the labour process can be seen as allegorical for the break-up of old or traditional organic communities and their 'instrumental' reorganization into the more purely quantitative groupings of the great industrial city.

Lukács's notion of reification (*Verdinglichung*) has more in common with Weber than it does with the original Marxian concept, which essentially characterized the substitution of the relationship between things for the relationship between people (the 'fetishism' of the commodity and in a

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wider development the 'cash nexus'). For in Lukács the process of Weberian rationalization – now grasped, via the labour process, as the loss of any ability to totalize or to grasp the meaningful totality, not merely of the micro-process of labour, but also of the macro-phenomenon of capitalism itself – is theorized in terms of its effects on subjectivity. Lukács now sees that it is a global process which can leave no one untouched; and in his philosophical chapters he shows the way in which reification enters bourgeois consciousness and limits the latter's capacity to theorize and confront reality.⁷⁵ The mediatory exhibit here, the great symptom of reification of bourgeois consciousness, is found in the history of bourgeois philosophy and in its 'containment' operations, its inability after Hegel to confront and to conceptualize that ultimate reality that is capitalism and which Marx showed could only be grasped dialectically as a totality before its constituent movements and tendencies could be identified as such. Paradoxically, Lukács's diagnosis of the other consciousness, that of a working class that has been stripped even of its craft skills and productive knowledge, is far more positive: reduced to the commodity of sheer labour-power, this devastated proletariat will now alone of all the classes or groups of capitalist society have the structural capacity to grasp the capitalist social order as a whole, in that unity-of-theory-and-praxis that is Marxism.

Lukács can thus be said, in analogy to our previous discussions, to have marked a kind of 'second modernity' in the Weberian tradition, and to have added the modernity of the situation of the subject (but not of 'subjectivity' in our earlier sense) to the modernity of the rationalizing process (in much the same way that Foucault's historicism adds the emergence of the bourgeois subject to the modernity of his earlier moment of representation).

But this larger history, with its multiple breaks and stages, can also be set in place in other ways; and this is the moment to show the kinship between the Weberian notion of rationalization and that 'initial' moment of modernity we continue to associate with Descartes. It is, however, to a rather different aspect of Descartes's work than the cogito that we must turn here. Not consciousness, foundational proof, doubt and indubitability, will now be the guiding thread, but rather method, as it no doubt leads to the experiment of the *Meditations*, but also to his numerous other scientific and engineering inquiries. And here it is the second of Descartes's four working or methodological precepts that will be the crucial one: 'to divide each of the difficulties I wanted to examine into the smallest possible units necessary for their better resolution'.⁷⁶ Never mind what Descartes himself had in mind here (the unity of even the smallest of these units will surely be measured by the standard of the 'clear and distinct'): as it has been understood, this precept serves as the very foundation of empiricism as opposed to dialectical thought. It seems to recommend a building up into the eventual whole of the solutions of the parts of a problem, as opposed to the dialectical method, which begins with wholes and only after works down to the parts.

Still, the meaning of the precept for Descartes will become clear only from its context: and the historicist question about the conditions of possibility of such a maxim remains, I think, a useful guide. Unexpectedly, it is Anthony Giddens who has the elements of an answer for us here, in a historical investigation in which he no doubt follows Foucauldian disciplinary historiography but is also influenced by the recent fashion for a kind of military determination in history (or at least war and the military as a new kind of 'ultimately determining instance' of the modern). For Descartes spent a

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significant and formative period in the armies of Protestant and Catholic forces alike on the eve of the Thirty Years' War; indeed, his famous philosophical illumination (and the fateful three dreams) took place in Ulm, in the camp of Maximilian, in November 1619. All of which can be taken as mere seventeenth-century local colour if not sheer coincidence; and yet the 22-year-old Descartes had his reasons for this excursus into military life and certainly observed it with curiosity and interest. Here at any rate is what Giddens has to say about the army in which Descartes spent the first year of his postgraduate travels:

[In the expansion of administrative power], the organization of the military played a prime role, influencing both the state apparatus and other organizations including, at a later date, business firms. For it was to a large extent in the military sphere that administrative power in its modern guise was pioneered. The innovations of Maurice of Nassau, the Prince of Orange, are both the most prominent example of this and at the same time exemplify more long-term trends in military organization. Maurice helped initiate two connected administrative changes later seen in all more bureaucratized organizations – the formation of a body of experts holding exclusive knowledge of certain essential administrative techniques, and the simultaneous creation of a 'de-skilled' population of ordinary soldiery. There is a very real sense in which, through Maurice's interventions, the techniques of Taylorism became well embedded in the sphere of the armed forces several hundred years before, in industrial production, they came to be known by such a label. As van Doorn remarks, comparing the two apparently quite contrasting figures, 'with both persons one is struck by the solid knowledge of the practice of their trade, their sharp analytical powers and a desire for experiment which was supported by a firm belief

in the organisability and manipulability of human behaviour.' As Taylor was to do, Maurice divided the technical aspects of the work of soldiery into specific, regular sequences of single activities. Thus, building upon what had already been accomplished by the Spanish commanders, he produced flow charts for the handling of the musket and the pike, each part of the sequence of acts involved being clearly specified. Soldiers were required to practise these until they could automatically follow the 'correct' procedures. Rather than being treated as 'craftsmen', skilled in the use of weaponry, recruits were regarded as having to be drilled to acquire the necessary familiarity with handling military equipment. The members of a unit were taught to respond simultaneously to command instructions, so as to co-ordinate the movements of each individual with the group as a whole.⁷⁷

The shift from break to period can be registered in the relative formalization of the description, which in this state of abstraction – 'experts', 'sequences of single activities', 'command', 'coordination', etcetera – can now be translated from one specific type of content to another (and in the process becomes applicable to cultural phenomena as well, unless, of course, one wants to consider that it is already profoundly cultural in its very nature as an empty form). Yet the alternative of a break and a beginning persists faintly in the evocation of Prince Maurice as an agent and a 'vanishing mediator'.

It is this alternative that has disappeared altogether when we move to the final form of the category of separation in Niklas Luhmann's even more formalized notion of differentiation. What is gained in the multiple possibilities for allegorical transfers onto all kinds of varying material – the state, subjective feelings like love, social groups, the market,

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sociological theories themselves, etcetera – is paid for by the effacement of the place of a cause or a beginning, or even a dialectical or structural reorganization. Differentiation – like Galilean or Newtonian movement – simply continues until it meets some external obstacle: yet the nature of the process is such that (like capital) it cannot reproduce itself without constant expansion. Differentiation tends towards ever greater differentiation, without any end in sight.

And this is, on the one hand, why no beginning can be assigned to it in its own terms: what precedes it is simply a very different mode or logic of social reproduction, at an early stage ‘segmentary differentiation’, at a later stage ‘stratification’ and for our own society and modernity, ‘functional differentiation’.⁷⁸ These are, however, the most rudimentary and even pre-Marxian classifications of human society: tribal societies, pre-capitalist states (organized around power, and generally loosely termed ‘feudal’), and finally capitalism itself. ‘Differentiation’, therefore, no matter how attractive an ideological slogan it may be in the current situation in which its root has become a charged and popular political signifier, does not offer any unified field theory in terms of which the logic of other social systems can be thought in the same categories as this one. But this very precisely characterizes the theory of modernity in its most rudimentary form, as a mere sociological classification whose status is left unexamined. The novelty of Luhmann’s thought lies in the transformation of earlier empirical features of ‘modernity’ into the language of an abstract formal process (with a subsequent and remarkable expansion of the variety of materials Luhmann is able to rewrite, in the extraordinary body of work he has left us).

For even if all three types of society involve degrees of intensity in the process of differentiation itself, a dialectic

must necessarily be posited whereby at any given moment the increase triggers a leap from quantity to quality and produces a radically new type of differentiation. But the concept of differentiation is a uniform one which is non-dialectical (even though Luhmann himself includes the dialectic in its genealogy as an early and oversimplified anticipation of 'differentiation' itself)⁷⁹ and cannot accommodate such radical leaps and breaks. The question of origins does not for all that disappear, and the periodizations referred to above are the standard ones, which identify the Renaissance as the general take-off point for differentiation (and its modernity) as such. But it is clear that the conceptions of the earlier stages are anthropological rather than sociological and do not even reach the sophistication of the Marxian theorization of modes of production.

The advantages of Luhmann's theory seem to me to lie elsewhere, in implications that the reminder of the older theme *separation* (particularly in its Foucauldian usage) brings out more sharply. For in fact differentiation, on Luhmann's account, consists in the gradual separation of areas of social life from each other, their disentanglement from some seemingly global and mythic (but more often religious) overall dynamic, and their reconstitution as distinct fields with distinct laws and dynamics. Thus economics begins to disengage itself from politics (and vice versa) as the market acquires a relative independence from the state. The same process obtains for the judicial and juridical systems, which gradually find themselves endowed with their own personnel and their own local history and precedents and traditions. This process is certainly one of modernity; and Luhmann's account conveys the nature of secularization in useful formal ways, which show, for example, how a now-privatized religion is itself differentiated from social

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life as a whole and assigned its separate status and space. Indeed, the theory may itself be seen as a secularization of Foucault's rather more portentous one (in his account of the movement of the geological plates and templates of life, labour and language away from one another in the nineteenth century).

Still, I think it might be best to take another step further and to speak, instead of differentiation, of a process of autonomization (with stages of semi-autonomization in between). Here what is stressed is not the moment of separation itself, but what happens to the previous parts, now new entities and small-scale wholes and totalities in their own right, after the event of mitosis has taken place. (Thus the new formulation also allows for the return of the category of a break, even though it has become internalized as little more than the infinite repetition of the process itself.) At any rate this new formulation will prove useful later on, when it is a question of the aesthetic as such (whose own 'autonomization' from other levels and activities indeed becomes part of the story of some properly aesthetic 'modernity').

But the very suggestiveness of the scheme for rewriting older descriptions of modernity may alert us to its ideological character when appealed to for practical and future-oriented programmes or even judgements on the present. For as so often in theories of modernity (whose descriptions are then reappropriated for prescriptive purposes), the essentially regressive conceptuality of the modern is only too likely to confront any conceivable systemic changes with a resistance and an inertia: modernity describes what obtains within a given system, within a given historical moment, and can therefore not be counted on for reliable analyses of what negates it. So it is that from time to time we come upon

historical reflections which are in fact so many party political pronouncements about the present, about the market and the so-called triumph of capitalism, and about deregulation:

The obvious danger here is that we may replace the relatively large openness and variability of the classical, internal differentiation of the economic system by decision-making processes having too little selectivity and habitual and rigid premises. We would then let the economy sacrifice the maneuverability that became available after the external differentiation of the economy from the rest of society.⁸⁰

In other words, the danger lies in the welfare state, not to speak of socialism itself. This is not particularly meant as a criticism of Luhmann, who has rarely been thought to be a leftist in any case, but it does mark the passage of his interesting and complex system – which promised to reintegrate postmodernity into older theories of the modern – over into sheer ideology.

For the passage not only amounts to a warning against ‘socialism’, but also rules out the maintenance of welfare-state-type mechanisms or the return to even those milder forms of government regulation that have come to seem sensible after the worst excesses of the free market period. In such passages, then, Luhmann’s ostensibly sociological theory of modernity can be seen to unmask itself as conventional free market rhetoric and the ideology of deregulation.

And to be complete about it, I would also wish to mention the persistence in his work of that now ancient category of self-consciousness – which he here depersonalizes in the form of some ‘reflexivity of the system’ itself – but which remains a kind of ghost in the machine for all theories of the modern. If you prefer, this is at least one clear dividing line between

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the modern and the postmodern, namely, the refusal of concepts of self-consciousness, reflexivity, irony or self-reference in the postmodern aesthetic and also in postmodern values and philosophy as such, if there can be said to be such a thing. I imagine this also coincides with the disappearance of the slogan of freedom, whether in its bourgeois or anarchist sense: the feeling that the biological individual can no longer enjoy individualism as in the entrepreneurial stage of capitalism, but that he or she is integrated into a larger collective or institutional structure seems to me common both to contemporary conservative neo-Confucianism (of all types) as much as to the Marxist tradition. If so, then reflexivity of the system itself – on which Luhmann insists so strongly – would have to be imagined in a very different way from some older reflexivity of the individual consciousness, about whose conceptual incoherence we have in any case already remarked.

Such functional lapses are, however, to be seen as mere symptoms of a deeper conceptual problem, namely the insistence on maintaining older conceptions of modernity in the face of the situation of postmodernity, with its multiple transformations. I choose my terms carefully here for it is the situation that has changed and that demands a modified theoretical response, without necessarily imposing any particular ‘concept’ of postmodernity or even ruling out the argument that there has been no such transformation and that we are still in modernity itself, all indications to the contrary. That is why our fourth thesis must not decry the absence of a concept of the postmodern, but only the omission of any attempt to come to terms with the situation of postmodernity (whatever the eventual decision may turn out to be).⁸¹ Just such an omission certifies Luhmann’s status as yet another ideologist of the modern as such.

A SINGULAR MODERNITY

The fact is that Luhmann's concept can deal adequately neither with its antagonistic contradiction – the possibility of some system radically different from capitalist modernity – nor with its non-antagonistic contradiction – the coming into existence of a stage of capitalism that is no longer 'modern' in the traditional ways and that people have therefore begun to characterize as postmodern. But this problem now suggests a final (or fourth) maxim for the 'bon usage' of the term 'modernity', namely that

4. No 'theory' of modernity makes sense today unless it is able to come to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern.

If it does so come to terms, however, it unmask itself as a purely historiographic category and thereby seems to undo all its claims as a temporal category and as a vanguard concept of innovation.

We may now recapitulate the four theses of modernity:

1. One cannot not periodize.
2. Modernity is not a concept but rather a narrative category.
3. The one way not to narrate it is via subjectivity (thesis: subjectivity is unrepresentable). Only situations of modernity can be narrated.
4. No 'theory' of modernity makes sense today unless it comes to terms with the hypothesis of a postmodern break with the modern.

Still, there remains one usage of the modern whose immediacy and relevance for the present (no matter how complex and paradoxical) seem undeniable. This is its aesthetic cat-

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egory or adaptation, which necessarily posits an experience of the work in the present, no matter what its historical origins. We must therefore now turn our attention to artistic modernism as such.