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10

The Postmodern Turn: Positions, Problems, and Prospects



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During the 1980s, debates over postmodernism entered the domain of social theory and both a new postmodern social theory and sociological attempts to define the multi-faceted aspects of postmodernity emerged.¹ Advocates of the postmodern turn aggressively attacked traditional social theory, and social theorists responded either by ignoring the new challenger, by attacking it in return, or by attempting to come to terms with and appropriate the new wave. Assimilating postmodernism to social theory was and is extremely difficult both because of the intrinsic difficulty of the work of those associated with it (Baudrillard, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and others) and because the radicality of the postmodern critique of social theory puts the very concepts of society, representation, and social theory into question. In addition, there has been no real agreement as to what constitutes postmodernity and its correlate, postmodern theory. Conceptualizing postmodernity is complicated by the fact that its discourses have emerged in several different fields (art and cultural theory, philosophy, social theory, etc.) and because within these fields there are fierce debates as to what constitutes the postmodern and how it differs from the modern.

In this essay, I shall discuss the ramifications of the postmodern debates for social theory but will draw on some of the philosophical debates because the postmodern critique of traditional social theory was initiated by post-structuralist criticisms of the basic premises of

¹A previous attempt to analyze postmodern social theory appeared in *Theory, Culture, and Society* 5:239-270 (1988) and I am grateful to Mike Featherstone for soliciting the article and for discussions which helped in development of this new study, some of which I first presented at a 1988 Global Futures Conference which Featherstone and his associates organized. For helpful criticism and suggestions of the present study, I am also indebted to Robert Antonio, Stephen Brunner, George Ritzer, and especially to Steve Best for incisive criticism and editing of many versions of the study and for sustained discussion of the issues involved.

philosophy and social theory, a critique influenced by such diverse figures as Nietzsche, Saussure, Heidegger, Baraille, and Derrida. Nietzsche's attack on concepts of the subject, representation, truth, and value, combined with Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, led post-structuralists to question the very framework and deep assumptions of philosophy and social theory (Derrida 1976; Dews 1987). In addition, Saussure's reflections on language, Baraille's alternative conception of economy based on excess and expenditure, and Lacan's reconstruction of Freud promoted new views of language, theory, and social reality (Jameson 1972; Coward-Ellis 1977; Kellner 1989b).

The postmodern social theories of such French figures as Baudrillard, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, and others were also influenced by theoretical developments in France such as Roland Barthes' (1962) explorations of mythologies and popular culture, Henri Lefebvre's (1971) critical dissections of everyday life, Guy Debord's (1976) critiques of "the society of the spectacle," and developments in literary and cultural criticism which advanced new conceptions of writing, theory, and discourse (Derrida, Foucault, *Tel Quel*, the later Barthes, etc.). The 1960s and 1970s in France were a period of intense theoretical and political debates which produced a fascinating diversity of new theories appearing which drew on these developments. Jean Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b) describes a postmodern society in which "radical semurgy," the constantly accelerating proliferation of signs, produces simulations and simulacra that create new forms of society, culture, experience, and subjectivity. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) describes a "postmodern condition" that marks the end of the grand hopes of modernity and the impossibility of continuing with the totalizing social theories and revolutionary politics of the past. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1977) propose developing micro analyses of desire, a "schizo-analysis" which will trace the trajectories and inscriptions of desire in cultural texts and everyday life and seek possible "lines of escape" from repressive social and psychological structures. Attempting to preserve Marxism against the postmodern critique, Fredric Jameson (1984) argues that postmodernism should be interpreted as the "cultural logic of late capitalism," thus promoting totalizing Marxian theories as the grand narratives—or the most inclusive social theories—of the present age, while locating postmodernism itself as a mere cultural logic within a new stage of capitalism. Arthur Kroker and his colleagues (1986, 1989) describe contemporary society as a new fin-de-millennium "panic" scene which eludes the categories and social theories of the past, and which requires new theorizing. Other social theorists like Habermas

(1981, 1987), by contrast, are skeptical of claims for a postmodern break in history and attack postmodernism as a form of irrationalist ideology. In view of these disputes, it is time to investigate the genesis and developments of postmodern social theory and to distinguish its central positions, insights, and limitations. Before beginning, it should be pointed out that there is nothing like a unified "postmodern social theory." Rather one is struck by the diversities among theories often lumped together as "postmodern." Instead of defining characteristics and traits which would distinguish a postmodern social theory, there are rather a plurality of different postmodern theories and positions. One is also struck by the inadequate and undertheorized notion of the "postmodern" in the theories which adopt, or are identified in, such terms. Consequently, I shall begin by attempting to sort out the various notions of the postmodern operative in various discourses and fields and shall trace the genealogy of the concept of the postmodern as a designation for a new historical epoch requiring new theories and categories.

GENEALOGIES OF THE POSTMODERN

To avoid confusion between the various discourses of the postmodern, it is useful to distinguish between members of the family of concepts related to the distinction between the modern and the postmodern. Following Featherstone (1988), we might therefore distinguish between "modernity" conceptualized as the modern age and "postmodernity" as a descriptive, epochal term for describing the period which follows modernity. Modernity, as theorized by Marx, Weber, and others (Bertram 1982), refers to the epoch of industrial capitalism which follows the Middle Ages or feudalism. One might also describe the processes by which modernity produced a new industrial and colonial world as "modernization" and the new processes producing the current world as those of an as yet relatively untheorized "postmodernization." Modernity is opposed to tradition and is characterized by innovation, novelty, and dynamism and one might describe the experiences of this era of constant change by the French term *modernité* (Frisby 1985) while the experiences of postmodernity could be described as *postmodernité*. "Modernism," finally, could be used to describe the art movements of the modern age [art for art's sake, the *avant-garde*, expressionism, surrealism, etc.] while "postmodernism" can describe those diverse aesthetic forms and practices which come after modernism.

In all cases, the term "post" describes a break or rupture between the modern and the postmodern. It also functions as a sequential con-

cept, describing that which follows and comes after the modern. The term thus functions in a periodizing discourse which marks historical distinctions. Yet there is also an ambiguity inherent in this particular set of "post" terms which is exploited by various adherents of the postmodern. For the term "post" describes a "not" modern that can be read as an active term of negation which attempts to move beyond the era and practices of modernity. This negation can be interpreted positively as a liberation from old constraining and oppressive conditions, and as an affirmation of new developments, a moving into new terrains, a forging of new discourses and ideas (Lyotard 1984). Or the movement can be interpreted negatively, as a deplorable regression, as a loss of traditional values, certainties, stabilities, and so on (Toynbee 1954; Bell 1976).

The "post" in postmodern also signifies, however, a dependence on and a continuity with that which it follows, leading some to conceptualize the postmodern as merely an intensification of the modern, as a hypermodernity (Merquior 1986; During 1987), or a new "face of modernity" (Calinescu 1987). Yet most theorists of postmodernity deploy the term—as it was introduced by Toynbee—to characterize a dramatic rupture or break in Western history. What all of these conceptions of the "postmodern" have in common, then, is the assumption of a radical break or rupture with the past. The discourse of the postmodern therefore presupposes a sense of an ending, the sense of something new, and the sense that we must develop new categories, theories, and methods to explore and conceptualize this novum, this novel social and cultural situation. Such a conception of a radical rupture within history presupposes global and epochal historical periodization, and not surprisingly some of the first conceptions of the postmodern appeared in historians like Arnold Toynbee and Geoffrey Barraclough, or historically oriented sociologists like C. Wright Mills and Daniel Bell.

After the Second World War notions began emerging concerning both a new postmodern age which succeeded the modern age and new postmodern art which succeeded modernism (Calinescu 1987). In the later volumes of his monumental *A Study of History*, Toynbee (1947–1954) argued that Western civilization had entered a new transitional period beginning around 1875 which he termed the "postmodern age." This period constituted a dramatic mutation and rupture from the previous "modern age" and was characterized by wars, social turmoil, and revolution. Toynbee described the age as one of "anarchy" and "total relativism." He characterized the previous period as a middle-class, bourgeois era marked by social stability, rationalism, and progress. The postmodern age, by contrast, is a "Time of Troubles" marked by the collapse of rationalism and the ethos of the Enlightenment.

This scenario is reminiscent of Nietzsche's *Will to Power* and Spengler's *Decline of the West* with their diagnoses of social and cultural regression in the present age. A somewhat similar notion of a "post-modern age" emerges in C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Mills claims that "we are at the ending of what is called The Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy, which Westerners provincially call 'The Dark Ages,' so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period" (Mills 1959, 165–166). Mills believed that "our basic definitions of society and of self are being overtaken by new realities" and that it is necessary to struggle to conceptualize the changes taking place and to "grasp the outline of the new epoch we suppose ourselves to be entering" (Mills 1959, 165–166). In conceptualizing transformations of the present, he believed, many previous expectations and images, and standard categories of thought and of feeling, are no longer of use in characterizing the present situation. In particular, he believed that Marxism and liberalism are no longer convincing because both take up the Enlightenment belief in the inner connection between reason and freedom, which holds that increased rationality would produce increased freedom. By contrast, Mills claims that in the present one can no longer assume this.

In an analysis close to that of the Frankfurt School, Mills charts out some of the ways that increased societal rationalization is diminishing freedom and paints the specter of a society of "cheerful robots" who might well desire, or cheerfully submit to, increased servitude.² A much more systematic and detailed notion of the postmodern age than is found in the work of Toynbee and Mills is present in Geoffrey Barraclough's *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (1964). Barraclough opens his explorations of the nature of contemporary history by claiming that the world in which we live today is "different, in almost all its basic preconditions, from the world in which Bismarck lived and died" (Barraclough 1964, 9). Barraclough claims that analysis of the underlying structural changes between the "old world" and the "new world" requires "a new framework and new terms of reference" (Barraclough 1964, 9). Against theories which emphasize continuity in history, Barraclough argues: "What we should look out for as significant are the differences rather than the similarities, the elements of discontinuity rather than the elements of continuity. In short, contemporary history should be considered as a distinct period of time, with characteristics of its own which mark it off from the preceding period, in much the same way as what we call 'medieval history' is marked off . . . from modern history" (Barraclough 1964, 12).

After discussing some of the contours of the "new era," Barraclough

rejects various attempts to characterize the current historical situation and then proposes the term "post-modern" to describe the period which follows "modern" history (Barzclough 1964, 23). He describes the "new age" as being constituted by revolutionary developments in science and technology, by a new imperialism meeting resistance in Third World revolutionary movements, by the transition from individualism to mass society, and by a "new outlook on the world" and new forms of culture.

Ami'ai Etzioni also introduced the notion of a postmodern society in his book *The Active Society* (1968). For Etzioni, the Second World War was a turning point in history; he argued that the post-war introduction of new modes of communication, information, and energy inaugurated a new postmodern period. He hypothesized that either relentless technological development would itself destroy all previous values, or would make possible the use of technology to better human life and to solve all social problems. Etzioni championed this "active society" in which normative values would guide technological developments and human beings would utilize and control technology for the benefit of humanity. This "activist" normative ideal was one of the few positive visions of a postmodern future, though Etzioni was also aware of the dangers.

In the mid-1970s more books appeared in the United States which used the term postmodern to designate a new era in history. Frederick Ferre's *Shaping the Future: Resources for the Post-Modern World* projected a new set of values and institutions for a "post-modern consciousness" and new future (1976). His emphasis was positive and took the form of quasi-religious prophecy and advocacy of primarily religious values to guide the new age. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), Daniel Bell also took up the theme that the modern era was coming to an end and that humanity now faced fundamental choices for the future, writing: "We are coming to a watershed in Western society: we are witnessing the end of the bourgeois idea—that view of human action and of social relations, particularly of economic exchange—which has molded the modern era for the last 200 years" (Bell 1976, 7). He interprets the "post-modern" age much as Toynbee; it represents for him the unleashing of instinct, impulse, and will, though he tends to identify it with the 1960s counterculture (Bell 1976, 51). For Bell, the postmodern age exhibits an extension of the rebellious, anti-bourgeois, antimonic, and hedonistic impulses which he sees as the legacies of the modernist movements in the arts and their bohemian subcultures. He claims that cultural modernism perpetuates hedonism, the lack of social identification and obedience, narcissism, and the withdrawal from status and achievement competition. The postmodern age is thus a product of the application of modernist revolts

to everyday life, the extension and living out of a rebellious, hyperindividualist, and hedonist life-style.

Bell interprets contemporary society as a radical disjunction and fragmentation into the spheres of the economy, polity, and culture, all of which are structured according to different principles and which come into inextorable conflict with each other (Bell 1976). He sees contemporary postmodern culture as a radical assault on tradition connected with an aggressive narcissism which is in profound contradiction with the bureaucratic, technocratic, and organizational imperatives of the capitalist economy and democratic polity. This development signifies for him the end of the bourgeois world view with its rationality, sobriety, and moral and religious values (Bell 1976, 53). In response to the corrosive force of postmodernism on traditional values, Bell calls for a revivification of religious values.

Yet as Habermas has argued (1981, 14), Bell tends to blame culture for the ills of the economy and polity, as when he refers to "cultural crises which beset bourgeois societies and which, in the longer run, devitalize a country, confuse the motivations of individuals, instill a sense of *carpe diem*, and undercut its civic will. The problems are less those of the adequacy of institutions than of the kinds of meanings that sustain a society" (Habermas 1981, 28). In passages like this, Bell obscures the extent to which the development of the consumer society itself with its emphasis on consumption, instant gratification, easy credit, and hedonism is responsible for the undermining of traditional values and culture and the production of what he calls the "cultural contradictions of capitalism." Bell sees the latter as a result of the disjunction of the economy and culture rather than as a production of the capitalist system itself. Thus while Mills' (1959) early critique of the postmodern society of cheerful robots derived from a progressive concern with diminution of the ability to shape, control, and change the conditions of society and one's life, Bell's critique derived from fear of the collapse of the bourgeois world view and its value system.

In any case, the discourse of the postmodern has a negative valence for Toynbee, Mills, Bell, and others and describes what they see as a crisis of Western civilization and a dramatic rupture with modernity. This apocalyptic outlook is shared by French theorists of postmodernity such as Baudrillard who claims that the previous era of industrial modernity is over—an event which he announces in characteristically dramatic terms:

The end of labor. The end of production. The end of political economy. The end of the dialectic signifier/signified which permitted an accumulation of knowledge and of meaning, and of a linear syntagm of cumulative discourse. The end simultaneously of the dialectic of ex-

change value/use value which alone previously made possible capital accumulation and social production. The end of linear discourse. The end of linear merchandising. The end of the classic era of the sign. The end of the era of production. (Baudrillard 1988, 127-128; translation modified)

Baudrillard's narrative concerns the end of a "modernity" dominated by production and industrial capitalism, and the advent of a new post-industrial "postmodernity," constituted by "simulations," "hyperreality," and "implosion" which are instantiated in new forms of technology, culture, and society (Baudrillard 1983a; see Kellner 1988, 1989b). For Baudrillard, modernity was characterized by the explosion of commodity, mechanization, technology, exchange, and the market, modification, mechanization, technology, exchange, and the market, while postmodern society is the site of an *implosion*, a collapsing of all boundaries, regions, and distinctions between high and low culture, appearance and reality, and just about every other binary opposition maintained by traditional philosophy and social theory. For Baudrillard, in the postmodern world the boundary between image or simulation and reality implodes and with this the very experience and ground of "the real" disappears. This process of "postmodernization" signifies the end of all the positivities, grand referents, and finalities of previous social theory: the real, meaning, power, revolution, history, the subject, and even the social itself (Baudrillard 1983a, 1983b). Thus while modernity could be characterized as a process of increasing differentiation of spheres of life (Max Weber as interpreted by Habermas 1981, 1984) with attendant social fragmentation and alienation, postmodernity could be interpreted as a process of de-differentiation (Lash 1988) and attendant implosion.

Postmodernity is characterized by Baudrillard as the "catastrophe" of modernity, in the sense of current scientific theories which posit a catastrophe as "a radical, qualitative change in an entire system" (Baudrillard 1984, 18). Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984, 15) criticizes Baudrillard's somewhat apocalyptic vision of "the end of the social" but agrees with Baudrillard that "the postmodern condition" refers to a social order organized around information, knowledge, and the computerization of society (1984, 7). Although Lyotard uses the term "postmodern condition" which also, like Baudrillard's conception, signifies a fundamental break or rupture, he focuses on analyzing what he calls postmodern knowledge, which, in effect, provides a new epistemology for postmodern social theory, a theme that I shall take up in the next section.

In Baudrillard's perspectives, postmodern society is characterized by a process of "radical semiology" whereby "simulations" produce a new social order in which models precede "the real" and come to constitute society as a "hyperreality" (Baudrillard 1983a). Closely following Baudrillard, Arthur Kroker and David Cook (1986) develop a theory of "the

postmodern scene" as the catastrophe of modernity and in *Panic Encyclopedia* (1989), they and others provide a "[panic] reader's guide to the fin-de-millennium." For Kroker and Cook postmodernity constitutes a fundamental "rupture in Western experience" that requires a complete reworking of modern theoretical categories and political projects. Baudrillard is taken as the theoretical "password" to this new universe and Kroker and Cook attempt to out-Baudrillard Baudrillard, using his major categories as the key constituents of the postmodern scene while raising some of his more marginal notions—dead power, excremental culture, panic, and so on—to fundamental categories of a new postmodern social theory. They develop the Baudrillardian theme of an all-powerful cybernetic system consisting of the "fantastic perfection" of schemes of control and in reducing individuals to "vacant nodes on a relational power grid" (Kroker and Cook 1986, 259), and thus erase categories of subjectivity, praxis, and struggle from radical social theory, a theme to which I shall return.

Within these varying attempts to theorize postmodernity, however, a variety of postmodern positions emerges concerning epistemology, the tasks of social theory, and politics, and it is to discussing some of these issues that I shall now turn.

POSTMODERN POSITIONS

In his book *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) attempts to develop a postmodern epistemology which will replace the philosophical perspectives dominated by Western rationalism and instrumentalism.³ Subtitled *A Report on Knowledge*, the text was commissioned by a Canadian government agency to study new developments in knowledge and information in the most highly developed societies. "I have decided to use the word *postmodern* to describe that condition. The word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (Lyotard 1984, xxiii). For Lyotard, the "postmodern" concerns developing a new epistemology responding to new conditions of knowledge, and he attempts to explicate the differences between the grand narratives of traditional philosophy and social theory, the practice and legitimation of contemporary science, and what he calls "postmodern science" which he defends as a preferable form of knowledge to traditional and currently hegemonic philosophical and scientific forms.

This epistemological focus influences his definition of terms and

emphasis on modern and postmodern forms of knowledge rather than society and culture (as with Baudrillard, Jameson, Kroker and Cook, and others). Lyotard by contrast writes: "I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a meta-discourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" [Lyotard 1984, xxiii]. From this perspective the "*postmodern*" is defined "as incredulity toward metanarratives," the rejection of meta-physical philosophy, philosophies of history, and any form of totalizing thought—be it Hegelianism, liberalism, Marxism, or whatever. Postmodern knowledge, by contrast, "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy" [Lyotard 1984, xxv].

Lyotard thus valorizes differences, incommensurability, heterogeneity, paradox, and paralogies which disrupt or challenge existing forms of knowledge over unities, totalities, systems, and foundations of macro social theory and metatheories. Uncritically reproducing a cliché of late 1970s French thought initiated by the so-called "new philosophers," Lyotard suggests that totalizing narratives are connected with totalitarian and terroristic politics. This point is highlighted in the conclusion to a 1982 article published as an appendix to the English version of *The Postmodern Condition*:

Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games (which, under the name of faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening or for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name. [Lyotard 1984, 82]

This passage—often cited but rarely interpreted—is highly revealing. Lyotard seems to privilege here art (supplying allusions) over the-

ory while valorizing nonrepresentational attempts to present that "which cannot be presented." This position is congruent with his earlier privileging of figure over discourse, avant-garde art over theory (see Lyotard 1971). Moreover, Lyotard equates totalizing social theory with terror and nostalgia for totality, for reconciliation, and for a unity which for him constitutes the danger of suppression of differences and particularity. Lyotard rejects such theories, which he describes as master narratives, as being intolerably reductionist, simplistic, and even "terroristic" (i.e., providing legitimations for totalitarian terror, and suppressing differences in unifying schemes). Consequently, Lyotard joins at this juncture the so-called "new philosopher" who attempted to associate totalizing thought with totalitarianism *tout court*, replaying an ideologically loaded argument about the theoretical-historical route from Hegel and Marx to the Gulag. This renunciation of programs of radical social change also places him, as Peter Dews (1986, 6) has suggested, in the "end of ideology" camp which draws similar associations between grand schemes of social change, like Marxism, and many catastrophes of the twentieth century.

Lyotard's polemic contains as well an attack against the position that discourse aims at consensus, associated with Jürgen Habermas [Lyotard 1984, xv, 65]. He adopts a language games approach to knowledge, proposing that we conceive of various discourses as types of games with their own rules, structure, and moves.⁴ Different language games are governed by different criteria and rules, and none are to be privileged: "All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species. Lamenting the 'loss of meaning' in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative" [Lyotard 1984, 26]. Yet Lyotard wants to privilege and proliferate precisely this plurality of language games, and rejects all modes of philosophical discourse which would legislate between the various validity claims, values, positions, etc., affirmed in the proliferation of discourses which circulate through society. Rather than engaging in totalizing macro social theory and critique, Lyotard wants more localized, heterogeneous microanalysis with "little narratives" [Lyotard 1984, 60]. "A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games is a first step. . . . The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it must be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation" [Lyotard 1984, 66].

Yet participation in language games involves struggle and conflict for Lyotard; he claims that "the first principle underlying our method as a whole" is that "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and

speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics" (Lyotard 1984, 10). His model of a postmodern society posits individuals in struggle within various language games in an unforced consensus. Furthermore, postmodern knowledge for Lyotard involves knowledge of local terrains, and tolerance of a variety and diversity of different language games.

Lyotard assumes that all attempts at consensus involve some sort of terroristic imposition of uniformity and oppression. Thus for Lyotard there is something intrinsically repressive about traditional social theory and its concern for truth, universality, totality, and emancipation.⁵ While Lyotard criticizes Habermas' alleged desire for a unitary ground for consensus and a universal ground for social theory, both Lyotard and Habermas accept Kant's division of reason into the spheres of theoretical, practical and aesthetic judgments, and both defend the sort of cultural differentiation analyzed by Max Weber. Both concretize the Kantian distinctions in terms of contrasting communicative practices and both thus take something of a "speech acts" and "pragmatic" approach to communication which both believe to be the "social bond" which constitutes societies (though here a difference emerges as Lyotard emphasizes the primacy and desirability of agonistic competition while Habermas attempts to formulate the grounds for consensus). In addition, their aesthetics take two opposing Kantian poles, with Lyotard unambiguously advocating an aesthetics of the sublime while Habermas has at least some propensities for an aesthetics of the beautiful. They also differ as Lyotard defends a more incommensurable division of different language games while Habermas wants more dialogue and consensus among the various spheres of life. In contrast to Baudrillard, however, their similar Kantian proclivities are rather striking. Other postmodern social theorists, like Baudrillard (1983b), posit the end of the social and the end of history.

In a text first published in 1978, "In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities," Baudrillard puts in question fundamental presuppositions of previous social theories, including the concepts of the social, class, and class conflict, arguing that these categories have imploded and lost their significance and reference in the society of simulations. Baudrillard, in effect, interprets "the social" in terms of "masses" and proliferates a series of metaphors to capture the nature of the masses who he describes as that "spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucent reality, that nothingness," "a statistical crystal ball . . . 'writing with currents and flows,' in the image of matter and the natural elements," "an 'inertia,' 'silence,' 'figure of implosion,' 'social void,' and—what is probably his favorite metaphor—an "opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to

collapse finally under its own weight. A black hole which engulfs the social" (Baudrillard 1983b, 1-4). This "black hole" of the masses absorbs all meaning, information, communication, messages, and so on, and renders them all meaningless through refusing to accept and produce "meaning." Thus, for Baudrillard, the masses—indifferent and apathetic in the face of the messages which bombard them and which they refuse—absorb "the social" which disappears in a black hole of indifference, apathy, and cynicism.

Baudrillard also postulates "the end of history" (1988), claiming that in a media-saturated society no event attains historical consequences any longer beyond the present moment, both because change is so rapid and intense that no events can have a decisive impact, and because the society is so saturated with information that it has reached the point of inertia, where all events and ideas are simply absorbed into the cynical and oversaturated mediascape. Baudrillard's analysis implies as well that traditional social theory, which posits causality and social determination from stable structures like the economy or political institutions, is obsolete, for he questions whether social theory can any longer be said to be able to "represent" society at all, or to posit clear lines of causal determination.⁶ Kroker and Cook (1986) also take up the theme of the impossibility of delineating social causality in a society marked by implosion, fragmentation, rapid change, and metamorphosis. Instead, postmodern society is described as a flat, one-dimensional, "fantastic and grisly implosion of experience as Western culture itself runs under the signs of passive and suicidal nihilism" (Kroker and Cook 1986, 81).

For these social theories, it is no longer possible to discern a "depth dimension," an underlying reality, essence, or structure as when Marx discovered class interests behind ideology, or Freud discovered unconscious complexes between texts or actions of individuals. The erasure of history also flattens out experience, for lost in a postmodern present, one is cut off from those sedimented traditions, those continuities, those historical memories which nurtured historical consciousness and provided for a rich, textured, multidimensional present. Some postmodernists, like Baudrillard, in this situation postulate a radical presentism, a self-conscious erasure of history which eschews diachronic, historical analysis and contextualization in favor of synchronic description of the present moment. Jameson, by contrast, attempts to historicize and contextualize his analyses of postmodernism, though he too fears a loss of history in contemporary postmodern society.

Most postmodern social theory also exhibits a certain anti-utopianism, a certain political pessimism and renunciation of hopes for radical political change. For Lyotard, "there is sorrow in the *Zeitgeist*" (1984,

x), while Baudrillard claims that "melancholy" is the appropriate response to the disappearance of previous eras of history and theoretical-political constructions (1988). Much postmodern social theory is motivated by disillusionment with liberal ideals of progress and radical hopes for emancipation. Its political matrix is disappointment over failures of the radical movements of the 1960s to produce the desired results, followed by despair over conservative hegemony (or in France, the failure of the French socialist) in the 1980s. These disappointments have led postmodern theorists to either scale down their political projects and ambitions (as with Lyotard, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari) in order to focus on micro-politics, more local concerns and struggles, or with Baudrillard to abandon radical politics altogether (Kellner 1989b).

Furthermore, there is a certain ideological kinship and (mostly unarticulated) lines of continuity with theories of the post-industrial society. In a sense, current postmodern social theory replays many of the themes and positions of so-called "post-industrial society" and share, I would argue, their characteristic limitations and distortions. Both exhibit a form of technological determinism, with theorists of the post-industrial society such as Bell claiming that information and knowledge are the new "axial" or organizing, principles of society (Bell 1973, 1976), while postmodern theorists ascribe a variety of forms of extreme power to new technologies.⁷ Baudrillard, for example, reproduces McLuhan's technological determinism in his media theory by claiming that "the Medium is the Message," and thus reducing media to their formal effects while erasing content, possibilities of emancipatory or progressive uses, and alternative media from the purview of his theory (Kellner 1989b). Baudrillard assigns a primary role in constituting postmodern society to simulations, codes, models, and new technologies and completely erases political economy from his theory, claiming that "TV and information in general are a kind of catastrophe in Rene Thom's formal, topological sense: a radical, qualitative change in an entire system" (Baudrillard 1984, 18). Such theories posit an "autonomous technology" (see Winner 1977) which, as with theories of post-industrial society, is taken as the fundamental organizing principle of contemporary society.

Both postmodern theories and those of the post-industrial society thus make technological development the motor of social change and occlude the extent to which economic imperatives, or a dialectic between technology and the mode of production, continue to structure contemporary societies. Both erase human subjects and social classes as agents of social change and both explicitly renounce hope for radical social change. Both—despite the postmodern critique of totality—to-

talize and project a rupture or break within history that, as I shall argue, exaggerates the novelty of the contemporary moment and occludes continuities with the past. They take trends as constitutive facts, and developmental possibilities as finalities, and both assume that a possible future is already present. From this perspective, postmodern social theory can be seen as a continuation of theories of the post-industrial society in a new context and with new theoretical instruments. These "post" theories can thus be read as two successive attempts to identify new social conditions, to provide new theoretical paradigms, and to yield new sources of cultural capital during an era when undeniable change was forcing conscientious individuals to question old paradigms and theories.

Consequently, I would argue that many criticisms of earlier theories of the post-industrial society are relevant to debates over postmodern social theory, which shares some of the presuppositions and weaknesses of its predecessor (see Frankel 1987; Poster 1990 for critiques of theories of the post-industrial society). In some ways, however, postmodern theories might be seen as an advance over theories of post-industrial society by more adequately theorizing the role of culture in the constitution of contemporary societies, though some versions might be interpreted as a regression due to their excessive rhetoric, hyperbole, and lack of sustained empirical analysis (I am thinking here of Baudrillard).

Furthermore, theorists of the post-industrial society tended to subscribe to Enlightenment values of rationality, autonomy, and progress, often with a deep faith in science and technology. Postmodern theorists, by contrast, tend to be sharply critical of the Enlightenment and to affirm opposing values. Indeed, defenders of the postmodern turn in social theory argue that it is precisely the emphasis on notions of difference or pluralism that distinguishes postmodern theory and that constitutes its significance for contemporary social theory. Charles Lemert (1990), for instance, argues that the concept of difference championed by postmodern theorists demands that social theory attend to cultural, racial, gender, and other differences. On this view, postmodern theory is distinguished by refusal of a cultural imperialism that imposes the views of one's group on other groups or cultures, and that respects differences and discontinuities which are not absorbed into a homogenizing universal or general theory.

Wolfgang Ivers (1988) argues that the pluralistic perspectives of postmodern theory constitute an important contribution which has both theoretical and political implications. Ivers argues that the postmodern refusal to privilege a single discourse undermines the socialism and reductionism which infects much contemporary social

theory. Further, he believes that pluralist perspectives are also valuable for a postmodern politics which refuses to privilege one political subject or focus, instead championing a multiplicity of issues and movements. Critics of postmodern theory and politics complain in turn of a fetishism of difference in postmodern theory, or uncritical celebration of single-issue interest group politics, which fail to articulate common issues and universal political values (see Bronner 1990).

In the following section, I shall argue for more dialectical perspectives in the following section, I shall argue for more dialectical perspectives in social theory and politics which advocate differences and pluralism, as well as more global modes of thought and Marxist and feminist political perspectives. I shall argue that postmodern thought tends to be excessively one-sided in significant cases and suffers from a series of aporia which undermine key theoretical positions.

POSTMODERN APORIA

Some postmodern social theory privileges fragmentation as a key feature of texts, experience, and society itself in the postmodern era. Lyotard (1984) describes and celebrates a plurality of language games while attacking unitary concepts of reason and subjectivity and describes a schizophrenic fragmentation of experience as central to postmodern culture and claims that both postmodern subjectivity and texts are marked by lack of depth, fragmentation, and schizoid intensities alternating with an absence of affect (Jameson 1983, 119, 1984a, 71). Postmodern space too is fragmented, dispersed, and disorienting, requiring new modes of perception and cognitive mapping. Lyotard calls for a further pluralization and fragmentation of knowledge and politics on the grounds that totalities, systems, and consensus produces "terroristic oppression." And for Baudrillard, postmodernism itself can be described as a playing with the fragments and vestiges of past cultures, art forms, theories, etc. (Kellner 1989a).

From the standpoint of developments in contemporary capitalist society, postmodern social theory thus can be read as articulating social processes toward fragmentation and heterogeneity, and one of their contributions is to illuminate these trends. Yet there are also arguably trends towards increased centralization, new totalizations, and new forms of social organization as well (Kellner 1989a). For example, although there is an ever-proliferating product differentiation and market fragmentation in a capitalist consumer economy, there are also trends toward economic concentration, the extension of a world market system, and growing commodification as capitalism penetrates every sphere of everyday life and the totality of the globe from Peking to Topeka.

While there are new emphases on cultural differentiation and autonomy, a homogeneous mass consumer and media society is also working to standardize tastes, wants, and practices. Bureaucratization and administration also continue to be major trends of contemporary society and postmodern social theory tends to obscure these fundamental aspects of our everyday life and social experience.

In effect, postmodern social theory is highly one-sided, articulating tendencies toward fragmentation (Lyotard) or implosion (Baudrillard) while neglecting to properly conceptualize counter-tendencies. Likewise, in both the theoretical and political spheres it is sometimes valuable to stress differences, plurality, and heterogeneity while in other contexts it may be preferable to seek generalities, unity, and consensus. While in some contexts in which consensus is produced it may be forced and oppressive, it does not seem accurate to characterize all attempts at consensus as "terroristic" or oppressive. Likewise, in regard to Lyotard's championing parody over consensus, there seem to be at least some situations in which consensus might be preferable to parody, just as there might be some contexts in which attempts to capture universality and commonality might be preferable to articulating differences and dissent. Mobilizing progressive forces against reactionary programs like aid for the Nicaraguan contras, or consensus that attempts to curtail abortion rights, requires producing consensus that some actions (i.e., covert actions against democratically elected governments) are wrong while other rights (i.e., women's control of their own bodies) are legitimate. In a discussion of the relation between postmodernism and feminism, Fraser and Nicholson (1988) argue that one needs totalizing narratives that cut across the lines of race, gender, and class if one wants to engage in radical social theory and politics. They argue that Lyotard's "justice of multiplicities" "precludes one familiar, and arguably essential, version of normative political theory: identification and critique of macrostructures of inequality and injustice which cut across the boundaries separating relatively discrete practices and institutions. There is no place in Lyotard's universe for critique of pervasive axes of stratification, for critique of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race and class" (Fraser and Nicholson 1988, 377-378).

Consequently, while it is sometimes appropriate in theory and politics to valorize differences, in other contexts it is better, even necessary, to valorize macrostructures and consensus. Lyotard's epistemology, by contrast, makes a (positive) fetish out of difference and parody while stigmatizing such things as totality, grand narratives, consensus, and universality. Curiously, he does not, however, differentiate between different types of totality, instead completely rejecting any and

all totalizing modes of thought. Against this one-sided and terroristic epistemology, certain contemporary theorists (i.e., Rorty) operate with a more contextual epistemology which derives epistemological criteria from specific tasks, goals, and topics. Such a "conceptual pragmatism" is consistent with the spirit of Lyotard's emphasis on a plurality of language games but cuts against his proscriptions against certain kinds of social theory.

Consequently, against Lyotard one could argue that in some contexts it is necessary and desirable to use totalizing modes of thought to grasp certain empirical trends, to make connections between various realms of experience to contextualize events and institutions, and to target centers of oppression and domination. Yet due to Lyotard's polemic against totality and grand narratives, it is impossible—or undesirable—in principle to conceptualize totalizing social trends because of his ban on macrotheory. Yet this epistemological position disables social theory and raises questions concerning the legitimacy and effects of such a position. I would argue that just because some "narratives of legitimation" are highly dubious, politically suspect, and not very convincing does not entail that we should reject *all* grand narratives—that is, all of traditional philosophy and social theory which has systematic and comprehensive aims (see Kellner 1989a and Best 1989). Consequently, I propose that critical social theory today should conceptualize both totalities and differences, centralizing and decentralizing trends and institutions. Similarly, in political theory and practice it is sometimes preferable to stress plurality and the preservation of differences while in other contexts it is preferable to produce alliances and to articulate common interests.

In fact, Lyotard's absolutizing polemic against grand narratives points to a major aporia in certain French postmodern theories. For theories of a "postmodern condition" presuppose a very dramatic break from modernity. Consequently, the very concept of postmodernity, or a postmodern condition, presupposes a master narrative, a totalizing perspective, which envisages the transition from a previous stage of society to a new one. Such theorizing presupposes *both* a concept of a period of modernity *and* a presupposition of a radical break, or rupture, within history that leads to a totally new condition which justifies the term postmodern. Thus, the very concept "postmodern" seems to presuppose both a master narrative and some notion of totality, or some notion of a periodizing and totalizing thought—precisely the sort of epistemological operation and theoretical hubris which Lyotard and others oppose and want to do away with!

Against Lyotard, we might want to distinguish between metanarratives that tell a (say Cartesian, or Lockean) story about the foundation

of knowledge contrasted to the narratives of macro social theory that attempt to conceptualize and interpret a complex diversity of phenomena within a global or totalizing context. We might also distinguish between synchronic narratives that tell a story about a given society at a given point in history, and diachronic narratives that analyze historical change, discontinuities, and ruptures, thus suggesting that narrative and discontinuity are not opposed concepts. Lyotard, by contrast, tends to lump all "grand narratives" together and thus does violence to the diversity of theoretical narratives in our culture. Rejecting totalizing theories, I believe, simply covers over the problem of providing a theoretical analysis of the contemporary historical situation and points to the undertheorized nature of Lyotard's theory of the postmodern condition, which would require at least some sort of rather large narrative of the transition to postmodernity—a rather big and exciting story, one would think. There is also an inconsistency in Lyotard's call for a plurality and heterogeneity of language games juxtaposed to his exclusion from his kingdom of discourse of those grand narratives which he suggests have illicitly monopolized the discussion and proffered illegitimate claims in favor of their privilege.

In addition, when one does not specify and explicate the specific sort of narrative of contemporary society involved in one's theoretical gaming, there is a tendency to make use of the established narratives at one's disposal. For example, in the absence of an alternative theory of contemporary society, Lyotard uncritically accepts theories of "post-industrial society" and "postmodern culture" as accounts of the present age (1984, 3, 7, 37). Yet this move presupposes the validity of these narratives without defending his model and without an adequate social theory which would delineate the transformation suggested by the "post" in "post-industrial" or "postmodern." Indeed, Lyotard (inadvertently?) places himself within the camp of post-industrial theory by failing to more closely and critically examine this rather grand narrative which he himself makes use of.

Furthermore, it seems like a more promising venture to critically discuss, take apart, and perhaps reconstruct and rewrite the grand narratives of social theory rather than to just prohibit them from the terrain of social theory. It is likely—as Jameson argues—that narrative is a fundamental human way of organizing and making sense of our experience and that the narratives of social theory will continue to operate in our social analysis in any case (Jameson 1984b, xi). If this is so, it would seem preferable to bring to light the narratives of social theory so as to critically examine and dissect them rather than forcing them underground to escape censure by a Lyotardian Thought Police on the lookout for illicit narratives. And in general it seems better to

highlight and develop the narrative component of social theory and to be aware of the extent to which narrative is an important and arguably indispensable aspect of historiography and social theory (see Ricoeur 1984).

In fact, if Lyotard was consistent with his epistemology, he wouldn't play the "post" game at all, for the terminology of "post" imbricates one in a historical, sequential discourse that implies a master narrative, totalizing periodizations, and historical, sequential thinking—all modes of "modern" thought which Lyotard attacks. Occasionally, he takes note of this dilemma and attempts to extricate himself by trying to provide a different sense to the "post" in postmodern. In the highly convoluted appendix to the English translation of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard defines the postmodern as that which "puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself," that which works without rules and establishes new rules or models. From this perspective, "Post modern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" (Lyotard 1984, 81). In other words, postmodernism is merely a species of modernism that, like modernism, is radically innovative, produces its own rules and norms, and is in constant flux. Yet here Lyotard puts himself in the position of being for artistic modernism while against modern epistemology.

In other texts from the period, Lyotard concedes that "postmodern" is probably a very bad term because it conveys the idea of a historical 'periodization.' 'Periodizing,' however is still a 'classic' or 'modern' ideal. 'Postmodern' simply indicates a mood, or better a state of mind" (Lyotard 1986-1987, 209). Yet here too Lyotard is merely engaging in a verbal subterfuge and seems to both want to exploit the prestige of the "postmodern" (which he, after all, helped to promote) while extricating himself from some of the theoretical commitments of "post" discourse and from justifying one's use of the discourse.

Furthermore, it seems wrong to operate with unitary notions of a postmodern "condition," "scene," or whatever, for it would seem to be more in the spirit of postmodern thought (and more accurate!) to talk of postmodern scenes, trends, and texts which are themselves plural, multiple, heterogeneous, and often contradictory. One could also argue that postmodern social theory greatly exaggerates the alleged break or rupture in history from which it gains its currency and prestige. Indeed, neither Baudrillard nor Lyotard nor any other postmodern theorist has adequately theorized what is involved in a break or rupture between the modern and the postmodern. Baudrillard and Kroker and Cook dramatically proclaim a fundamental break in history with the advent of a new postmodern era without providing a clear account of the transition to postmodernity and without seeing or specifying the con-

tinuities between the previous era and the allegedly new one. Jameson gives a fairly precise periodization of postmodern culture and a detailed account of its differences from the culture of high modernism, yet while he is prepared to postulate the existence of a new stage of society in terms of important new developments within capitalism, he does not provide a detailed narrative of the transition from the stages of capitalism described by Marx, Lenin, and earlier Marxists, relying on a rather brief synopsis of Mandel instead of providing a more detailed analysis. And Lyotard in principle is prohibited from producing a postmodern social theory of this kind by his postmodern epistemology which explicitly renounces grand narratives and macro social theory.

Rather than simply positing a radical break in history, we should grasp the differences between the old and the new stages of society (or art, philosophy, etc.), and the continuities between the previous and new stages—a continuity constituted precisely by the ongoing primacy of capitalist relations of production in the current organization of society (Kellner 1989a). Thus, against postmodernists who celebrate the radically "new"—and rupture, discontinuity, and difference—I would argue that we need to characterize both the continuities and the discontinuities in the historical process and that this involves both pointing to ruptures and breaks in recent history as well as continuities (see also Barracough 1964; Foucault 1970; Derrida 1981, 24; Jameson 1983, 123; Hall 1986, 46).

Raymond Williams' (1977) distinctions between "residual," "dominant," and "emergent" cultures might help with this task. Williams proposes that rather than speaking of "stages" or "variations" within culture, we should recognize "the internal dynamic relations of any actual process. We have certainly still to speak of the 'dominant' and the 'effective,' and in these senses of the hegemonic. But we find that we have also to speak, and indeed with further differentiation of each, of the 'residual' and the 'emergent,' which in any real process, and at any moment in the process are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal of the characteristics of the 'dominant'" (Williams 1977, 121-122).

Using Williams' distinctions we might want to speak of postmodernity as an emergent tendency within a still dominant modernity which is haunted as well by various forms of residual, traditional cultures. Our present moment, in this view, is thus a contradictory transitional and borderline situation which does not yet allow any unambiguous affirmations concerning an alleged leap into full-blown postmodernity. At this point it appears premature to claim that we are fully in a new postmodern scene, though one might, using Williams' terminology, see postmodernity as an important new emergent tendency. Consequently,

while postmodern social theory has attempted to cross the borderline and to chart out the terrain of the new, its claims for an absolute break between modernity and postmodernity are not always convincing. Although we may be living within a borderline, or transitional space, between the modern and the postmodern, and may be entering a terrain where old modes of thought and language are not always useful, it seems that in many ways postmodern social theory exaggerates the break or rupture in history and thus covers over the extent to which the contemporary situation continues to be constituted by capitalism, patriarchy, bureaucracy, and other aspects of the past.

THEORIZING POSTMODERNITY: CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Although there has been both a faddish embrace of the new postmodern theories, and an equally fervent rejection of these theories—frequently predicated, I suspect, on reluctance to spend the time reading some difficult theoretical works which may subvert one's previous theoretical positions—I imagine that the postmodern debates will be with us for a long time to come. There is a sense in many disciplines of the end of an era and there are equally compelling searches for new paradigms, new politics, and new theories (see Jameson 1984a, 53; Baynes et al. 1987). The debates over the postmodern pose in a dramatic way the issue of competing paradigms for social theory and the need to choose paradigms that are most theoretically and practically applicable to social conditions in the present era. The debate also highlights the importance of social theory for a wide variety of discussion within the arts, philosophy, politics, and everyday life. Although one wing of postmodern theory wants to jettison, or dramatically revise, social theory, on the whole I think that the postmodernity debate highlights precisely the importance of social theory for a variety of disciplines and problems.

Indeed, I believe that the postmodernity debate points to the need for better and more social theory. Interestingly, social theory has gained a certain amount of prestige and currency in that much contemporary literary and cultural studies, philosophy, anthropology, and other disciplines are informed by critical social theory. The postmodern crossing of disciplinary boundaries sanctions and encourages such moves and the postmodern emphasis on the social construction of reality, language, theory, and human life requires that all disciplines concerned

with these phenomena theorize the social dimensions of texts, practices, discourses, and institutions. On the other hand, postmodern boundary subversion points to the need for social theory to draw on the most advanced currents of philosophy, cultural theory, political economy, history, and other disciplines.

In addition, the postmodern challenge forces social theory to clarify and strengthen its presuppositions, to develop its methodology to respond to postmodern critiques of representation, macro theory, and theories of social change. From this perspective, one of the positive challenges and developments in postmodern social theory is its exploding of boundaries between previous academic disciplines and its putting in question the very field of social theory. Postmodernists, like critical theorists, tend to subvert boundaries between disciplines and draw upon a sometimes bewildering variety of academic fields, discourses, and positions. Such an approach contributes to the development of a multidisciplinary social theory which could provide a richer, more comprehensive critical social theory of the present age by drawing on the latest developments in philosophy, anthropology, political economy, and the other human and social sciences. Such a multidimensional social theory could well be preferable to the more abstract disciplinary enterprises which would limit social theory to the domain of academic sociology, cut off from developments in other fields.

And yet the most radical postmodern theory rejects social theory altogether. Baudrillard, for example, argues that the social has vanished in the black hole of the masses. It is impossible to claim any longer that social theory represents social reality in a society of simulations, implosion, and hyperreality where it is no longer possible to distinguish between simulations and the real, illusion and reality (1983a, 1983b). Against such postmodern epistemological skepticism, Stuart Hall strenuously asserts that postmodern notions of the collapse or implosion of the real, the end of history, and the loss of meaning are highly exaggerated, and against these claims argues for the continuing importance of the problematics of representation, ideological critique, and political struggle. Hall argues that "there is all the difference in the world between the assertion that there is no one, final absolute meaning—no ultimate signified, only the endlessly sliding chain of signification, and, on the other hand, the assertion that meaning does not exist" (1986, 49).

As noted, Lyotard argues that we should abandon the project of developing a theory of society which inevitably involves the construction of a grand narrative. In contrast to traditional social theory, he offers a new paradigm for the practice of theory: just gaining (Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985). He argues that in opposition to the ambitious

systematic social theories of the past, social theorists should intervene in a wide variety of different sorts of language games, making moves in a plurality of debates while opposing the moves and positions of other players. Against the systematic theories of justice and notions of a just society in traditional social theory and politics, Lyotard and Thebaud argue for a "justice of multiplicities" and more modest and pragmatic notions of social and political change.

Certain postmodern theorists like Baudrillard also reject completely the problematic of radical politics, while Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, and others attempt to develop a micropolitics of desire, accompanied by proposals for a postmodern politics of differences (Foucault, margins [Derrida], and new social movements [Laclau and Mouffe]). As I have suggested, some of the theoretical commitments of postmodern theory, however, create obstacles to produce a politics of alliances, a macropolitics, or more traditional theories of radical social change. In addition to postmodern rejections of macrotheory, their rejections of concepts of the subject and rather impoverished theory of subjectivity provide real limitations to producing a postmodern politics. Theories of political change require theories of agency and the postmodern rejection of the subject and categories of agency raises the question of how one can develop political theories without theories of agency, of praxis and action.

Hall particularly objects to Baudrillard and other postmodern theorists' conception of the masses as a passive, sullen, "silent majority," and their political cynicism and nihilism which he relates to

the collapse of the critical French intelligentsia during the Mitterand era. What raises my political hackles is the comfortable way in which French intellectuals now take it upon themselves to declare when and for whom history ends, how the masses can or cannot be represented, when they are or are not a real historical force, when they can or cannot be mythically invoked in the French revolutionary tradition, etc. French intellectuals always had a tendency to use "the masses" in the abstract to fuel or underpin their own intellectual positions. Now that the intellectuals have renounced critical thought, they feel no inhibition in renouncing it on behalf of the masses—whose destinies they have only shared abstractly. . . . I think that Baudrillard needs to join the masses for a while, to be silent for two thirds of a century, just to see what it feels like. (1986, 51–53)

Other British cultural Marxists find postmodern theory to be equally debilitating in its political implications. Dick Hebdige recognizes the contributions in Baudrillard's theory but also articulates "suspicious" that the kind of will motivating his work seems to be poisonous. . . . there's not much future in it . . . he . . . seems to promote its other:

heresy, sorcery, irrationality" (1987, 70). Those allied with British cultural studies tend to be most concerned with what they see as the nefarious political effects of postmodern social theory, with Iain Chambers criticizing its dark, pessimistic vision (1986, 100; see also McRobbie 1986, 110), Hebdige its "cynicism/nihilism" and "fatalism" (1986, 92, 95), and John Fiske and Jon Watts attacking its lack of "respect" for social groups and its contempt for "the masses" (1986, 106). As opposed to Baudrillardian monolithic categories of the "masses," British cultural studies attempt to analyze society in terms of different classes, groups, and subcultures with their own unique patterns of experience, cultural styles, modes of resistance, etc., in a neo-Gramscian analysis which attempts to specify the concrete forces of hegemony and counterhegemonic forces and struggles in a specific socio-historical conjuncture.

Jürgen Habermas is also worried about the political and theoretical implications of postmodern social theory. Habermas has been arguing (1981, 1987) that the new postmodern social theories are irrationalist ideologies which constitute a regressive development in contemporary social theory. For example, in an article on "Das Moderne—ein unvollendete Projekt" (translated as "Modernity versus Postmodernity"), Habermas (1981) argued that the various theories of postmodernism are a form of attack on modernity and have their ideological precursors in various irrationalist and counter-Enlightenment theories. In a series of succeeding *Lectures on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas (1987) continued to attack the (primarily French) theories of postmodernity. He used standard methods of ideology critique and suggested that the French theories of postmodernity which had their roots in Nietzsche and Heidegger were aligned with the counter-Enlightenment, and exhibited a disturbing kinship with fascism. Against theories of postmodernity, Habermas defended "the project of modernity" which he believed was "an unfinished project" containing unfulfilled emancipatory potential.

Postmodernists by contrast see modernity, the Enlightenment, and its political projects as themselves flawed and containing the seeds of social domination. Against these critiques, Habermas and his colleagues have responded with critiques of the postmodern attacks on reason, enlightenment, universality, and so on by New French Theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard (Benhabib 1984; Honneth 1985; Frank 1983). The latter discussion has for the most part focused on postmodern theory, or forms of knowledge, and its allegedly irrationalist proclivities. With the exception of Habermas who takes on a broad panorama of postmodern theory, the critical theory response has focused on critiques of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984),

and on defenses of reason, universality, consensus, and normativity against the postmodern attack (see the discussion in Kellner 1989a).

These debates, I believe, have forced social theorists of different positions to define their fundamental presuppositions and to rethink what assumptions are involved in critical social theory and radical politics. Thus despite its limitations, postmodern social theory poses a provocative challenge to other traditions of social theory and theories of political change. Consequently, if contemporary social theorists want to continue to be relevant to the theoretical and political concerns of the present age, they must address the issues advanced by the postmodern challenge. This means that critical social theory today must attempt to theorize the new social conditions and phenomena analyzed by the postmodernists, and must demonstrate that categories and theories developed earlier continue to be applicable and illuminating in theorizing the new social conditions. This requires rethinking such enterprises as the Enlightenment, Marxism, critical theory, structuralism, feminism, and so on in terms of the new issues posed and the new challenges advanced by the current configurations of the media, communication societies, by cybernetics and design, by the restructuring of labor and production, by the new configurations of class, and by the new modes of the colonization of everyday life.¹⁰

For instance, in light of the continued vitality and hegemony of capitalism, I would prefer to situate and analyze contemporary culture and social conditions in terms of a theory of techno-capitalism that would present the current social order in the capitalist countries as a synthesis of new technologies and capitalism that is characterized by new technical, social, and cultural forms combining with capitalist relations of production to create the social matrix of our times (Kellner 1989a). This move points to continuities with the social theories of the past (i.e., Marxism) and the need to revive, update, expand, and develop previous theories in the light of contemporary conditions. Analyzing the new configurations of capitalism and technology would allow emphasis on the new role of information, media, consumerism, the imposition of aesthetics and commodification, and other themes stressed by postmodernists while situating these developments within a larger socio-historical context (Kellner 1989a, 1990).

It is my view that postmodern social theorists like Baudrillard, Lyotard, Foucault, and Kroker and Cook have made a serious theoretical and political mistake in severing their work from the Marxian critique of capitalism precisely at a point when the logic of capital accumulation has been playing an increasingly important role in structuring the new stage of society which I conceptualize as a new technological restructuring in a techno-capital society. Indeed, I would argue that

Marxian categories are of central importance precisely in analyzing the phenomena focused on by postmodern social theory: the consumer society, the media, information, computers, etc. Although theorists of both the post-industrial society and postmodern society posit the primacy of knowledge and information as new principles of social organization, it is arguably capitalism that is determining what sort of media, information, computers, etc. are being produced and distributed according to its logic and interests. That is, in techno-capitalist societies, information, as Herbert Schiller (1981, 1984) and others have shown, is being more and more commodified, accessible only to those who can pay for it. Education itself is becoming more and more commodified as computers become essential to the process of education, and while more domains of knowledge and information themselves are commodified and transmitted through computers (I'm thinking both of computer learning programs which force consumers to buy programs to learn typing, math, history, foreign languages, etc., as well as modem programs and data bases which provide access to an abundance of information, entertainment, networking, etc. via computer for those who can afford to pay its per minute information prices).

Interestingly, in a recent article, Lyotard himself has made this point, arguing: "The major development of the last twenty years, expressed in the most rapid terms of political economy and historical periodization, has been the transformation of language into a productive commodity: phrases considered as messages to encode, decode, transmit, and order (by the bundle) to reproduce, conserve, and keep available (memories), to combine and conclude [calculations], and to oppose (games, conflicts, cybernetics); and the establishment of a unit of measure that is also a price unit, in other words, information. The effects of the penetration of capitalism into language are just beginning to be felt" (Lyotard 1986-1987, 217).

Yet against Lyotard and others who reject macrotheory, the category of totality, or meta-narratives, I would argue that it is precisely now that we need such totalizing theories to capture the new totalizations being undertaken by capitalism in the realm of consumption, the media, information, etc. From this perspective one needs totalizing theories to conceptualize, describe, and interpret totalizing social processes (Kellner 1989a), just as one needs political theories to articulate common or general interests that cut across divisions of gender, race, and class (Fraser and Nicholson 1988; Bronner 1990). Without such macrotheories that attempt to cognitively map the new forms of social development and the relationships between spheres like the economy, culture, education, politics, we are condemned to live among the fragments without clear indications of what impact new technologies and

social developments are having on the various domains of our social life. "Cognitive mapping" is therefore necessary to provide theoretical and political orientation as we move into a new and confusing social terrain (Jameson 1988).

NOTES

1. These distinctions are made by Mike Featherstone (1988) in the introduction to a special issue of *Theory, Culture, and Society* dedicated to postmodernism and social theory. Other special journal issues devoted to postmodernism include *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10(2), Summer 1986; *Cultural Critique* 5, 1986-1987; and *Social Text* 18, Winter 1987/88, on postmodern social theory; see also Denzin 1987 and Diekens and Fomana 1990.
2. Habermas also projected the possibility of a postmodern social organization in *Legitimation Crisis* (1975): "The interest behind the examination of crisis tendencies in late- and post-capitalist class societies is in exploring the possibilities of a 'post-modern' society—that is, a historically new principle of organization and not a different name for the surprising vigor of an aged capitalism" (17). Yet Habermas has never really undertaken an inquiry into what might follow modernity and shall generally treated postmodern theories as irrationalist ideologies—a point that I shall take up later.
3. Lyotard's earlier work *Discours, Figure* (1971) (see Lash [1988]) and later *Just Gaming* (with Thebaud 1985) and *Le Différend* (1989) could also be taken as prototypical postmodern texts.
4. Rejecting the structuralist, semiological, and formalist theories of language previously dominant in France, Lyotard adopts the pragmatic approach to language which would analyze its uses, rules, and practices as moves in a language game—an approach developed by Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, and others. Interestingly enough, his opponent Habermas adopts a similar approach.
5. Benhabib (1984) points out a contradiction in Lyotard's program in which Lyotard seems unable to decide if he wishes to maintain a relativist and pluralist heterogeneity of language games or develop an epistemological standpoint from which he can criticize "grand narratives" or the "performativity" of legitimation practices of the sciences: "The choice is still between an uncritical polytheism and a self-conscious recognition of the need for criteria of validity, and the attempt to reflectively ground them" (Benhabib 1984, 111). Benhabib suggests that Lyotard doesn't seem to be able to make the choice, though he seems to tend toward the pluralism and relativism pole, which would mean that he does not really have a standpoint from which he can criticize competing positions. Habermas, by contrast, has exerted much theoretical labor in attempting to develop a critical standpoint for critical theory today.
6. For a debate over the ways that postmodernism problematizes social theory and puts in question established theory, see the exchanges between Denzin (1986, 1987) and Bogard (1987).
7. Lyotard, as noted, explicitly characterizes postmodern society as the computerization of society, thus replaying a central theme of the "post-industrial society" and the "information society" that knowledge and information are fundamental organizing principles of society. He differs, however, by sometimes insisting that capitalism continues to be a fundamental organizing principle (Lyotard 1984, 1986-1987, 215). These resurres, however, point to inadequacies in his own theory which has never developed analyses of the relationships between capitalism and technol-

ogy. In the most curious assimilation of social theory and human beings to machines, in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1977) use the concept of "desiring machines" to describe human beings and use the mechanistic concept of flows and intensities of desire as the basis for their revolutionary theory.

8. See Foucault 1970. For a provocative discussion of rupture in history and the categories needed to conceptualize both continuity and discontinuity, see Foucault 1972.

9. For a critical review of some of these positions, see Ryan 1988 and Best and Keller 1990.

10. Several important works on feminism and postmodernism were published while my text was going to press. They include Kipnis 1988, Lombard 1989, Flax 1990, Nicholson 1990.

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