POSTMODERNISM AND THE HUMAN SUBJECT

POSTMODERNISM AND THE HUMAN SUBJECT:

THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

By

JEFFREY NOONAN, B.A, M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (1996)   McMaster University
(Philosophy)   Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Postmodernism and the Human Subject: The Return of
the Repressed.

AUTHOR: Jeffrey Noonan, B.A.(York), M.A. (McMaster)

SUPERVISOR: Professor John McMurtry

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 307

Abstract

According to postmodern philosophy, the great political errors and crimes of the modern period may be traced back to the essentialism of modern thought. Modernity sought to base universal political projects upon a universal definition of humanity as a rationally self-determining species. However, such a view of humanity is opposed to the real cultural differences which characterize real communities. The essentialist picture of human being, far from furthering the work of freedom, legitimates the suppression of any differences judged to be unessential.

Postmodernism hopes to overcome the suppression of differences by rejecting the notion of subjecthood upon which modernity rested. However, by giving up the idea that humanity is essentially self-determining, postmodern politics become incoherent. The concern for the oppressed which animates postmodern philosophy pre-supposes what postmodern critique denies- a real, universal human capacity to alter circumstances in accordance with self-given plans.

Acknowledgments

As philosophy is a discipline which preserves its past in its present, anyone who sets out to make an original contribution must first recognize all those who played a part in the elaboration of whatever tradition of philosophy one works within. In the particular context of this doctoral dissertation, my first thanks must go to my supervisor, Dr. John McMurtry, whose illuminating criticisms and unflagging patience were essential. Gratitude must also be extended to Dr. Marina Vitkin and Dr. Evan Simpson, the other members of my committee. Their insights and evaluations were also indispensable. Finally, special thanks should be extended to Dr. Jay Lampert, whose generosity and commitment in a difficult situation were greatly appreciated.

It takes more than academic support to complete a dissertation. For all her assistance, support, and love along the way, I must thank Simone. As well, for all her help throughout the years, for her continuing belief in me, I must thank my mother. As well, I must extend thanks to Jack, whose pursuit of beauty without regard to fashion has been a lasting inspiration. Finally, to all those with whom I have worked politically over the years, thank you for keeping me focused on what is really important.

This work is dedicated to the memory of my father, who unfortunately did not live to see its completion.

iv

Table of Contents

Introduction: Fragmented Horizons

The legacy of the Enlightenment is one of ambiguity. While the formal rule of law, representative democracy, and scientific reason have entrenched themselves in the West, the easy cosmopolitanism and purportedly essential *bienfaisance* of humanity are rather less in evidence. It is unfortunate that the latter values have suffered most since it grows more manifest each day that the former, important as they may be, are inadequate guarantors of robust freedom. Indeed, notwithstanding the considerable historical import of natural science and liberalism and their real contribution to the alleviation of human suffering, it is nevertheless true that they have been realized on the back of an economic system which has rapaciously devoured resources, entrenched absurd levels of inequality, and been extended across the globe with the most frightening violence. Schiller was more prophetic than he could have known when he wrote in 1795 that, "Civilization, far from setting us free, in fact creates some new need with every new power it creates in us...Thus do we see the spirit of the age wavering between perversity and

brutality."[1]

Two hundred years later the debate concerning the Enlightenment still burns. From France has come in the last three decades a powerful reconsideration of that entire modern period whose true birthplace was the forests of America and the streets of Paris in the late eighteenth century. For the three most astute philosophical critics of this period, Jean Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, the understanding of humanity which grounded these liberal revolutions, as well as the radical attempt to surpass liberalism in the East, has reached its limit. If, as they contend, the critical mind must now confront an entirely new set of possibilities, will we be able to feel, like Wordsworth, that it "[will be] bliss in that dawn to be alive?"

Such a hope may appear to be groundless. We poison ourselves as we produce the means of subsistence, real allegiance to contemporary political systems has been replaced by cynicism and active embrace of stupefying pastimes, and brutal ethnic warfare remains the legacy of European imperialism. Worse than all this, perhaps, is that the symbol of the attempt to surpass this world is not a red flag flying over a free republic of co-operatively self-creative individuals, but the breadline, the Gulag and the tank.

---

[1]Friedrich Schiller, *Letters On The Aesthetic Education of Man,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1989, pp. 27, 29.

How did the monster of Stalinism arise? But can one even call it a monster, an accident? Perhaps today we must conclude that this outcome was not a perversion of human nature, but rather the natural outcome of the idea that there is a human nature. This reasoning animates the critique of the modern period which it is the task of the present investigation to examine. While there may be room for critical vigilance over social practices, postmodern, anti-humanist criticism argues that such vigilance can no longer be based on the idea that humanity is a species defined by essential capacities which can be realized in a definite society.

What is this idea of human nature which, postmodern thought claims, must be rejected today in the interests of a different, less violent, less oppressive world? The great French materialist d'Holbach provides perhaps the most powerful articulation of this idea in the Enlightenment period:

> Malgré tous les efforts de la tyranny, malgré les
> violences et les ruses du sacerdoce, malgré les soins
> vigilents du tous les ennemis du genre humaine, la race
> humaine s'éclaira, les nations connaitront leurs
> veritables interets, une multitude des rayons assemblés
> formera quelque jour une masse immense de lumière qui
> échauffera tous les couers, qui éclaira tous les
> ésprits.[2]

There are three crucial claims here that one encounters again

---

[2]Quoted in, Pierre Navile, *D'Holbach*, (Paris: Gallimard), 1943, pp.359-360. The quotation comes from d'Holbach's "Essai sur les préjugés."

in the thought of the two most influential nineteenth century
critics of the Enlightenment, Hegel and Marx. The first is
that humanity may be defined in universal terms by reference
to defining interets. The second is that humanity can be in
contradiction with itself in so far as these essential
interests are not concretely realized in particular societies.
The third is that this contradiction can be overcome through
collective practices which bring about social and political
transformations.

While Hegel and Marx were both critics of the abstract
individualism characteristic of Enlightenment thought (as
exemplified by the Constitution of the French Republic) both
nevertheless maintain and develop the understanding of
subjecthood evident in d'Holbach's claim. Hegel's attempt to
trace the development of self-consciousness in history in *The
Phenomenology of Spirit* is an essential moment in the
articulation of this understanding. The Enlightenment
represents for Hegel the extreme point of the individuation of
rationality. What interests me here, however, is not Hegel's
periodization of history but the understanding of human self-
consciousness which drives the historical process. Moving
history is an active human power to negate and then
reconstitute the immediate environment in accordance with ever
more inclusive rational criteria. As he describes this power
in general:

> ...the life of Spirit is not a life that shrinks from
> death and keeps itself untouched by devastation...It

> wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it
> finds itself. It is this power, not as something
> positive, which closes its eyes to the negative... on
> the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the
> negative in the face, and tarrying with it...This power
> is identical to what we earlier called the Subject,
> which, by giving determinateness an existence in its
> own element supersedes abstract immediacy... and thus
> is authentic substance.[3]

Hegel characterizes the historical process as a movement in
which the world as given is made into a human world through
the conscious production of authentic substance.

These two ancient categories, Subject and Substance,
are dynamically interrelated in a process of collective human
self-creation. Substance is no longer, as with Aristotle,
that which is self-subsistent. Self-subsistence is an
abstract definition of substance. Logically, genuine
substance is that which has developed its immanent potential
to the highest degree. Concretely, authentic substance is a
rational community defined by the mutual recognition of each
citizen's freedom. Within this community all oppositions
between subject and object have been resolved. Individual
human beings understand their rootedness in the ethical
community, their interdependence, and their active,
transformative role in the natural world.

The key idea here is that authentic substance is the
objective realization of the essence of the Subject. That is,
this community of mutually recognizing selves understands that

---

[3]G.W.F.Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.Miller
translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1987, p.19.

the community is both the universal ground and product of the power of the interrelated subjects. History is a human product. While Marx objected to Hegel's idealist metaphysics and his conservative justification of the Prussian state, he nevertheless saw clearly the radical implications of the claim that positive freedom is found only in a social structure which allows humanity to express its self-creative essence in a self-conscious manner. *The Phenomenology*, in Marx's view, expressed a vision of humanity developing itself actively through both practice and reflection on the limitations of given practices, meeting contradictions and overcoming them through new forms of action:

> The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phenomenology*...
> is thus first that Hegel conceives of the self-creation
> of man as a process...that he grasps the essence of
> labour, and comprehends objective man- true, because
> real man- as the outcome of man's own labour.[4]

The claim that the essence of humanity is subjecthood means that humanity is a self-determining species. As an essence, subjecthood is not a static form but a dynamic capacity which gives rise to new social structures progressively more adequate to the human essence. That is, society becomes free to the extent that its resources are utilized not for private gain but for collective enrichment. The devotion of collectively produced resources to the satisfaction of humanity's natural needs frees individuals to realize and

---

[4]Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, (New York: International Publishers), 1977, p.177.

express themselves according to their unique potential. In
this reading, political struggles against oppression are
struggles against the systematic restriction of this self-
creative capacity.

Thus, what animates the divergent programmes glossed
above is the idea, so evident in d'Holbach's statement, that
humanity can control its destiny by coming to understand its
history and on the basis of that understanding, create a
society which realizes the universal interests of the species.
This idea has been employed to legitimate the manifold
revolutions of modern times. In each case the essence of
humanity was to have finally come into its own, to have freed
itself from all alien, external determinations. Yet, the
universalism of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and
Citizen was undermined by the entrenched power imbalances of
the capitalist economy. Formal rights and negative freedom
have not been sufficient to allow all citizens in the west to
fulfil their goals and hopes. Indeed, these structures,
important as they are, ultimately become justifications for
the poverty and impotence of the majority of citizens.
Communism's attempt to surpass liberalism, on the other hand,
failed in its international mission. The isolation of the
Russian Revolution released the immanent dangers of
bureaucratism and the result was the economic and political
disaster called Stalinism.

Thus, nowhere has the idea of positive human freedom

been realized, for everywhere deep-seated social problems remain the norm. Perhaps, therefore, the way forward is to abandon this very idea. Perhaps jettisoning this universal perspective will result in an attitude of acceptance towards an unbounded plurality of dimensions of human experience. Perhaps if we stop positing essential goals we will stop needing violence and oppression to make others conform to those goals. Such is the idea which animates the postmodern challenge to all forms of essentialist, humanist modern theory.

Traces of the Postmodern

While historical precedents for any position can always be found, and while this is often crucial, it is sometimes necessary to try and think through a position in its specificity. In the present context this entails foregoing an examination of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian roots of postmodern thought. This is not to minimize the importance of these roots but rather to emphasize the unique political dimension of the thought in question here. While Nietzsche and Heidegger may provide ammunition for the postmodern critique of metaphysics, neither articulated their work as an explicit attempt to let those who have been excluded and oppressed by metaphysics have their say. Indeed, the opposite was the case. However, it is this link between the critique of modern theory and the creation of a space for the various "others" excluded by the modern notion of humanity that will be the focus of the present examination of postmodern anti-humanism.

In the most general terms, this work will examine the postmodern critique of the underlying grounds of the rational humanism, which, according to postmodern thought, underwrites

both liberalism and socialism. What is radical about
postmodernism is that it seeks to articulate its critique in a
language which is other than rational humanism. It seeks out
a theoretical space which does not posit as a goal a society
in which positive freedom will be realized. Indeed, it gives
up on the notions of goal and positive freedom altogether. It
does so because of the belief that all total political
strategies rooted in a notion of human essence are predicated
upon a series of exclusions which have not meant the
realization of universal freedom, but rather the legitimation
of the rule of particular groups over other particular groups.
Postmodern critique thus casts out for a way to embrace
particularity and difference so as to, at the very least, not
create further exclusions, and at best, to cultivate a new way
of thinking about otherness which will confront the present
order with that which it has always had to exclude.

 While this is indeed a worthy enterprise, I will argue
that there is a deeply-rooted contradiction at its
philosophical core. The notion that humanity is to be
understood as essentially self-determining, that it is endowed
with a self-creative capacity from which the structure of a
free society can be derived, is criticized because this has
meant concretely that different possibilities and voices are
necessarily ruled out. At a philosophical level the critique
seeks to demonstrate that this notion of humanity is naively
naturalistic, that it cannot come to terms with the historical

and cultural dynamics which alone are definitive of human beings and which are always changing and different. If humans are nothing but the functions of the diverse cultural contents which concretely exist, then there is no real basis for a universal notion of human being. Any such notion is ultimately unfounded as well as exclusionary and oppressive.

However, if a universal notion of humanity is both mistaken and oppressive, and people are the functions of dynamics which do not derive from intentional human activity, postmodern criticism undermines its own political values. Postmodern politics concerns the release of suppressed voices from the social bonds which suppress those voices. If this suppression is wrong it must be because an external force is brought to bear on the group in question which does not correspond to what those voices would say for themselves if they were released from the bonds. However, postmodern criticism contends that humans lack the capacity to say what they are because concrete individuals and groups are constructed by forces beyond their control. In other words, humans lack the capacity to determine circumstances in accordance with self-determined plans, we are always under the sway of uncontrollable forces. Nevertheless, oppression is conceived of by postmodern thought as the suppression of certain groups by the given order. If postmodern criticism conceives of oppression, therefore, it must presuppose a difference between what people are in fact and what they are

in essence, ie, what they could make themselves to be in changed circumstances. In the absence of this idea the critique of externally imposed definitions would be groundless.

Before beginning the task of validating this thesis a note on the selection of texts and the structure of the thesis is in order. As the notion of postmodernity has infiltrated the entire domain of the humanities and the social sciences, the precise meaning of the term is itself a source of debate. The diversity of postmodern positions is further complicated by the fact that a key postmodern claim is that precise definitions are impossible. The present dissertation will not concern itself with the adjudication of disputes within sociology, historiography, art history and cultural theory as to the meaning and relevance of the term "postmodern." The focus will be restricted to the implications of postmodern thought for critical political philosophy.

Of course, restricting the focus does not obviate the need for a working definition of that which is being focused upon. The great diversity and novelty of postmodern positions notwithstanding, one key idea crops up in the vast majority of postmodern texts, and that idea is that the subject of modernity has disappeared. Thus. literary criticism discusses the disappearance of the author, art history and cultural studies contest the notions of the avant garde and individual creativity. As it is the purview of philosophy to evaluate

positions at the level of the highest generality, and as this is primarily a work of philosophy, postmodernism will be defined as any theory which takes as its central goal the re-thinking of positions which relied for their initial coherence upon an essentialist notion of human subjecthood. The defining trait of postmodern thought is, for present purposes, its anti-humanism, its contention that humanity is not defined by any universal capacity and lacks all essential interests. This definition obliges the present work to restrict its focus to the general philosophical deconstruction of human subjecthood.

Just as postmodern thought in general is diverse, so too is postmodern philosophy. Thus, the same problem of selecting defining texts of the discipline in general returns in the selection of postmodern philosophical texts in particular. Although the number of postmodern philosophical texts has become legion over the last two decades, three figures appear time and again. These three figures, Jean Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, will thus serve as the particular focus of the present investigation. From their works derive the general *philosophical* arguments which have come to shape postmodern thinking generally. As it is the task of the dissertation to investigate the underlying philosophical arguments governing the decentering and deconstruction of the subject, it is necessary to concentrate on these three figures.

Nevertheless, the analysis of these three figures is governed by the idea that they represent a shared philosophical commitment to the critique of essentialist conceptions of subjecthood. Thus, the problem of diversity returns yet again. For it is manifest that these thinkers have different interests and take different roads in the pursuit of those interests. Therefore, Part One of the thesis will have to demonstrate that there is in fact unity on the key issues involved in the critique of subjecthood. The only feasible way to achieve this goal is to offer, in succession, exegeses of each thinker's work with regard to the general position at issue in each chapter. In this manner the points of convergence will make themselves apparent. Each chapter will conclude with a resume of the general philosophical issue. This process will be cumulative so that by the conclusion of Part One the defining features of radical postmodern politics will have emerged.

There are, however, obviously other important postmodern thinkers. Perhaps the most notable is Jean Baudrillard. I have chosen to exclude Baudrillard not because he does not provide valuable insight into the postmodern condition, but because he does not offer a unique philosophical position. If the aim of the thesis were to determine the sociological implications of postmodernism he would have been considered. However, as the dissertation is concerned with social structure only in so far as it has an

impact upon the philosophical critique of essentialist subjecthood, an examination of Baudrillard is not necessary.

Three other thinkers also appear to be candidates for investigation. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have also been centrally associated with postmodern political philosophy, but have not been included here. I have chosen to exclude them because their political positions do not always accord with the defining anti-humanism of radical postmodern thought. Their best known work, *Anti-Oedipus,* rests upon a concept of desire which is universal and naturalist. They concern themselves with the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist "territorializations" of desire and operate with a notion of positive freedom, both of which are rejected by postmodern anti-humanism.[5] Finally, the American philosopher Richard Rorty has provided important philosophical perspectives on the implications of postmodernism. However, Rorty employs postmodern positions to justify liberalism, while the concern here is to understand whether or not postmodern philosophy can coherently inform a radical political critique. If anything, Rorty would count as evidence against postmodern radicalism, and therefore will not be considered in detail.

---

[5]See, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1989. Guattari has always maintained a close affiliation to a certain brand of communism. See his work with the Italian revolutionary Toni Negri, *Communists Like Us,* (New York: Semiotexte(e)), 1989, for evidence of this position.

Finally, a note on the structure of the argument. Part One will be concerned with an exegesis of the major works of Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida. This interpretation is guided by the belief that these thinkers share certain basic premises with regard to the political implications of humanist philosophy and the function of the foundation of that philosophy, (an essentialist concept of subjecthood). To the extent that Part One is argumentative, it will defend the thesis that all three thinkers contend that subjecthood follows from an exclusionary mode of thought which is at the root of contemporary forms of oppression and domination. In order to escape from the logic of domination, subjecthood must be rejected in favour of the diverse subject-positions variously constructed by irreducible cultural-linguistic dynamics. Part One will be divided into four chapters. It will begin with a survey of the historical changes each author believes to have occurred over the past several decades and then consider the philosophical arguments which each believes are appropriate to the new context. Part One will conclude with an examination of the political consequences of the postmodern decentering of subjecthood and the repudiation of universal political-normative criteria which this decentering entails.

Part Two will concern itself with a critical interrogation of the politics entailed by the postmodern position discovered in Part One. The second part will begin

with a concise recapitulation of the basic structure of radical postmodern politics. Following this review, the next three chapters will argue that such politics must fall into three major self-contradictions. In each case, the values which orient postmodern critique are undermined by the conclusions of postmodern social analysis. First, the attempt to make difference and diversity primary undermines the unity of oppressed groups and draws attention away from the basic forces which structure oppression. Thought through consistently, radical pluralism would dissolve, rather than strengthen, opposition to the forces of homogenization. Second, the identification of universalist thought *per se* with imperialism, which is made in defence of cultural plurality on a global scale, contradicts the universal foundations which groups in struggle against Western imperialism claim for their struggles. Postmodern readings of these struggles again end up counterposed to the postmodern values (openness towards differences, a willingness to let the other speak) which guide postmodernism because these readings undermine the foundations from which concrete struggles proceed. This outcome opens up the fundamental contradiction of postmodern thought. The final chapter will reveal why even the postmodern affirmation of difference as a social value pre-supposes the essentialist concept of subjecthood it so stringently rejects. The outline now complete, the complex task of colouring it in remains.

Part One: Postmodern Critique

1.1: The Emergence of Difference

It will perhaps serve purposes of clarity if postmodern philosophy is first examined from the side of what it is not. In each of the cases to be examined the notion of a total theory of society and history is explicitly rejected. The idea that society is a totality in the Kantian sense of "plurality conceived of as unity"[6] is rejected as historically antiquated, theoretically inadequate, and politically oppressive. In the following section the claim of historical superannuation will be investigated.

To conceive of society as a totality is to relate the diverse institutions, practices, groups and individuals of which it is composed to a central, fundamental governing dynamic. The plurality of social phenomena is thus conceived of as unitary to the extent that each phenomenon is shown to be relatively determined in its nature and function by the governing principle. The Marxist focus on the commodity is

---

[6]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (New York: MacMillan), 1987, p.116.

perhaps paradigmatic here. A concise example may prove to be a useful introduction.

Marxism defines capitalism as an economic system which is rooted in the commodification of labour-power. This relationship is taken as the foundation from which a complete analysis of the social must proceed. The main drive of the capitalist is to maximize profit and minimize labour-costs. This gives rise to progressive automation. Thus, scientific research is understood as proceeding from an economic imperative which reduces the entire world to the status of raw material awaiting exploitation (as opposed to our own nature externalized through productive activity).[7] Therefore, the destructive effects of technology may be explained as the result of an economic system whose goal is profit. If it is the case that ecological damage follows from the structure of the economy, then there are political implications as well. If the environmental movement now desires a better planet, it should harness itself to a more broad-based struggle against the entire system, since if it attacks technology in the abstract it misses the basic problem. One could go on with other examples, but the general point should be clear. A totalized theory seeks to relate seemingly independent issues back to a key dynamic, claiming that unless such relationships are established one's understanding remains abstract.

---

[7]See Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p.114.

A concrete understanding demands that empirically distinct phenomena be understood both in their independence and in relation to the governing principle. The governing dynamic is discovered through empirical research and in turn guides further investigations. For example, one could examine the ways in which corporations struggle against environmental legislation, the fact that most scientific research is sponsored by large corporations, that economic decisions are made without regard to environmental costs, and that major environmental problems are the result of capitalist industrialization as strong evidence that the relationship asserted above exists. Thus, totalizing theory seeks to understand society according to a governing principle which is itself dynamic and in a process of historical development. The principle generates new phenomena which in turn modify the operation of the principle.

This historical element leads to a second characteristic of totalized theory of a Marxist sort. As well as stressing synchronic organization, such theory also emphasizes progressive diachronic connection. Each successive social totality is seen to have developed out of the previous one, and to be a response to immanent problems the old shape could not solve. History is thus defined as a progressive movement in which more complex societies evolve and in which greater possibilities for human freedom develop. Capitalism, for example, has greatly increased the understanding of

nature, has given rise to new productive capacities, and has linked the globe in such a way that parochial attachments to local traditions become harder to maintain. From the Marxist standpoint this creates the possibility of a global society in which natural scarcity is overcome, which frees people for self-creative activities.

The problem, for postmodern thought, is that such an outcome has not occurred. It is this failure which animates the rejection of totalized theory and progressivist models of historical change characteristic of postmodern philosophy. According to postmodern thought, rigorous examination discloses that what appears to be theoretical analysis is in fact an interpretation of events which claims exclusive validity. gloss The function of such metanarratives is not only to explain these events, but rather to legitimate the position of the theorist who explains them and to rule out other interpretations. This is the position of Jean Francois Lyotard, but it is one which, as will become evident, is shared by Foucault and Derrida.

As Lyotard defines postmodernity, it is "incredulity towards metanarratives"[8] that is, towards any general explanation of events by reference to some general principle, whether this be, "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working

---

[8]Jean   Francois   Lyotard,   *The   Postmodern   Condition,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1984, p.xxiv.

subject, or the creation of wealth."[9] Against these

metanarratives Lyotard, and postmodern thinking generally, has

consistently affirmed limited interpretations of particular

phenomena. Lyotard began this critique of total theory and

progressivist history before he applied the term "postmodern"

to his work. What would become a defining feature of

postmodern thought is expressed clearly in Lyotard's idea of

"libidinal history:"

> Une histoire libidinale se refuse à cette finalité qui
> est celle du savoir et du pouvoir princiers. Il
> lui faut au moins appliquer a son "corpus"... le
> principe de relativité généralisée que les physicennes
> de la universe du noyau connaissent bien, et
> qu'implique qu'il n'y a pas de poste priviligée pour le
> déchiffrage des organizations d'energie.[10]

One sees here two themes which run throughout Lyotard's work.

The first is his affinity for generalizing the conclusions of

the relativity prevalent in contemporary physics. The second

is his on-going attempt to link macrotheory and centralized

forms of political control.

Lyotard roots his critique of totalizing theory within

an historical analysis of the post-Second World War globe.

This world is characterized by growing scientific

specialization and increasingly fragmented sites of political

struggle. The relationship between these two forces is the

central focus of his ground-breaking work, *The Postmodern*

---

[9]*Ibid.*, p.xxiii.

[10]Jean Francois Lyotard, *Rudiments paiennes,* (Paris: Union
Generale D'Editions), 1977, pp.164-165.

Condition.

Lyotard contends that the very development of rationality in the west is responsible for the dissolution of the link between reason and freedom. Ever more numerous branches of knowledge have developed and each has generated an ever growing collection of data.   This fragmentation, driven forward by the principle of performativity, or efficiency, extends out from the sciences and works its shattering effects throughout society. Politics becomes management, work is reduced to meaningless detail labour, consumer society develops to fill the void left by mind-numbing occupations, and that in turn develops a host of trivial pastimes. In short, people find themselves situated within ever more numerous social practices over which they have no control and between which no necessary connections are to be found:

> We may form a pessimistic picture of this splintering:
> nobody speaks all those languages, they have no
> universal metalanguage, the project of a system subject
> is a failure, the goal of emancipation has nothing to
> do with science, we are all stuck in the positivism of
> this or that discipline of learning, the learned
> scholars have turned into scientists, the diminished
> tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no
> one can master them all. Speculative or humanist
> philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimation
> duties, which explains why philosophy is
> facing a crisis wherever it persists in arrogating such
> functions...[11]

At root, Lyotard contends that social complexity has simply exceeded the explanatory capacity of totalizing thought. This complexity proceeds, paradoxically, from a general

---

[11]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* p.41.

dynamic of scientific development.

Be that as it may, the accelerating specialization of social roles does raise questions about the adequacy of totalizing theory. If it is perhaps no longer the case that one can think of society as unified by an essential dynamic, it may also be necessary to question the correlative attempt to provide a unified account of history. Lyotard raises this problem in the assertion cited above to the effect that humanistic philosophy is facing a crisis. Its hero, the "system-subject," is a failure. Science is not unambiguously harnessed to human freedom. The unbridled development of technology has meant ecological destruction and the subjugation of non-technological cultures just as much as it has meant increased control over the environment. This failure entails the failure, for Lyotard, of each modern metanarrative. Neither the growth of wealth nor scientific knowledge have in fact resulted in a positively free society. The radical alternative to capitalism has also failed miserably. Thus, postmodern thought must reconsider the basic structures of the social in the absence of universal principles:

> The narrative function is losing its functors,its great hero, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements- narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each of these clouds are pragmatic valencies specific to each kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these.[12]

---

[12]*Ibid.*, p.xxiv.

Postmodern analysis, therefore, will focus upon tracing out
the logic specific to discreet social practices, while
postmodern politics will focus upon diversifying the practices
operative in society by trying to "invent new moves [or] even
better, to invent new games."[13] The specifics of this
analysis and this politics shall be considered in the
subsequent sections of the present chapter. For the moment
the inquiry must flesh out the historical evidence which tells
against modern theory. An examination of Foucault's detailed
critique of modern historical writing amplifies and deepens
Lyotard's concerns.

Foucault offers evidence similar to that offered by
Lyotard to support his break with "all theories that claim to
be global and radical."[14] Like Lyotard, Foucault drew
methodological conclusions from his observation of the
changing nature of political struggles. The struggles of
"women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers" in so far as they
were directed against "the particularized power, the
constraints and controls that were exerted over them,"[15]
disclosed to Foucault the inadequacy of totalized theory.
These struggles could not be understood if they were reduced

---

[13]Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press), 1985, p.61.

[14]Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", *The Foucault
Reader*, (New York: Pantheon Books), 1984, p.46.

[15]Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, (Ithaca:
Cornell University Press), 1977, p.216.

to secondary manifestations of the class struggle. On the

contrary, these local conflicts signify an historical change

for Foucault, one which makes obsolete old forms of

theorizing:

> What has emerged in the course of the last fifteen
> years is a sense of the increasing vulnerability to
> criticism of things, institutions, practices and
> discourses... But together with this sense of
> instability and this amazing efficacy of discontinuous,
> particular, and local criticism one in fact also
> discovers something that perhaps was
> not initially foreseen, something one might describe
> as precisely the inhibiting effect of global
> theories.... In each case, the attempt to think in
> terms of totality has in fact proved a hinderance to
> research.[16]

In order to grasp the specificities of local struggles and

criticisms, in order to study the specifics of the operation

of power, one has to reject totality.

Foucault's problem with totalizing theory is placed in

sharp relief by recalling the example of the environmental

movement. A Marxist approach would argue that the

environmental movement should annex itself to the workers

movement, because environmental problems are ultimately

economic problems. In so doing, however, the environmental

movement loses its distinctive character. As a result, novel

perspectives on environmental problems, technology, and human

action may be lost. An autonomous environmental movement

could perhaps disclose that the problem lies not with the use

of technology, but with technology itself. Unless this

---

[16]Foucault, "Two Lectures", *Power/Knowledge,* (New York: Pantheon Books), 1980, pp.80-81

autonomy is maintained, this new perspective is lost.

The example draws attention towards a pervasive failure on the part of totalizing theory to comprehend social contradictions in their specificity and difference. If one desires to understand the fault-lines of contemporary society, one must, according to Foucault, reject the category of totality. This is the case because the category of totality structures all contradictions and struggles according to its basic understanding of the social whole, reducing conflict to "an Hegelian skeleton." By transforming all contradictions into the off-shoots of one fundamental contradiction totalizing theory predetermines the material it will study. At root, totality manifests a peculiar Western abhorrence for difference, non-commensurability, and otherness. This is a pervasive feature of Western thought which has consistently sought out and affirmed order, linearity, and progress:

> ... we [historians] felt a particular repugnance to conceiving of difference, to describing separations and dispersions, to dissociating from the reassuring form of the identical... As if we were afraid to conceive of the Other in the time of our own thought. There is a reason for this. If the history of thought could remain the locus of uninterrupted continuities, if it could endlessly forge connections that no analysis could undo without abstraction... it would provide a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness. Continuous history is the indispensable correlate for the founding function of the subject.[^1]

Thus, Foucault's work is unified by an on-going effort to

---

[^1]: Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London: Tavistock Publications), 1972, p.12.

disrupt the seamless unities of subject-based philosophies of history and society.

Initially, in his early archaeological work, this effort took a methodological form with little direct political content. Archaeology was empirically oriented and sought to unravel the grand unities of Hegelian-inspired philosophies of history by revealing what Foucault called the "positive unconscious of knowledge:"

> What I would like to do, however, is to reveal a positive unconscious to knowledge: a level that eludes the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity...and its scientific character.[18]

This "positive unconscious" consists of underlying epistemic rules which define for a given period what counts as "scientific knowledge."

These rules are unconscious because they are not the object of explicit reflection. On the contrary, they structure all possible epistemological or scientific reflection. These rules vary from period to period, but empirical analysis does not reveal any progressive dynamic governing the change. Quantum mechanics is not more scientific than Ptolmeyan cosmology. The former is produced according to different rules for scientific practice than the latter. Changes in these underlying rules for the formation of statements recognized as scientific do not manifest "the growing perfection of knowledge," but simply different

---

[18]*Ibid.*, p.xi.

"conditions of possibility."[19] If this is the case then it is a tendentious falsehood to claim that historical change is consciously directed by a collective historical subject which manifests the irresistible growth of reason. At root historical transformations are motivated by changes at the unconscious level. Such changes then redefine the structural conditions for scientific statements and research.

However, there was a tension within this archaeological approach between its diachronically disruptive effects and its insistence upon synchronic unity. While empirical analysis of the existent archives of various periods revealed essential differences between them, Foucault's method operated under the assumption that historical periods could be defined by the rules existing at the archaeological level. This led to charges of structuralism being laid against Foucault throughout the sixties[20], charges which he denied. Despite these denials Foucault eventually offered a self-criticism which was notable for its affinity with those charges. In 1977, reflecting on works such as *The Order of Things* and *The Birth of the Clinic*, he lamented that "what was lacking here was the problem of the discursive regime, of the effects of power peculiar to the play of statements." These he had "confused too much with systematicity, theoretical form, or

---

[19]*Ibid.*

[20]For a clear articulation of these charges see Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp.79-100.

something like a paradigm."[21] That is, Foucault believed that
he had abstracted form the socio-political interests operative
in the constitution of knowledge within various institutions.
He attributed this constitutive function to the unconscious
rules operative across disciplines and thus committed an error
similar to totalizing theory. In other words, he allowed the
coercive nature of institutional knowledge to disappear behind
neutral rules governing the production of knowledge.[22]
However, alerted to the operations of power within
institutions by the eruption of the struggles he identified,
Foucault developed his celebrated analysis of the various
constellations of power/knowledge characteristic of
contemporary social formations. This analysis of power will
be treated in detail in the following two chapters. For the
moment let us take stock of the similarity between Foucault
and Lyotard on the reasons why totalizing theory is obsolete
and inadequate and then press on to examine Derrida.

Like Lyotard, Foucault contends that a new period is on
the horizon, a period in which humanity as the subject of
history is disappearing. While he first enunciated this in a
prophetic voice which announced the "death of Man"[23] he soon
abandoned such pronouncements for a more historical and

---

[21]Foucault, "Truth and Power", *Power/Knowledge*, p.113.

[22]For a concise criticism of this problem in Foucault see
Deborah Cook, *The Subject Finds a Voice*, (New York: Peter Lang
Publishers), 1993, p.130.

[23]See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp.386-387.

political account of what the disappearance of subjecthood
meant. Like Lyotard, the fragmentation of unified struggles
foregrounded the diverse character of contemporary society.
These struggles are particular and local in focus and
purportedly do not draw upon universal values deriving from a
philosophy of history for their legitimacy. Totalizing theory
is a once again judged to be an impediment to the
comprehension of these struggles, the tool of Lyotard's
"pouvoirs princiers." Thus, Foucault embarks on a
microtheoretical journey whose aim is the disclosure of the
differing effects of power within specific institutions -
schools, prisons, hospitals, and the entire welfare apparatus
of contemporary liberal society.

Like Foucault's work, Derrida's work begins at an
abstract level and gradually becomes more concrete and
political. This is not to say that the initially
philosophical focus lacks political implications, but only to
note a difference in tone and focus. As with Foucault and
Lyotard, the object of Derrida's critique is once again the
grand unified accounts of history and society which are
essential to modern thought. According to Derrida, there is
a certain unified tale to be told about the West, the tale
established by philosophy and science. Deconstruction will
repeat this tale but in a manner which confronts it with its
outside, its Other, and by so doing reveal that the organizing
principles of philosophy cannot fulfil their own mandate:

> To deconstruct philosophy, thus, would be to think- in
> the most faithful, interior way, the structured
> genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same
> time to determine- from a certain exterior that is
> unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy- what this
> history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making
> itself into a history by reason of this somewhere
> motivated repression. By means of this simultaneously
> faithful and violent circulation between the inside and
> the outside of philosophy- that is,
> *of the West* - there is produced a certain
> textual work that gives pleasure... which also enables
> us to read philosophemes- and consequently *all the*
> *texts of our culture* as kinds of symptoms... of
> something that could not be presented in the history of
> philosophy....[my emphasis][24]

If this deconstruction is possible now, it is less owing to

any special insight of Derrida, than to certain historical

events. The emergence of the question of language in the work

of Heidegger, Nietzsche and Saussure, the use of writing as a

model in biology and cybernetics, the disruptive effects of

new information technologies, and the tragedies of Stalinism

and Nazism all testify to the end of the age of total history

and its complement, total social theory.

Before examining Derrida's evidence it is essential to

sketch out his understanding of the conditions for the

possibility of philosophy. Turning to the Greeks, Derrida

discovers a subordination of writing to the spoken word which

he takes as essential to the constitution of philosophy.

Truth was originally posited as the presence of the immanent

nature of things to the rational element of the soul. Spoken

language transcribed the universal concepts in-dwelling in the

---

[24]Jacques Derrida, *Positions,* (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press), 1981, pp. 6-7.

soul and made them fit for public expression. The voice and

the rational inscriptions of the soul thus enjoy a privileged

relationship. Writing, on the other hand, was dangerous for

the Greeks. This danger stems from the material character of

language. As a material copy of speech writing is at two

removes from the truth and can escape the original context and

therefore the control of the writer. This introduces

ambiguity and misunderstanding into the house of Truth. While

this view goes back to the *Phaedrus*, it is Aristotle, for

Derrida, who gives it paradigmatic expression:

> If, for Aristotle, for example, "spoken words" are
> the symbols of mental experiences...and written
> words are the symbols of spoken words, it is because
> the voice, producer of the first symbols, has a
> relationship of essential and immediate proximity to
> mind. It signifies "mental experiences" which
> themselves reflect or mirror things by natural
> resemblance.[25]

According to Derrida, this opposition of speech and writing is

the fundamental opposition of Western thought from which all

others are derived. Speech is natural, writing cultural; the

natural is essential in Western thought. the cultural

accidental. The goal of reason is the true comprehension of

things, the making present of the essence to mind, which,

because the essence is purportedly timeless, requires the

control of the indeterminacy introduced by time, culture, and

perception. Thinking these sites of indeterminacy in their

---

[25]Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1974, p.11.

specificity is, at root, that which philosophy cannot do and, if it is to endure, must forbid.

Thus writing, the "materialized sign,"[26] must be subordinated to speech because writing is the locus of indeterminacy. Since writing can escape from the initial context and enter into the hands of interpreters who were not originally present, it allows unintended meanings to crop up. Writing is the possibility of plurality and difference:

> Writing... is considered subversive
> in so far as it creates a spatial and temporal distance
> between the author and the audience, writing
> presupposes the absence of the author so we can never
> be sure exactly what is meant by a written text.[27]

While this is obviously a different point of entry into the status of the current historical moment than that taken by Lyotard or Foucault, it will become apparent that Derrida agrees with them as to the meaning of the present historical situation.

For Derrida, the age of the Book, the age of unified, present meaning, "seems to be approaching its exhaustion."[28]This exhaustion was portended in Nietzschean perspectivism, in Heidegger's critique of the instrumentalism definitive of metaphysics, and in Saussure's epochal

---

[26]As Bill Martin calls it in his valuable, *Matrix and Sign: Derrida and the Possibility of Postmodern Social Theory,* (Albany: SUNY Press), 1992, p.79.

[27]Derrida in an interview with Richard Kearney in, Kearney, *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1984, p.116.

[28]Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* p.8.

demonstration that meaning derives from the systematic

character of language (of which more in the subsequent

section) and not from individual intention. There are also

concrete symptoms of exhaustion making themselves felt through

recent scientific practice and media technology.   The

increasing prevalence of the use of writing as a concept in

biology and cybernetics, but also in politics, athletics, film

theory and so on testifies to the growing awareness of the

coming of the end for metaphysics:

> One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even
> greater certainty of military and political writing in
> view of the techniques that govern these domains today.
> All this is to describe not only the system of notation
> secondarily connected with these activities but the
> essence and content of those activities themselves. It
> is also in this sense that the biologist speaks of
> writing and pro-gram in relation to the most elemental
> processes within the living cell. And finally... the
> entire field covered by cybernetic program will be the
> field of writing.[29]

While these signify the return of writing from its exile in

the realm of the secondary they do not function at a fully

deconstructive level.

The operation which Derrida seeks to work against

metaphysics will consist in confronting metaphysics with the

protean character of writing. Such a confrontation will

reveal metaphysics to be but an on-going series of failed

attempts to bind the endless play of writing's signifiers.

Impelling deconstruction to this confrontation is a desire to

restore to historical events their specificity and uniqueness.

---

[29]*Ibid.*, p.9.

It seeks to rescue history from any and all reductive

totalizations:

> Qu'on me permettre de le rappeller d'un mot, une
> certaine démarche déconstructrice... consistait dès le
> départ à mettre en question le concept onto - théo -
> mais aussi archéo - téléologique de l'histoire- chez
> Hegel, chez Marx, ou même dans la pensée épochal de
> Heidegger. Non pas pour y opposer une fin de
> l'histoire ou une anhistoricité, mais au
> contraire pour demontre que cette onto-théo-archaéo-
> téléologie verouille, neutralise, et finalement annule
> l'histoire. Il s'agissait alors de penser une autre
> histoire.[30]

The particularities of this "other history" shall be

investigated in subsequent sections of the present chapter.

Suffice it to say for the moment that this position holds that

once reductive teleologies have been stripped away historical

events will be grasped in their specificity as events and the

future will appear as an unbounded horizon of possibilities.

Now, as has already been noted, the counterpart to

universal philosophies of history is totalized social theory.

They mutually imply one another to the extent that what is

traced in a philosophy of history is the successive

development of the essential, structuring dynamic of society

as such. As with Lyotard and Foucault, Derrida also sees in

the synchronic element of universal theorizing a desire to

repress, control, and reduce difference to identity. The

following citation occurs in the context of a critique of

---

[30]Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, (Paris: Editions Galilee), 1993,
p.125. For an identical expression of this essential
deconstructive interest in restoring history see, Derrida,
Positions, pp.58-59

structuralism, but it is easily generalizable to any social

theory which posits a central, governing dynamic to society.

Derrida writes:

> The function of this centre was not only to orient,
> balance, and organize the structure... but above all
> to make sure that the organizing principle would limit
> what we might call the *play* of the structure. By
> orienting and organizing the coherence of the system,
> the centre of a structure permits the play of its
> elements inside the total form... Nevertheless, the
> centre also closes off the play it opens up.[31]

In other words the essential dynamic determining social

development allows for variability and difference, but only

within limits which it itself prescribes. Recall the example

which opened this section. A Marxist analysis of contemporary

society might allow for an independent environmental movement

given the absence of meaningful working class struggle. Thus,

there is "play" here in so far as environmentalists are not

denounced outright as reformists or what have you. However,

this support will be limited by the annexation of a number of

conditions (attack corporations, avoid individualist

strategies of "reduce, reuse, recycle" and so forth) which

restrict play. Nothing radically new is allowed to emerge.

In this way, "the concept of a centred structure... is a

concept of play constituted on the basis of a fundamental

immobility and a reassuring certitude." This fundamental

---

[31]Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the
Human Sciences", *Writing and Difference,* (London: Routledge and
Keegan Paul), 1978, pp. 278-279.

stability ensures that, "anxiety can be mastered."[32]

This anxiety is the anxiety felt by the theorist towards the unmanageable, the indeterminate, the different. As with Lyotard and Foucault, Derrida delineates new social forces which are making modern totalizing strategies impossible. In Derrida's case new media and communication technologies are dissolving the stability of society. The mobility of capital, the transformation of the politician into a television image, the various marketing techniques employed to "sell" political programmes and the general acceleration of the dissemination of culture and ideas have upset all the old beliefs about civil society, the integrity of the nation state, and, perhaps, the possibility of democracy:

> Un ensemble de transformations de tous ordres
> (en particulier des mutations techno-scientifico-
> économico-médiatique) excède aussi bien les données
> traditionelles du discours marxiste que celles du
> discours libérale qui s'opposse a lui. Même si
> nous avons herité de quelque ressours essentielle
> pour en projeter l'analyse, il faut d'abord récconaître
> que ces mutations perturb les system onto-théologique
> ou les philosophie de la technique comme tels. Elles
> dérangent les philosophie politique et les concepts
> courant de la democratie; elles obligent a reconsidérer
> tous les rapports entre l'État et le nation, l'homme et
> le citoyen, le privé et le public, étc.[33]

Thus Speaker's Corner in London becomes Speaker's Corner in Toronto. The face to face debate of political issues becomes the televised dissemination of opinions packaged in an

---

[32]*Ibid.*, p.279.

[33]Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, p.120.

entertainment format. The Toronto-based television program
mixes together serious views on pressing issues with jokes,
songs, marriage proposals in a true postmodern *melange.*
Newscasts as well show the same editing techniques. Stories
of military atrocities are followed by "human interest"
stories of raccoons being rescued and people swimming across
large bodies of water, all in order to reassure us that
ultimately all is well. As capital becomes more and more
mobile and national politicians have less and less control
over the forces which effect their citizens they too turn to
postmodern entertainment in an effort to get elected. One may
read as much analysis of what pop song a party has chosen as
its "campaign theme" as of the actual platform of the party.
It is much more difficult to pin down responsibility, to
assign blame, to determine the social forces which need to be
resisted today. It is not a simple matter, so postmodern
thought claims, of constructing a political force which will
change basic social dynamics, since the problems to be
attacked are highly elusive, international, and not easily
reducible to one identifiable class or system. These changes
thus raise new political issues and demand responses which
cannot be anticipated by modern theory. As Steven Best and
Douglas Kellner argue in their superb introduction to
postmodern theory, "...[postmodernism] thus calls for new
categories, new modes of thought and writing, and values and
politics to overcome the deficiencies of modern discourses and

practices."[34] Before pressing on to consider the general form of these new approaches, it is essential to take stock of the points of unity disclosed in this chapter.

There are three important points of convergence on the question of the contemporary status of totalizing theory. Each of the thinkers examined has judged totalizing theory and universal philosophy of history to be tendentiously reductionist, rooted in a desire to restrict, manage, avoid or master incommensurable differences, and to be obsolete given transformations in scientific practice, technology, and political struggle. It will now be our task to examine the alternative characterization of history and society as a non-totalized constellation of heteronomous practices, discourses and subject-positions. In the following chapter the focus will be on the postmodern characterization of social dynamics. In the third chapter the manner in which such a characterization of social dynamics involves a strong critique of subjecthood will be explored.

---

[34]Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations,* (New York: Guilford Press), 1991, p.30.

1.2: The Dynamics of Difference

In the previous section the historical evidence against
the sustainability of totalizing social theory was surveyed.
Such a strategy was judged to be obsolete given the growth in
social complexity and the multiplication of sites of political
struggle. However, this is but empirical evidence for the
postmodern critique of totalized theory. It is not just that
society is too complex to be mastered by a theory which posits
an essential governing dynamic. More importantly, according
to postmodern thought, any such positing relies upon a naive
understanding of the relationship between nature and culture.
The claim here is that society can be conceived of as totality
only upon the supposition of a natural basis to the social.
The governing dynamic structuring the totality purportedly
grows from this natural basis. Thus, for Marxism, society
develops historically out of the on-going struggle to satisfy
human needs. History is a process in which new needs are
engendered and new capacities created. The difference between
the objective capacities and resources of society and the
success or failure of individuals to access these resources is

the key criterion in the normative evaluation of society.
Capitalism, despite its tremendous productive capacities,
depends upon the exploitation and alienation of labour. Not
only does this guarantee that the working class does not
receive back the full value of their labour, but also that
they are alienated from their labour as the essential human
capacity. Communism is thus, for Marx, the reappropriation of
the natural in a socially developed form.[35]

Now, according to postmodern critique, such a
supposition of a natural core to society, regardless of
whether it is conceived dialectically and historically (the
natural is not a static category for Marx, but rather becomes
a dynamic and developing basis for society) is both naive and
exclusionary. Needs and capacities are not natural, they are
one and all socially constructed by those particular, local
rules whose existence was touched upon above. Thus, the
general criterion governing normative critique in a totalized
theory is repudiated because it effectively rules out
perspectives which do not meet its demands. Social theory
must concretize and particularize its focus in order to be
adequate to the plural character of social dynamics. These
dynamics are primarily, but not exclusively (especially for
Foucault) linguistic. The key postmodern tenet which emerges
from the three positions to be examined is that these dynamics

---

[35]See Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*,
139.

do not follow from the needs, desires, and intentions of
individual or groups. On the contrary, the dynamics determine
the needs, desires, and intentions of individuals and groups.
Given the dispersion of the social practices these rules
define, and the absence of any universally valid criteria of
analysis and critique, the protean dynamics of society rule
out a natural basis for analysis and critique.

For the sake of structural consistency the examination
of this argument will once again commence with Lyotard. The
essential problem of the notion of a natural basis to society
(according) to Lyotard is that it can never be isolated from
its concrete socio-cultural instantiations. That is, the
purportedly natural basis, (let us stick with labour), is
never found in a natural state, but always in this or that
society, under such and such conditions. One must therefore
theorize the natural, in which case the natural is the product
of a theory which responds to particular socio-historical
exigencies. Wherever one encounters a purported natural need
one encounters a theory of natural needs. Wherever one
encounters theory one encounters language. Wherever one
encounters language one encounters particular rules governing
particular linguistic constructions. These particular sites
of linguistic production define the social field. Society is
thus characterized as a dispersed plurality of heteronomous
language-games:

> ...there is no need to resort to some fiction of
> social origins to establish that language-games are

the minimum relation required for society to exist:
even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name
he is given, the human child is already positioned
as the referent in the story recounted by those around
him, in relation to which he will *inevitably*
chart his course. Or more simply still, the question
of the social bond, in so far as it is a question, is
itself a language game, the game of inquiry. It
immediately positions the person who asks, as well as
the addressee and the referent asked about: it is
already the social bond.[my emphasis][36]

As was illustrated in Chapter One there is no meta-game

governing the interpretation of all discreet games. Even if

there were it would not be rooted in genuine human interests.

This is so because the strategies implicit in different

language games, the rules they obey and the ends they seek, do

not stem from human needs or interests at all. As Lyotard

argues, "the rules regulating language-games are unknown to

the players," and therefore these games are, "in no sense

played by people using specific languages as instruments."[37]

Thus, by focusing on the irreducible linguistic element

in social practices, Lyotard is able to transform objects into

referents of discourse. Different theories have different

referents. So too human action. Human beings, as his example

of the child shows, are also referents in various stories.

While people may also tell stories, they do so only by

following rules in definite contexts which they did not and

could not determine. Thus, society is conceived

---

[36]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* p.15.

[37]Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event,* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1988, pp.5-6.

pluralistically as a dispersed constellation of language-
games, and the human being as a sender, an addressee, or a
referent of discourse with no depth proper to itself:

> A self does not amount to much, but no self is an
> island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is
> more complex and mobile than ever before... a person
> is always located at a nodal point of specific
> communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or
> better, one is always located at a post through which
> various kinds of messages pass.[38]

The dynamic, creative, and productive element of the social

thus lies in language and not in any natural capacity of human

beings whether construed individually or collectively.

Commenting on this central claim, John Keane observes that for

Lyotard the social bond, "resembles a complex labyrinth of

different, sometimes hostile, slippery and sliding language-

games," which, "obey rules of an indeterminate variety" and

which, consequently, "cannot be apprehended or synthesized

under the authority of a single metadiscourse."[39]

As a consequence of the dispersed nature of social

practices and institutions, Lyotard opts for what he terms a

pragmatic approach. His social pragmatics is a "monster"

formed by, "the interweaving of various networks of

heteromorphous classes of utterances." Given that there is no

reason to believe that "it would be possible to determine

metaprescriptives common to them all," there is also no reason

---

[38]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* p.15

[39]John Keane, "The Modern Democratic Revolution", *Judging Lyotard,* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul), 1992, p.86.

to believe that any consensus could "embrace the totality of metaprescriptives regulating the totality of statements circulating in the social collectivity."[40] Thus, the analytic goal of social pragmatics is to determine the rules in play in any given network. Concretely, this means, for example, that one cannot judge science morally, or morality scientifically. Radicalizing the Kantian separation of faculties into pure reason (natural science), practical reason (morality), and reflective judgement (aesthetics), Lyotard maintains that there are no rules specifiable in advance which would link these domains. Unlike Kant, however, Lyotard refuses to admit reason as a unifying capacity. Therefore, importing the rules of one-language game into an evaluation of a different language-game is illegitimate. As shall become evident, this claim has decisive political implications, although some of these run counter to what Lyotard himself anticipates.

For Lyotard, these political implications are positive in that they stand as a bulwark against authoritarian forms of discourse which aim to subsume everything within themselves, which aim to teach people their "interests" and ground "scientific" strategies for social renewal. Under the influence of the desire to resist totalization, his work after *The Postmodern Condition* showed an increasing interest in keeping separate discourses separate. This pre-occupation is

---

[40]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* p.65.

best exemplified in the text, *The Differend.* Gone is the

notion of the language game, which he abandoned because it

implied that humans actually use language to satisfy their

purposes.[41] Language-games are replaced by the phrase, the

basic unit of discourse. Phrases organize themselves into

different genres which in turn constitute different universes.

What is crucial is the manner in which phrases are linked

together. Such linkage is always an event, and not a

deductive procedure. That is, there are no rules specifiable

in advance governing the linkage of phrases to one another.

The rules emerge after the fact.

More important, from a political standpoint, is the

idea of the "differend" itself. This signifies the absence of

any common principle which could be appealed to by disputants

in order to resolve their dispute:

> As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be
> a case of conflict between (at least) two parties that
> cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of
> judgement applicable to both arguments. One side's
> legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of
> legitimacy.[42]

This notion is the culminating point of Lyotard's celebration

of the particular. The fragmentation of the world by these

differends must be respected. One may think here of the need

---

[41]In an interview concerning this text he explains that he
abandoned the notion because, "it seemed to me that 'language
games' implied players that made use of language like a toolbox,
thus repeating the constant arrogance of Western anthropocentrism."
See, *Diacritics, Vol 14,* #3 , Fall, 1984, pp.16-21.

[42]Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute,* (Minneapolis:
The University of Minnesota Press), 1988, p.xi.

to respect different cultural practices, of the need to
refrain from judging one culture by the norms of another. To
that extent Lyotard is touching here on something like the
ethnocentric fallacy. This respect for plurality and
difference is crucially linked to a "theory" of justice in
Lyotard, so further consideration of this argument is best put
off to the subsequent two chapters. The key point to keep in
mind as the analysis turns to Foucault is the essential claim
that needs are all constituted by a plurality of different
social dynamics, a claim which rules out a grounding role for
a natural notion of basic human needs.

While Foucault is a stern critic of the theoretical
effort at specifying the natural foundations to the social,
his critique is ultimately not as language based as Lyotard's.
Like his attitude towards historical periodization, Foucault's
views on the relative weight of language in the constitution
of needs changes throughout his career. In the archaeological
endeavour, language does play the determining role. When he
later shifts attention to the operations of power, a more
interesting and complex account of the constitution of needs
emerges. While it would be incorrect to attribute to Foucault
Lyotard's claim that the social bond is essentially
linguistic, it would not be false to claim, 1) that Foucault
initially thought this and, more significantly, 2) that the
constitutive effects of power have the same critical force
with regard to totalizing attempts to ground the social in

human needs. As there are some common threads linking the archaeologies and the genealogies, the analysis of Foucault must begin with the early work.

What is essential in this regard is the manner in which objects are said to be "constituted" by the rules for the formation of scientific statements in a given period. There is no given field of objects classified and reclassified by a progressive science according to Foucault. "Nature" is inchoate, it exists as a determined field of objects only through the activity of historically relative "discursive practices:"

> Discursive practices are characterized by the delimitation of a field of objects, the determination of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories. Thus, each discursive practice implies a play of prescriptions that designate its exclusions and choices.[43]

While this notion of exclusions will later be politicized, it remains for the most part here an analytical tool used to describe the manner in which different domains of knowledge constitute their objects. The basic rules structuring the play of the various discursive practices vary from period to period, recall, and thus so to do the objects of discourse. There are no transhistorical criteria to which one could appeal to define a real object as opposed to one which was merely posited by a "bad" theory, because archaeology studies knowledge, "apart from all criteria having to do with its

---

[43]Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p.197.

rational value."[44] Phlogiston was as real as oxygen in so far as it satisfied the immanent criteria of eighteenth century physics.

While the matter of discursive practices is language, Foucault does not follow Lyotard in attempting to draw any methodological conclusions from general linguistic structures. One cannot discover anything about concrete discursive practices from a reflection on formal linguistics:

> ...a language is still a system for possible statements, a finite body of rules that authorizes an infinite number of performances. The field of discursive events, on the other hand, is a grouping that is always finite and limited at any moment to the linguistic sequences that have been formulated... The question posed by language analysis of some discursive fact or other is always: according to what rules has a particular statement been made?...the description of the events of discourse poses a quite different question: how is it that some particular statement appeared rather than another?[45]

Answering this question requires concentration upon specific discursive practices, and here there is a definite contiguity with Lyotard's social pragmatics. Foucault's attempts to answer this question led him to the analysis of the operation of power within different institutions as the agent of production of knowledge.

He answers the lingering question of how and why discursive practices change with an apparently radical reformulation of the notion of power. Foucault contends that

---

[44]Foucault, *The Order of Things,* p.xxiii.

[45]Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* p.27.

power is not rooted in large-scale social forces, a ruling

class which controls the means of production and has a

monopoly on the means of violence, for example. Its origins

are inscrutable to his analysis, but its effects are

everywhere manifest. It is not a whole waiting to be seized,

it is relational, circulating, and "capillary."[46] As he

writes,

> Power comes from below, that is, there is no binary
> and all-encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled
> at the root of power relations... One must suppose,
> rather, that the manifold relations of force that take
> shape and come into play in the machinery of
> production, in families, in limited groups, and
> institutions are the basis for wide-ranging effects of
> cleavage which run through the social
> body as a whole.[47]

This power does not repress, but rather produces discourses,

identities and truths. Power does not mask or distort but is

rather constitutive of what becomes manifest at any given

time. It "induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces

discourse," and thus must be considered, "a productive network

... much more than as a negative instance."[48] As such, it

does away with the distinction between truth and falsity and

replaces it with the notion of "truth-effects." "I believe,"

he states, "that the problem does not consist in drawing a

line between that in a discourse which falls under the

---

[46]Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books), 1978, p.94.

[47]*Ibid.*, p.94.

[48]Foucault, "Truth and Power", *Power/Knowledge*, p.61.

category of scientificity or truth, and that which falls under some other category." The analysis of discursive practices shaped by power relations consists rather "in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which are themselves neither true not false."[49] That is, true statements do not mirror the natural world or correctly model an material object or process. Truth is what gains acceptance at any given time. That is the meaning of "truth-effect." There is no non-relative criterion of truth which could be appealed to by one driven by the desire to construct trans-historical accounts of the growth of knowledge.

In general, history is now conceived by Foucault as an on-going struggle between discourses each seeking to establish itself as dominant. No one discourse is in itself better than another. What becomes socially predominant is the result of force and exclusion, not rationality or moral value. History is intelligible only, "in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, strategy, and tactics."[50] What is valuable is what is said to be valuable by a discourse which manages to exclude other possibilities. While this has serious political implications, consideration of these must be held in abeyance so that a more patient consideration of the ontological claim

---

[49]*Ibid.*, p.60.

[50]Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", *The Foucault Reader*, pp.56-57.

running throughout Foucault's entire analysis can be explicated.

Foucault's argument seems to weave together a relatively uncontroversial epistemological claim with a highly controversial ontological implication. The epistemological claim is that knowledge requires a conceptual apparatus. Human knowledge is discursive, not intuitive, and this entails that all knowledge must be articulated through concepts. Furthermore, in so far as institutions are the site of knowledge production, and institutions are bound up with political interests, it is not so controversial to claim that knowledge and power are intermeshed. However, that knowledge is discursive and (at least sometimes) is bound up with power does not entail that knowledge determines objects, which is what Foucault seems to think. If knowledge constitutes objects, some disturbing ontological claims seem to follow concerning the reality of the objects of "undeveloped" scientific thought. Black bile, wandering wombs, the philosopher's stone, and so on would all have existed, not as the *empty* objects of bad or immature science, but as real objects of a science which simply obeyed different rules than our own. The same could be said for moral and political claims- none are in truth "good" or "bad," "progressive" or "reactionary" but simply different attempts to master the social field. But let us stick for the moment with the scientific side. As Foucault does not make the distinction

which Kant does in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, between the empty objects arising from the uncritical employment of the concepts of understanding, and real objects which are the product of a synthesis of empirical matter and intellectual form, he would not seem to have any way out of the ontological implications of his empirical claim.

Indeed, Foucault does not seem to think that the ontological implication is a problem in so far as he rejects a progressivist understanding of science. As this rejection of progress applies to Foucault's understanding of history generally, the same ontological problem applies globally to his work. However, this has troubling implications for his efforts in so far as these have, as they do, political goals. If an object is simply what it is posited to be by a given discursive practice, if it has no nature or content proper to itself which can be known with relative certainty and which may be appealed to in order to settle disputes, then that object is no more than what it is said to be by different discursive descriptions. Just as phlogiston existed in so far as it satisfied given criteria so too democracy, for example, is just what is called democratic in a given society. Freedom and justice likewise are just the posits of given political discourses. There is no surplus within these concepts which could be appealed to in an immanent critique of a given instantiation of the concept. Struggle over definitions would proceed as a battle between two different discourses, not two

interpretations of the same concept. In such battles, there are no valid universal grounds for settling arguments and this fact makes the legitimation of struggles very difficult if not impossible. As Foucault himself recognized, there would be nothing but a preponderance of force to decide issues. This is entailed by his claim that history must be understood solely on the model of strategy and tactics. The present investigation shall return to this problem in the critical chapters to follow, as it is a general problem of the anti-humanist argument. For the moment it is important to explore an example of the constitution of an object in Foucault's work.

The example comes from *Discipline and Punish*, perhaps Foucault's most powerful and fascinating text. The example of how prison constitutes the criminal and the delinquent brings together the general epistemological strategy discussed above with Foucault's later analysis of the operations of power specific to the play of discourse within different institutions. What is at issue here is neither the truism that crime is relative to a criminal code, or the sociological inference that prisons do not reform criminals so much as make first time criminals lifelong offenders. Foucault's argument, if it has any distinctiveness, must operate at a deeper level. His essential claim is that through the discourse of criminology, within the context of a total institution whose function is to control every aspect of behaviour, a new entity

is produced. It is not only (as a humanistic critique might maintain) that criminology flattens out and objectifies a person, it is moreover productive of a whole history and identity for that person. The criminal is not an empirical individual who has broken a law. The criminal is the product of a knowledge invested with disciplinary power:

> At the point that marks the disappearance of the
> branded, dismembered, burnt, annihilated body of
> the tortured criminal, there appeared the body of the
> prisoner, duplicated by the individuality of the
> "delinquent," by the little soul of the criminal, which
> the very apparatus of punishment *fabricated as a point
> of application of the power to punish* [my italics] and
> as the object of what is still today called
> penitentiary science.[51]

Thus, Foucault argues that the rules governing discursive practices are at the same time the rules for the constitution of the objects of those discourses. These rules define institutions within whose walls power coalesces with knowledge in order to produce individuals of various types. In general,

> ...the individual is not a pre-given entity, the
> individual with his identity and characteristics,
> is the product of a relation of power exercised over
> bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces.[52]

The various institutions of society - schools, factories, hospitals, courts, etc. each contribute their share to the final product. Humans appear to be conceived of as Stoic matter, formless stuff subsequently shaped by rational

---

[51]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* (New York: Vintage Books), 1977, p.255.

[52]Foucault, quoted in Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism,* (London: Polity Press), 1989, p.87.

purpose. This purpose flows from disciplinary institutions

whose goal is normalized beings, people who keep themselves in

line:

> ... in its function the power to punish is not
> essentially different from that of curing or that of
> educating. It receives from them... a sanction from
> below... the sanction of technique and rationality...
> [by] circulating the same calculated, mechanical and
> discreet methods from one to the other, the carceral
> makes it possible to carry out that great "economy" of
> power whose formula the eighteenth century had sought,
> when the problem of the accumulation and
> adminstration of men first appeared.[53]

This claim is the heart of Foucault's decentering of the

subject. As Peter Dews observes,

> Indeed, the supposed expressive unity between an
> individual and his/her "personality," "the human
> soul," is itself constituted by relations of power
> in which the formation of knowledge plays a central
> role. It is through the internalization of such
> knowledge that the individual is first produced as
> a "subject" on which strategies of power can operate.
> Subjectification, in this sense, is the necessary
> preliminary to subjection.[54]

Thus, subjecthood is not a basis from which freedom can be

built, but rather the product of power. Consequently,

subjecthood must be displaced if freedom is to be somehow

realized. However, this topic is beyond the purview of the

present chapter. At this point, the investigation must turn

to Derrida.

While the immanent deconstruction of metaphysics may

appear to be far removed form the analysis of the study of

---

[53]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.303.

[54]Peter Dews, "Foucault and the *Nouvelle Philosophie*", *Economy and Society*, #8, 1979. p.86.

social structure, such is not the case. As was disclosed in
the first chapter, Derrida has much to say about the
relationship between philosophy and history and society. Yet,
if one is to fully grasp the implications of deconstruction
vis-a-vis the question of the structure of society and the
means of dealing with such structure theoretically, a rather
long detour is necessary. The road leads us away from
concrete social analysis into Derrida's deconstructive reading
of classical metaphysics (which is, in his view, at the root
of modern forms of critical theory). The analysis must begin
by examining Derrida's arguments concerning the "other" of
metaphysics, the unbounded meaning-generating capacity of
writing. Within this confrontation we will detect again the
postmodern assault on the notion of the "natural."

The deconstruction of the opposition between the
natural (as foundation and limit) and the social (the
artificial, mutable) is at the core of deconstruction.
Metaphysics, according to Derrida, is defined by an on-going
effort to ground the social in the natural. Whether by
deriving the structure of society from first principles,
empirical observation, or scientific laws, metaphysical
thinking, driven by the anxiety to master unmanageable
elements, always aims at limiting the diversity of the social
by deducing it from some natural cause. The opposition
"between *physis/nomos, physis/techne,*" has served a dual
purpose throughout Western history. It has served to, "derive

historicity and, paradoxically, not to recognize the rights of history."[55]   That is, metaphysics, according to this view, seeks to understand history and society as a law governed search to fulfil the natural needs or goals of the species. By linking particular events to an overall process, arbitrariness and plurivocity can be mastered. Change is permitted, but is understood as a variation on the same theme. Thus for Marx, for example, historical change is measured by the growth of needs and capacities and is tending towards an end-state which can be specified in advance of its realization. Before one can appreciate all the political implications of this position, however, one has to examine Derrida's deconstruction of the basic opposition of speech and writing.

Derrida's most clear critique of this opposition is also his first. It is to be found in his deconstruction of Husserl's phenomenology and it will serve as the point of departure for the present analysis. It is not the job of this analysis to evaluate Derrida's reading of Husserl. The sole interest here is to glean a clear understanding of the tools and the effects of deconstruction.

Husserl is a sound target for Derrida's assault on metaphysics in general since in Husserl one finds, "perhaps

---

[55]Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.33.

the last 'traditional' account of language."[56] That is,

Husserl's account of language repeats in fundamental respects

the classical opposition between an inner speech which

expresses meaning directly and externalized discourse which,

in being mediated by a sign-system, introduces indeterminacy

into the dissemination of meaning. It is Derrida's skilful

collapsing of this distinction which is of importance here.

Allison provides a lucid explanation of Husserl's

understanding of the difference between expressive and

indicative signs:

> ...indicative signs motivate us...to turn our attention
> elsewhere, either to an objective referent or to
> another sign. But in-itself the indicative sign is
> essentially meaningless. It is merely an empirical
> mark... Husserl therefore focuses his analysis on
> another kind of signification, what he calls
> "expression," or expressive signification. Unlike
> indication, expression neither represents an empirical
> objectivity, nor does it refer beyond itself for
> meaning.[57]

Expression here is analogous to the natural resemblance of

mental image and essence in Aristotle. Expression is an

intuition in which the essence of a thing is manifest to the

thinking consciousness.

Indicative signs, on the other hand, are devoid of

intrinsic meaning. They gain meaning through intentional

employment by language users. Intentionality is like an

"inner voice," a breath which gives life to otherwise

---

[56]David. B. Allison, "Wittgenstein and Derrida: Playing the Game", *Research in Phenomenology*, VIII, 1978, p.94.

[57]*Ibid.,* pp. 94-95.

inanimate matter. This inner speech is thus privileged over

the external matter of language, which is precisely the

privilege which Derrida takes to be the defining act of

metaphysics:

> Husserl will radicalize the privilege of the phone
> which is implied in the whole history of metaphysics...
> For it is not in the sonorous substance or in the
> physical voice... that he will recognize an affinity
> with the logos in general, but in the voice
> phenomenologically taken, speech in its transcendental
> flesh, in the breath, the intentional animation that
> transforms the body of the word into flesh.[58]

Within this intentional act of meaning-creation, truth as

presence is manifest. Presence here has a two-fold sense. It

signifies both "proximity of what is set forth as intuition,"

and "proximity of the temporal present which gives the clear

and present intuition of the object its form."[59] Simply put,

in the intentional act the essence of the object is manifest

to the intending consciousness in a distinct temporal moment.

This meaning is then expressed outwardly through the use of

indicative signs.

In intuition, however, no indicative signs are supposed

to be present. Since in consciousness the thinking subject is

communicating only with itself, does not refer to anything

beyond the intuitive contents of its own consciousness,

indicative signs purportedly have no role. Moreover, the

addition of indicative signs would undermine the essential

---

[58]Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1973, p.16.

[59]*Ibid.*, p. 7.

character of the intuition. Since they mean only by referring to something beyond themselves, indicative signs cannot be the vehicle for an immediate manifestation of the truth or essence of that which they indicate. Thus, according to Derrida, the success of Husserl's argument, and the whole history of the metaphysics of presence which it presupposes and repeats, depends upon the distinction between expressive and indicative signs (speech and writing).

Derrida, however, reveals a decisive problem with this distinction. Expressive signs are purportedly foundational acts of intentional consciousness. The act and the sign are identical. However, in this act something is manifested to something else, ie, the logos to intentional consciousness. There is a plurality where there should be a unity. In order to manifest the logos, one must signify. Signification, however, must draw upon a store of signs which have always already been in play. That is, these signs are not created by the intentional consciousness, they are rather repetitions of the signs which define the natural language of the user. Even in "speaking with oneself" one must draw upon a pre-existing system of signs if one is to understand one's self. Absolutely unique and unrepeatable signs would be meaningless:

> When I in fact effectively use words, and whether or not I do so for communicative ends... I must from the outset operate from within a structure of repetition whose basic element can only be representative. A sign is never an event if by event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular, a purely

idiomatic sign would not be a sign.[60]
Thus, whether one is using indicative or expressive signs one
is taken up into a system of signs which did not originate
with one's individual consciousness.

Now, the essence of the expressive sign was said to be
its intrinsically meaningful nature, that is, that it did not
represent an absent object but was the pure manifestation of
truth through an act of intentional consciousness. However,
even expressive signs must be iterable, otherwise they would
be devoid of meaning, one would not recognize them. In so far
as even expressive signs must bear repeating, they show
themselves to belong to a system which allows them to be
repeated. They do not pop into and out of existence with each
distinct act of consciousness, they must be preserved ready
for use:

> ...the primordial structure of repetition which we just
> evoked for signs must govern all acts of signification.
> The subject cannot speak without giving himself a
> representation of his speaking, and this is not
> accidental...[61]

However, if one can make truth present only through
signifying, and if one can only signify by entering into the
system organizing signification, consciousness is predicated
upon the sign-system, and not vice versa. One cannot isolate
a non-semiotic level of consciousness. When one is conscious
one is conscious in and through signs.

---

[60]*Ibid.*, p.50.

[61]*Ibid.*, p.50.

If this is the case, however, then the metaphysics of
presence, dependent as it is upon a conception of truth in
which the essence will be *immediately* present to subjective
rationality, would be impossible. Signs, as shall become
clear, have as their "essence" the function of pointing beyond
themselves to another sign. Thus, the metaphysical adventure
has played itself out through on-going attempts (of which
Husserl is a paradigmatic example) to eliminate signs:

> Signs can be eliminated in the classical manner in a
> philosophy of intuition and presence. Such a
> philosophy eliminates signs by making them derivative;
> it annuls reproduction and representation by making
> signs a modification of a simple presence. But because
> it is just such a philosophy- which is in fact the
> philosophy and history of the West- which has so
> constituted and established the very concept of signs,
> the sign is from the very origin marked by this will to
> derivation or effacement. Thus, to restore the
> original and non-derivative character of signs is... to
> eliminate a concept of signs whose whole
> history and meaning belong to the adventure of the
> metaphysics of presence.[62]

It is just such a restoration which Derrida aims to carry out.
If, as he indicates above, the "philosophy and the history of
the West," may be considered as an on-going effort to efface
the "non-derivative" nature of signs, then the deconstruction
of metaphysics will have far-reaching consequences for all
forms of theorizing and action. To grasp these effects it is
essential to examine the "logic" of signification and the
"notion" of "*differance*."

As was stated above, the "essence" of a sign is to

---

[62] *Ibid.*, p.51.

point beyond itself to the object or substance which will
fulfil the meaning of the sign. However, when one follows
this journey, one arrives not at an unmediated object, not at
a clear intuition of substance, but simply another sign:

> From the very moment there is meaning there is nothing
> but signs. We think only in signs. Which amounts to
> ruining the notion of sign at the very moment when, as
> in Nietzsche, its exigency is recognized in the
> absoluteness of its right. One could call play the
> absence of the transcendental signified as the
> limitlessness of play, that is, the destruction of
> onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence.[63]

Because totalizing social theory depended upon a centre which
limited play, to negate the metaphysics of presence by making
the play of signs limitless is to undermine all the centres
which managed play within totalized social theory. Any basis
which one may assign to the social may be undone through a
deconstruction which illuminates that the basis is, in fact, a
signifier, one which therefore is not immediately natural but
rather semiotic, and therefore capable of unbounded variation.

The deconstructive movement of signification is
conveyed through Derrida's neologism, *différance*. The word
combines the two senses of the Latin verb *differer* - to
differ and to defer in time.[64] *Différance* is not a concept
according to Derrida, not a universal mental representation of
the process it illuminates, but rather an attempt to express

---

[63]Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.50.

[64]See, "Différance", *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press), 1982, pp.7-8, for the etymology of
the word.

the differing/deferring movement of signs themselves. Thus,
when one signifies, one puts in play the signs which one
believes will express one's meaning. There is thus a two-fold
temporal element involved in signification. One strand leads
back in time towards one's intention, and the other leads
forward to the object which, as the referent of the intention,
will fulfil one's intention if it is successfully pointed out.
If one examines these termini, however, one finds that each is
also a sign which points beyond itself. Each sign differs
from the sign which is supposed to express the meaning of the
first and the whole process is marked by on-going temporal
deferral,

> ...the signified concept is never present in and of
> itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only
> to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every sign is
> insinuated in a chain or in a system within which it
> refers to the others, to other concepts by means of
> the systematic play of differences. Such a play,
> *differance,* is thus no longer simply a concept, but
> rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a
> conceptual process or system in general.[65]

It is the "possibility of conceptuality" in general because
differance is the gap, the absence of presence which compels
one to signify in the first place. One signifies when one
does not have the truth of the matter in hand. This applies
equally to metaphysical speculation and scientific inquiry.
One desires to know the foundation of things and how they
work, thus one begins to produce signs. One begins this
production, however, upon a basis established by other signs,

---

[65]*Ibid.,* p.11.

and the signs one produces enter into play and acquire
unintended meanings because it is of the character of signs to
always differ from their intended meaning. The signs one
requires to fulfil one's desire would need to be
transcendental, beyond the reach of play. This no sign can do
because all express an absence, not a presence:

> The sign is usually said to be put in place of the
> thing itself, the present thing, "thing" here standing
> indifferently for meaning or referent. The sign
> represents the present in its absence. It takes the
> place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the
> thing... we signify, we go through the detour of the
> sign... The sign... is deferred presence.[66]

This deferral is infinite, since all signs must be iterable,
and iterable in different contexts, and therefore devoid of
the essential identity required of a genuinely universal
concept.

This movement of *differance* is intimately connected
with Derrida's central aim- the overturning of unified
accounts of history and society. It may easily be perceived,
by entailment, what will happen to all purportedly "natural"
grounds of social practice. For any such ground must be
signified. The signs thus employed must point back towards
the prior signs which motivated them, and these in turn, will
be seen to flow from a definite, particular, and variable
context. Any "natural" basis is thus always already
"cultural" in so far as the natural basis must be constituted
through signs and thus proceed from the meanings those signs

---

[66]*Ibid.*, p.9.

have at a given time. This is the fundamental implication of

Derrida's oft-quoted remark that, "There is nothing outside of

the text."[67] This does not mean that everything should be

considered like a book, or that society is composed of mere

words, quite the contrary. The book is a metaphor for fixed,

enclosed meaning. The *text*, on the other hand, points towards

a complex interweaving of "texts," lives, practices,

institutions and forces of which society is composed.[68]

In order to emphasize this complexity and to obviate

the charges of a crude linguistic determinism Derrida later

supplanted "text" by "context." Statements acquire their

meaning only within a fabric of relations which include the

speaker, the addressee, the place, the time, the institutional

setting and the general social and political environment.

However, while meaning must always be taken in context, the

limits of context are always open. There is no essential,

appropriate context which would distinguish proper from

parasitical or metaphorical meaning. He argues that "... a

context is never absolutely determinable... its determination

is never certain or saturated..."[69] New contexts can always

---

[67]Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* p.158.

[68]Derrida is vicious when he is misread on this score. See his
pointed response to two graduate students who had the temerity to
criticize him for a good example of this tone. See, Derrida, "But,
beyond: An Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon", *Critical
Inquiry,* 13, August 1986, esp pp.168-170.

[69]Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context", *Margins of Philosophy,*
p.310.

arise, new meanings can always be generated, and there are no non-contextual criteria which would permit the determination of the true context in which to interpret a statement, a practice, or a program.

The critical upshot of this is that social theory cannot be founded upon an ontology with universal pretensions since the contextuality of existent things rules out any final reading of their underlying nature. The problem with Marxism in particular is precisely this, that "... Marx continue à vouloir fonder sa critique... sur une ontologie...."[70] While Marxism was a valuable criticism, it remains "pre-deconstructive" since it does not question at a radical level presence and objectivity. Derrida, however, believes he has opened up a more radical level of critique in so far as he goes beyond the naive naturalism inherent in previous attempts to criticize society. The overriding aim of deconstruction is thus not mere interpretation, but social change. He writes that "if there is nothing beyond the text, in this new sense, then that leaves room for the most open type of political... practices and pragmatics."[71] These implications will be considered in the final chapter of Part One, but already there is a certain tension evident which should be noted.

The tension is this. Deconstructive critique gains its critical orientation from an appreciation of the open-ended

---

[70]Derrida, *Spectres de Marx,* p.269.

[71]Derrida, "But, beyond,...," p.169.

manner in which meanings are generated. It deconstructs logocentrism in order to reveal the polysemy which logocentrism tries to suppress. There are political stakes here because real people have been excluded by Western thought and practice. However, political action against this exclusion will have to practice exclusions itself. The deep question, therefore, concerns why some exclusions are legitimate (say, the exclusions a formerly colonized people will place on the erstwhile colonialists) whereas other exclusions are illegitimate (the exclusions practised by the colonialists). If there is only contextual justification, and no non-contextual criteria, then it follows that it can only be a matter of perspective to judge between the competing claims. If one is a racist then there can be nothing wrong, from that perspective, with a racist institutional apparatus. There can be no universally compelling argument against the racist, but only a different argument from a different perspective.

At this point, let us interrupt the examination in order to identify the underlying identity between the three positions under consideration. In each case the critique of totalized social theory entails the elimination of binding universal criteria in the evaluation of political systems. Whether one begins from language-games, discursively constituted regimes of power/knowledge, or the endless variety of contexts, the conclusion is the same- fixed norms are not

deducible from purportedly natural grounds because such grounds do not exist. What modern theory identifies as a stable ground turns out, after critical scrutiny, to be but a nodal point in a theory. These points are relative to the theory in which they exist, and therefore are not the undeconstructible, solid foundations they are said to be by modern theory. As a result of the lack of stable foundations for theory, one is left to judge political systems from definite perspectives which are not themselves reducible to an overweening, authoritative perspective. Before examining the implications this position has for an essentialist understanding of subjecthood, it is important to tie the conclusions of Chapters 1.1 and 1.2 together.

In 1.1 it was shown that there is a general rejection of totalizing theory on the grounds that it was necessarily reductionist which makes it inadequate to the task of comprehending social complexity. The present section has examined the basic dynamics of society from the postmodern perspective and in so doing has revealed a deeper level of the postmodern rejection of totalizing theory. Three essential points of convergence on the subject of the "nature" of the social have emerged in this chapter. The first is that there is no nature to the social, if by that is meant a stable foundation upon which dispersed social practices can be understood. There is no essential governing dynamic to society which, if known, would permit a complete grasp of each

specific element of society. The second point claims that the various institutions, practices and discourses constitutive of society produce needs and capacities and are not amenable to over-arching social co-ordination. Totalizing theory believed that by isolating the governing dynamic of society it could determine a complete program for the solution of basic social problems. If, as postmodern theory contends, each specific element of the social must be investigated in its own right, and that there is no essential link between these elements, then it follows that there is no single recipe for the solution of problems immanent to the discreet elements. Discreet practices must remain discreet; one must remain at the local, particular level in order to understand these local and particular practices. The third point expresses the political stakes involved in this social analysis. Underlying the postmodern critique of totalizing theory is a political concern with the manner in which such theory establishes some needs and capacities as essential and others as secondary. On the basis of such classification rests the exclusion of other perspectives and groups, including the groups (women, gays and lesbians, prisoners) whose struggles were cited in Chapter One as definitive postmodern struggles. The desire to rationally control society leads inevitably, according to postmodern criticism, to authoritarian forms of politics. At the basis of totalitarian systems is the figure of humanity as a collective historical subject, as the creator of its own

environment and as endowed with the capacity to master and manage it. Thus, in order to understand the political stakes we must examine the critique of subjecthood which ultimately explains the postmodern rejection of totalized social theory.

.

1.3: The Twilight of Subjecthood

The following Chapter will be concerned with what is properly radical to the philosophy, or critique of philosophy, practised by Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida. The material of the first two chapters could be interpreted as but a call for the renovation of modern theory to help it become adequate to contemporary social complexity. Much more than this is at stake, however. The radicality of this postmodern critique lies not in its identification of different logics inherent in different social practices, not in its supposition that history cannot be understood according to an essential dynamic, nor even in the claim that needs and capacities are thoroughly cultural and mutable. The radicality proper to this critique lies in its open rejection of the idea that humanity may be defined as essentially subject, as endowed with the capacity to determine its future in line with universal interests, and that such self-determination could ever therefore express positive freedom. On the contrary, the desire for rational control over the globe has not realized positive freedom but rather has led necessarily to

totalitarian polities, according to the postmodern critique. The present section will concentrate upon the specifics of the critique of subjecthood. In the concluding section the political alternatives generated by this critique will be investigated.

As was noted in 1.1, Lyotard claims that modern thought is defined by its metanarrative structure. That is, modern theory legitimates itself by situating itself as the intellectual expression of the universal historical mission of humanity. Linking together all the different metadiscourses characteristic of modernity is the idea of emancipation:

> The thought and action of the 19th and 20th centuries
> are governed by an Idea (I am using Idea in its Kantian
> sense). That idea is the idea of emancipation. What
> we call philosophies of history, the great narratives
> by means of which we attempt to order the multitude of
> events, certainly argue this idea in very different
> ways: a Christian narrative in which Adam's sin is
> redeemed through love, the *Aufklarer* narrative of
> emancipation from servitude thanks to knowledge and
> egalitarianism, the speculative narrative of the
> universal idea through the dialectic of the concrete,
> the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation
> and alienation through the socialization of labour...
> These various narratives all provide grounds for
> contention... But they all situate the
> data supplied by events within the course of history
> whose end, even if it is out of reach, is called
> freedom.[72]

Emancipation, as an Idea of the Kantian form, is thus a goal whose function it is to organize, in teleological fashion, the otherwise disorganized political strategies operative at a given time. Just as Reason in Kant gives Ideas to the

---

[72]Lyotard, "Universal History and Cultural Difference", *The Lyotard Reader,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1989, p.315.

Understanding (of, for example, a spontaneous causality, or a Supreme Being) which organize and give overall coherence to the realm of independent empirical laws, so too does emancipation organize the different political beliefs of modern thought. All look to a future in which humanity will be governed only by laws of its own choosing. Therefore, the foil against which emancipation emerges is the image of humanity divided from its essence; the image of humanity as oppressed but as also endowed with the proper means of overcoming oppression.

Lyotard unambiguously renounces this image of humanity. The Idea of emancipation was not self-subsistent. It pre-supposed an essentialist picture of human subjecthood. Only if, at some real level, humanity was constitutive of the reality which it inhabited, could emancipation be viewed as the species' essential goal. Only if there was a real capacity for self-determination, present but not fulfilled in given societies, would emancipation make sense. In the absence of such a capacity there would be no contrast between free and oppressive systems. This is an understanding of humanity which Lyotard dismantles. The modern subject has collapsed under the combined weight of failure and opposition from those who have been excluded by its standard definition. As he writes:

> If the answer to the question has to be no (no, human
> history as the history of emancipation is no longer
> credible) then the status of the "we" which asks the
> question must also be reviewed. It seems that it is

> condemned (but only in the eyes of modernity is it a
> condemnation) to remain particular... and to exclude
> a lot of third parties... it must either mourn for
> unanimity and find another mode of thinking and acting,
> or be plunged into melancholia by the loss of an
> "object" (or the impossibility of a subject): free
> humanity.[73]

Whatever this new mode of action turns out to be, and Lyotard

does not settle very long on any one mode, it must make do

without legitimating itself by appeal to a self-determining

capacity of humanity. Instead politics must begin from all

the different social positions where "selves" are situated.

In this manner, politics can both develop creative strategies

which correspond to changed circumstances and avoid the bloody

errors of the past.

This last point is crucial, because Lyotard argues that

not only is the essentialist conception of subjecthood

obsolete, it has in fact been at the basis of the great

political crimes of the twentieth century. Lyotard catalogues

these in detail:

> Without wishing to decide whether we are dealing with
> facts or signs, it seems difficult to refute the
> available evidence of the defaillancy of the modern
> subject. No matter which genre it seeks to make
> hegemonic, the very basis of each of the great
> narratives of emancipation
> has... been invalidated over the past 50 years. "All
> that is real is rational, all that is rational is
> real." "Auschwitz" refutes speculative doctrine...

---

[73]*Ibid.*, p.316. There is an ambiguity here which must be
noted. He states that it is only in the eyes of modernity that the
particular status of the "we" is a condemnation. It would appear
that for Lyotard too this would be a condemnation, since this
particular is responsible for the exclusion of the third parties.
However, what he objects to is not the particular status of the
"we" but its false universalization.

> "All that is proletarian is communist, all that is
> communist is proletarian." Berlin, 1953, Budapest
> 1956... refutes the doctrine of historical
> materialism.[74]

Lyotard continues on with examples which indicate the failure

of the liberal and capitalist metanarratives as well, but the

implication of his point is sufficiently clear- humanity has

not, and cannot, in the language of modernity, overcome the

concrete limitations on its freedom, and attempts to do so

result in the opposite of what was intended.

This ironic outcome is the case because the modern

understanding of freedom is, at root, according to Lyotard, an

idea not of freedom but of mastery. The reduction of

subjecthood to linguistically constituted subject-positions is

thus a critique of the idea of mastery which Lyotard finds at

the basis of the modernist understanding of humanity. Here

again he has recourse to general linguistics. Lyotard relates

the idea of humanity as subject to the grammatical position of

first-person subject. According to Lyotard, the first-person

subject-position in a sentence not only denotes who or what

the sentence concerns, but also who or what regulates the

meaning. The subject is the one who intends, who gives birth

to and who purportedly controls meaning:

> The position of the first person (the Subject) is
> in fact marked as being that of the mastery of speech
> meaning; let the people have a political voice, the
> workers a social voice.[75]

---

[74]*Ibid.*, p.318.

[75]*Ibid.*, p.314.

As his examples illustrate, the political analogue of the
first-person is mass-based struggle for control over the
social environment. Just as meaning is determined by non-
subjective grammatical rules, so too history is governed by a
plurality of rules not amenable to democratic or any social
control. Refusal to recognize the grammatical point leads to
dogmatic attempts at controlling meaning. Refusal to
recognize the political analogue leads to terroristic, ie,
exclusivist, political practices. Lyotard's "monstrous"
linguistic analysis of the social is designed to rupture the
link he asserts between speech and mastery, politics and
terror.

As has been indicated, Lyotard moves increasingly
towards an account of language as a productive force which
determines and situates speakers. As a dispersed plurality of
phrase regimens, language is not amenable to human control.
Humans utilize language in different contexts to pursue
different ends, but both the contexts and the ends are
functions of the rules governing the linkage of phrases, and
not the rational entailments of essential human interests and
capacities. The stakes of this argument, Lyotard contends in
the opening of *The Differend,* are,

> [t]o refute the prejudice anchored in the reader by
> centuries of humanism and the "human sciences" that
> there is "man," that there is "language," that the
> former uses the latter for his own ends and that if
> he does not succeed in attaining those ends it is for
> want of good control over "language" by means of a

better "language."[76]

As we have seen, this prejudice is to be overcome by a
pragmatic, linguistic analysis of the social which reveals
that human subjects are the product of different language-
games, or, as he puts it in this text, phrase regimens.
Because humans must speak in order to express what they are,
they enter into games where they do not control the rules.
There is no autonomy or freedom, but only heteronomy and
determination. There is no escaping this trap, since the only
alternative is silence, but this too, according to Lyotard, is
a phrase.

Once the humanist prejudice noted above has been
overcome a transformation is possible, an inversion whereby
the creative power of language is manifest. Humans are
dispersed fragments situated by dispersed phrase-regimens.
The latter carry with them their own instruction for use.
Human action amounts to playing with the fragments, but always
in a fashion determined by rules immanent to the phrases
themselves:

> ...the phrases that happen are "awaited" not by
> conscious or unconscious subjects who would anticipate
> them... [phrases] carry their own sets of directions
> along with them... they carry instructions as to the
> ends pursued through them.[77]

As there are differends (gaps which signify the absence of a
mediating principle which could adjudicate equally legitimate

---

[76]Lyotard, *The Differend,* p.xiii.

[77]*Ibid.,* p.129

claims) separating different phrase regimens from one another, science from morality, one political strategy from another, it follows that there are no valid universal criteria which could define the essential qualities of subjecthood, ie, produce a collective subject "humanity" and, on that basis, ground a global project for a free and rational society. If such a strategy were to be "truly human" it would require access to an essence which unites the disparate cultures of the globe. The production of such an essence would require that one ignore the differends separating one group from the next. The modern understanding of politics sought authorization from a universal interpretation of history, but there are differing interpretations of history and for Lyotard, as was noted in the previous section, (p.45) "one side's legitimacy does not entail the other side's lack of legitimacy."

If modern, global interpretations are abandoned, however, respect for the differends of history will rule out mastery, control, and authoritarianism. From this respect for difference in general Lyotard has attempted to formulate a postmodern justice, and it is this attempt which marks his work as a critique of modernity and not simply a catalogue of its problems. As will be argued in the next chapter, Lyotard's understanding of justice implies a concern with freedom, a freedom of phrases perhaps, but freedom nonetheless. If as Lyotard contends, "consensus does violence

to the heterogeneity of language-games[78]" and if his aim has been throughout to maximize dissensus and difference, it is owing to an interest in at least the minimization of exclusion and oppression. That is a tale to be told below, however. At this point, the complex history of Foucault's engagement with subjecthood awaits.

Foucault is both a harsh critic of the notion of subjecthood but also a thinker who, towards the end of his career, refocused attention on the self-creative capacity of the human subject.[79] The present section will focus upon Foucault's critique of subjecthood and the values of self-determination and autonomy which he feels are entailed by that notion. The subsequent section will introduce his rehabilitated notions of subjecthood, autonomy, and power.

Until the "turn" occasioned by his historical analysis of Greek, Roman, and early Christian ethical practices, Foucault was perhaps the most astringent and influential critic of the modernist account of subjecthood. He rejected subjecthood on both methodological and political grounds. Again, a crucial link is established between the modernist

---

[78]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* p.xxv.

[79]Perhaps the strongest proponent of this reading is Deborah Cook. See, *The Subject Finds A Voice,* p.130. I shall have occasion to comment on her argument below as it seems to efface the decisive contradiction in Foucault's work, namely, that either the notion of self-determination was presupposed throughout, and there is evidence that it was, in which case his critique is incoherent, or it is rehabilitated, in which case much of what he wrote prior to the 1980's is invalidated.

notion of subjecthood and the desire for mastery and control.
During his early career Foucault was driven by the hope of a
new day in which a different experience of ourselves, an
experience beyond the confines of rational self-identity and
collective self-determination, would become possible:

> ...my encounter with Bataille, Blanchot, and, through
> them, my reading of Nietzsche [represented for me] an
> invitation to call into question the category of
> "subject," its primacy and its originating function.
> And then, the conviction that an operation of this
> kind would not make any sense if it had been confined
> to speculation: to call the subject into question had
> to mean to live it in an experience that might be its
> real destruction or dissociation, its explosion or
> upheaval into something radically "other."[80]

In order to access this other in a radical way Foucault first
inquired into the realm of the mad, ie, those whose experience
of the world went well beyond the paradigms of rational
thought. In the life of the insane Foucault sought out a
"limit-experience," an experience which would "gather the
maximum amount of intensity and impossibility at the same
time,"[81] If this experience could be had, it would, Foucault
believed, burst the seams of the rational subject. It is here
that he first became fascinated by the practices of
transgression, of going beyond prescribed limits, which are
central to his politics even after he moves away from his
focus on the insane.

Foucault's initial assault upon subjecthood proceeds

---

[80]Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, (New York: Semiotext(e)), 1991,
p.46.

[81]*Ibid.*, p.31.

along two interconnected paths. He aims to disclose that the
self-determining capacity central to the concept of
subjecthood is both an historically specific posit of
anonymous rules governing the formulation of discourse in the
modern period, and undermined in general by the non-subjective
character of those rules. Given that humanity only expresses
its purportedly self-creative capacity by speaking and acting,
and that the rules governing speaking and acting are
irreducible either to individual intentions or collective
projects, Foucault concludes that any capacity for self-
determination is a chimera, and a dangerous one at that.

According to Foucault's archaeology of modernity, this
period is one characterized by the epistemic and historical
sovereignty of the subject. That is, the rules defining
rational and scientific argument in the period beginning in
the late eighteenth century obligated the theorist to ground
knowledge in some capacity inhering in the subject. Thus, for
Kant, the structure of subjective understanding made knowledge
of nature possible. For Hegel, history was the product of the
struggle of self-consciousness for understanding and mutual
recognition. For Marx, human labour was the basis of the
historical world and economic value. In each case one sees an
active, self-determining aspect ascribed to human being.
According to Foucault, this did not pre-exist modernity:

> Before the end of the 18th (sic) century, "Man" did
> not exist... he is a quite recent creature, which the
> *demiurge of knowledge fashioned with his own hand*

less than two hundred years ago.[82] [my emphasis]

Kant, Hegel and Marx did not make any fundamental advances in

the understanding of human knowledge and history. What they

did was draw valid inferences on the basis of evidence already

structured by those unconscious rules which organized

knowledge in their period. Their conclusions are true,

according to Foucault, only relative to the episteme in which

they worked.

Thus, one must not view as epistemologically or

politically progressive the sovereignty attributed to

subjecthood in this period. Whether construed individually,

as in Kant, or collectively, as in Hegel and Marx, the self-

certainty of the rational subject, the self-determining

capacity of the labouring subject, or the self-creative

character of the species as a whole, were made possible as

ideas by the rules of the epoch, and they must disappear when

those rules change. Foucault replaces the sovereign subject

with discursively constituted subject positions:

> [rules for the formation of discourse] constitute an
> anonymous field whose configuration defines the
> possible position of speaking subjects. Statements
> should no longer be situated in relation to a sovereign
> subjectivity, but recognize in the different forms of
> subjectivity effects proper to the enunciative
> field.[83]

Thus, in the archaeological decentering of the subject the

rules governing discursive practice determine and situate the

---

[82]Foucault, *The Order of Things,* p.369.

[83]Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* p.56.

subject.   These rules are external to the human species and

they cannot be brought under social control.

The decentering of the subject which this position

entails proceeds via an inversion, not a supersession, of the

modernist relationship between subject and object.   For Kant,

through Hegel to Marx, and beyond that, to phenomenology, the

object has been made dependent upon the subject.   That is,

objects were understood in this period as external to, but not

independent of, the theoretical and practical activity of

human beings.   The philosophical and political goals of

modernity are summed up in the slogan, "overcome the duality

of subject and object."   In its most politically sophisticated

expression, Marxism, the overcoming of this duality requires

the construction of a society in which productive activity

returns from alienation and manifests itself as what it

essentially is, an historically developed capacity for self-

creation.   The duality of subject and object is overcome

because the objective world is no longer an external

limitation upon action, but rather the collective product of

the species.   This collective product in turn serves as the

substance from which individual self-creative action proceeds.

One's work contributes to the general social product and also

fulfils the specific talents and goals of the individual.

There are limitations here, but the limitations are immanent

to the socio-natural whole and are, for that reason, not

oppressive.   What I can do in such a state is not limited by

systematically enforced power imbalances, but only by what I,

as this person with these talents, can do.

For Foucault, on the other hand, rather than an object-

constituting subjectivity there is a subject-constituting

objectivity (discursivity). As we know, this discursivity

exists in plural form and is irreducible to any centre.

Society and history exist as a plurality of dispersed events

in which numerous determined subject-positions are

established. Thus, the light begins to dim for the self-

determining subject and on the horizon appears the

polychromatic postmodern dawn:

> In the rumbling which shakes today, perhaps we have to
> recognize the birth of a world in which the subject is
> not one, but split, is not sovereign, but dependent, is
> not an absolute origin, but a function ceaselessly
> modified.[84]

The self-determining capacity of humanity is fractured by this

rumbling into the various discursive formations in which

humans are variously inserted. Michael Sprinker comments

incisively on the implications of this argument:

> ...it becomes clear that the apparent self-constitution
> of the human subject in history is illusory, since all
> the various discourses, including the discourse of man
> as historical subject and producer of discourse itself,
> are produced by language, which has a life, a being, a
> power of production of its own.[85]

Thus, not only is the subject relative to the rules of the

modern episteme; those very rules which make it possible also

---

[84]Foucault, "Birth of a World", *Foucault Live,* p.61.

[85]Michael Sprinker, "The Use and Abuse of Foucault", *Humanities in Society,* Vol.3, #1, Winter, 1980, p.3.

make its essential function as the sovereign creator of its
own conditions of existence illusory.

The modern period structured discourse such that all
knowledge appeared to be grounded in some subjective capacity.
The subjective grounding of determinate modes of objectivity
has a paradoxical effect, according to Foucault. The positing
of the subject as the ground of knowledge is simultaneously
the positing of the subject as an object of knowledge. That
is, it becomes possible to ask "what is it about "man" that
allows it to know nature, create history, etc?" On this basis
develop the human sciences which take humanity as their
object. In being thus transformed into an object, humanity
discovers that where its freedom should be there are only
determined rules and limitations. Speech follows rules,
labour is determined by the laws of the market, and behaviour
is governed by rules immanent to the biological organism. As
he writes:

> Will the history of man ever be more than a sort of
> common modulation of changes in the conditions of life
> (climate, soil fertility, methods of agriculture,
> exploitation of wealth), of transformations in the
> economy (and consequently in society and its
> institutions), and of the successive
> forms of usage of language? But, in that case, man is
> not himself historical: since time comes to him from
> somewhere else, he constitutes himself as a subject of
> history only by the superimposition of the history of
> beings, the history of things, and the history of
> words.[86]

Thus, Foucault concludes that because subjecthood has no

---

[86]Foucault, *The Order of Things,* p.369.

content apart from its objectification, and because these objectifications are determined by rules which do not originate with subjecthood, and because these rules are historically variable, subjecthood cannot be a transhistorical constitutive force. There is no subject of history. "History has no 'meaning.'"[87] There are no criteria which one could lay claim to in an effort to judge whether or not we have become more or less rational or more or less free.

The shift to genealogy and the analysis of power relations does not initially alter anything fundamental in this argument. If anything, genealogy is an intensification of the decentering of the subject, for now Foucault argues that the rules governing discursive practices are one and all enmeshed with power which is always circulating. The analysis of power relations is still guided by the idea that "[o]ne has to dispense with the constitutive subject, to get rid of the subject itself,... to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within an historical framework."[88]

What changes in Foucault's genealogies is that a new critical voice emerges. The subject is no longer simply the posit of anonymous rules, but rather the deliberate product of that disciplinary apparatus (prisons, schools, etc) which

---

[87]Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", *The Foucault Reader*, p.56.

[88]Foucault, "Truth and Power", *The Foucault Reader*, p.59.

constitutes individuals. This production extends beyond the
production of individuals as determinate objects of knowledge.
Power constructs individuals to the very depths of their
being. Here it is appropriate to recall Peter Dews" comment
cited previously, that "subjectification" as the process of
normalization, is a necessary precursor to subjection. In the
prison and the factory, through various practices of
confession and self-examination, people are constituted to
believe in an "inner truth" definitive of human being:

> The obligation to confess is now relayed through so
> many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us,
> that we no longer perceive it as an effect of power
> that constrains us, on the contrary, it seems to us
> that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands"
> only to surface.[89]

This practice goes back to the Christian confession of the
Middle Ages, and has an obvious modern counterpart in
psychoanalysis.

There is more at stake here, however, than whether or
not there is an inner truth to individuals. Foucault's
argument entails that there is no capacity distinct from
objective power relations definitive of human beings. As the
quotation above illustrates, the very thought that one is more
than what one is made to be by power is itself an effect of
power. Subjecthood is not the ground from which a free
society could be constructed. A society of self-determining
beings is neither possible nor desirable. It is rather a

---

[89]Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, p.60.

constraining production of the apparatus of power itself:

> There are two meanings to the word subject: subject to
> someone else's control or dependence, and tied to his
> own identity by a conscience or a self-knowledge. Both
> meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and
> makes subject to.[90]

It follows from Foucault's argument that there is no essential

depth to human being, no underlying human capacities which

could be distorted or alienated or repressed. Commenting

clearly on this implication, David Ingram notes:

> Foucault does not hesitate to draw what, for a critical
> theorist, appears to be a damning conclusion: if power
> insinuates itself into the very discipline constitutive
> of self-identity, then it is impossible to know
> rationally one's true humanity independently of power's
> distorting effects... there is no "false
> consciousness" but only blindness to the irrecusable
> historicity, conditionality, and otherness of one's own
> subjectivity.[91]

It is not that it is impossible to know one's true humanity,

but rather that there is no true humanity to be found beyond

the operations of power which constitute us.

For Foucault this is a positive development since it

creates hope for a politics beyond modernist limitations.

Once again, at the root of the worst totalitarian excesses

there lies the figure of humanity as subjecthood:

> ...we know from experience that the claim to escape
> from the system of contemporary society so as to
> produce the overall programs of another society,
> of another way of thinking, another culture, another

---

[90]Foucault, "The Subject and Power", Dreyfus and Rabinow,
Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, p.212.

[91]David Ingram, "Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of
Reason", *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault,* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press), 1994, p.221.

vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.[92]

This point is made even more forcefully in Foucault's review of Andre Glucksman's, *Les Maitres Penseurs*. Glucksman argued in this text that the very notion of positive freedom, understood to mean collective self-determination, leads necessarily to totalitarianism. Like Popper, Berlin, and Hayek before him, Glucksman asserts an essential identity between Stalinism and Nazism. Foucault welcomes this argument:

> Avec le Goulag, on voyait non pas les conséquences d'une malheureuse erreur mais les éffets des théories les plus "vraies" dans l'ordre de la politique.[93]

It was Marxism's "scientific" status, its belief in laws of history which could be known and manipulated to serve collective ends, which caused Stalinism. The argument which Foucault supports contends that if there really were such laws, and if they really could be bent to universal purposes, and if the fulfilment of these purposes would finally resolve the contradictions of human history, then those who know them are justified in taking any measures to bring that situation to pass. The Gulag follows necessarily from this argument because those who stand in the way of the construction of socialism are not just enemies of the state, but enemies of humanity. Eliminating them is thus both necessary and

---

[92]Foucault, "What is Enlightenment", *The Foucault Reader,* p.46.

[93]Foucault, "La Grand Colère des faits," *La Nouvelle Observateur,* lundi, 9 mai, 1977.

justified by the end their elimination will facilitate. The

same logic underlined Nazism. Although it took a much more

circumscribed view of who was "human" it nevertheless

justified the extermination of others by appeal to their

inhuman nature. It is a desire to avoid such monstrous crimes

which motivates Foucault to abandon, "the programs for a new

man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout

the twentieth century."[94]

---

[94]Foucault, "What is Enlightenment", *The Foucault Reader,* p.47. The problem with this argument is that it presupposes a law-like structure to history even as it claims that the belief in a law-like structure inevitably results in totalitarianism. While the totalitarian outcome is a contingent historical product, dependent upon the adoption of the universalist perspective, it is nevertheless an inevitable outcome once that perspective has been adopted. History is not, therefore, contingent, but determined by a law-like structure. The difference is that the critique of universalism complicates the laws, but it does not abandon them. One only need look at the howls which are produced by the neo-conservative inheritors of these ideas whenever someone interferes with the "laws of the market" to see the truth of this claim. The dispute boils down to a dispute about which laws one believes in.
There is a second problem here which follows from the first. In the rush to deduce "totalitarianism" in general from a philosophical position, only one side of the revolution is examined- the role of the Bolshevik Party. In the case of Russia certain salient features of the history of the revolution are effaced so as to validate the claim that Leninism is Stalinism. However, it cannot be denied that a) the Bolsheviks waited until they had a majority in the soviets until calling for the overthrow of the provisional government, b) that that government, regardless of the openly expressed views of hundreds of thousands of people, continued the war and refused to meet the peasantry's land claims, c) that the October Revolution was the culminating point of struggles in which hundreds of thousands of people participated in, d) Stalin exiled or killed the vast majority of the members of the Central Committee of the party after taking power, e) there was a left-opposition to Stalin which was systematically destroyed, a process which culminated half a world away when Trotsky was executed in Mexico. This is not to say that the internal structure of the Party was not partly responsible for the degeneration of the revolution, as, for example, Rosa Luxembourg maintained. It is to insist, however, that if Stalinism was both inevitable and

The political consequences of Foucault's critique of

subjecthood will be pursued in the next chapter. At this

point, let us examine Derrida and then proceed to illustrate

the shared outlines of a radical postmodern alternative to

contemporary society.

Like Foucault, Derrida's problems with the notion of

subjecthood evolve from a critique of the epistemological

subject of modern philosophy to a political critique of

political programs rooted in an essentialist understanding of

the human being. The problem with the epistemological

subject, as was manifest in the preceding chapter, was that it

rested upon an exclusion of the primacy of the signifier. If

one examines this exclusion critically one discovers

signifiers where the originary acts of consciousness should

be. Clear and distinct ideas, Categories of the

understanding, Ideas, and expressive signs are one and all

signs. As such they play according to their own rules. Signs

are primary, consciousness and self-consciousness are

secondary effects of linguistic operations:

...if we refer... to semiological difference, of what

---

consistent with the program of the Bolshevik Party then the left-
wing struggle against it is inexplicable. Taking into account the
events of the period, one can see that Stalinism was not
inevitable, but was the result of the isolation of the revolution.
This isolation and the misery it produced necessitated the
authoritarian degeneration which then created the context in which
Stalin could come to power.   An excellent critical evaluation of
the various attempts to link the totalitarian outcome of the
revolution with the process of revolution itself may be found in,
John Rees, "In Defence of October", *International Socialism*, #52,
October, 1991, pp.1-52.

> does Saussure in particular remind us? That "language"
> (which consists only of differences) is not a function
> of the speaking subject. This implies that the subject
> (in its identity with itself, its self-consciousness)
> is inscribed in language, is a "function" of language,
> becomes a *speaking* subject only by making its speech
> conform- even in so-called "creation" or
> "transgression"- to the system rules of
> language as a system of differences, or at very
> least to the general law of *differance*...[95]

The "general law of *differance*" stipulates that meaning is never present since it must be given through signs, the function of which is to signify the absence of that which should be present. Thus, the subject, rational, self-identical, and self-creative, in so far as it is only conscious of itself through signifying itself, cannot bring itself to presence, and thus cannot actually be the unified, rational, self-creative being it is said to be by modern thought.

There is thus no question of any essential core definitive of the human being. "The subject is always the posit of external forces,"[96] Bill Martin, referring to Derrida, correctly comments. This does not mean, however, that there is no subject. As in Lyotard and Foucault, there are subject-positions or functions, but these do not owe their existence to a defining subjecthood. "To deconstruct the subject," Derrida states, "does not mean to deny its existence. There are subjects, "operations" or "effects" of

---

[95]Derrida, "Differance", *Margins of Philosophy*, p.15

[96]Martin, *Matrix and Line*, p.52.

subjectivity." However, "to acknowledge this does not mean...
that the subject is what it says it is."[97] Indeed, whatever
the subject says it is will necessarily be undermined by the
ongoing dissemination of new meanings. All attempts to ground
and define human being can only function as arbitrary
restrictions upon this play.

Hence the essential link between the critique of the
epistemological subject and the historical character of
subjecthood. While Hegel and Marx also criticized abstract
conceptions of self-identity, they maintained an essential
link with the philosophy of identity in so far as both
conceived humanity as defined by a self-creative capacity.
Identity and meaning are retranscribed here and function as
critical tools. The identity of humanity as a self-creative
species is used as a yardstick to determine the free or unfree
character of social relations. Meanings are critical weapons
to the extent that they can be used against social structures
which call themselves free but in their practice do not live
up to the deeper implications of the concept. If, however,
the concept "free" has no determinate social, economic, or
institutional entailments, the successful employment of such
critical comparisons becomes impossible. Not only does
success become impossible, the very effort displays the desire
for mastery and control definitive of metaphysics:

---

[97]Derrida, quoted in Keane, *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers,* p.125.

> ... the rapport of self-identity is itself always a
> rapport of violence with the other, so that notions of
> property, appropriation, and self-presence so central
> to logocentric metaphysics are essentially dependent
> upon an oppositional relationship with otherness.[98]

It matters not whether the identity here be individual or

collective. Indeed, the passage carries more critical force

if the identity is a shared human identity. The desire of

metaphysics to master the real, a peculiarly Western desire,

plays itself out as the forcible exclusion of concrete

"others."

Thus, once again one finds the understanding of

humanity as self-determining posited as the ground of

totalitarianism. Once again, subjecthood, reliant as it is

upon the desire to master the forces which determine it (which

it is impossible in principle to do) ends up creating a

nightmare:

> ...un tel événement... de force philosophico-
> scientifique prétendent rompre avec le mythe, le
> réligion... s'est liée pour la premiere fois et
> inseperablement, à des formes mondiales d'organization
> sociale (un parti a vocation universelle, un mouvement
> ouvrier, une conféderation étatique, etc.)... Quoi
> qu'on pense de cet événement, de l'échec parfois
> terrrifiant de ce qui fut ainsi engagé; des désastres
> téchno-économique ou écologique
> et des perversions totalitaire auxquelles il a donné
> lieu (perversions dont certain disent depuis longtemps
> que ne sont pas perversions)... mais le déploiement
> necéssaire d'une logique éssentielment présent dans la
> naissance.[99]

This logic is the logic of eschatology. The struggles

---

[98]*Ibid.*, p.117.

[99]Derrida, *Spectres de Marx,* p.150.

surrounding the attempt to realize the human essence in
society in this century necessarily resulted in
totalitarianism. These struggles, he writes, "precipiter la
realisation monstreuse, l'effectuation magique,
l'incorporation animiste d'une eschatologie emancipatoire qui
aurait du respecter l'etre promesse d'une promesse."[100] The
totalitarian outcome is for the notion of human essence, "la
blessure le plus profonde."[101]

There is still, however, a place the promise of
emancipation in Derrida's politics. This promise, as is
indicated in the above citation, should have been (aurait du)
respected as a promise and not treated as a determinate
program for social transformation. As he argues:

> Il s'agissait alors, de penser un autre historicité-
> non pas une nouvelle histoire... mais une autre
> ouverture de l'évènmentalité comme
> historicité...d'ouvrir access à une pensée affirmatrice
> de la promesse messianique et émancipatoire comme
> promesse: comme promesse et non
> comme programme ou déssein onto-téléologique... C'est
> la condition d'une ré-politicization, peut-être d'une
> autre concept du politique.[102]

This new politics proceeds from a repudiation of an
essentialist and teleological understanding of humanity and
its history, not in the name of abandoning history, but in the
name of an affirmative history and a respect for the openness
of the future. After summing up the results of the present

---

[100]*Ibid.*, pp.172-173.

[101]*Ibid,* p.161.

[102]*Ibid.*, p.126,

section we shall finally turn to a consideration of the radical political implications of the work examined.

The disclosure of social complexity through the empirical evaluation of the present historical conjuncture disclosed a crack in the edifice of modern theory through which its more fundamental problems could be perceived. In particular, theoretical totalization was seen to rest upon a naive naturalism which may be overcome through the discursive analysis of social phenomena. This latter approach, in turn, discloses the fundament of the naive naturalism, ie, an essentialist understanding of human being, or what has been called here subjecthood. If humanity had essential characteristics, and if these could be read from the historical register, then these characteristics could serve as grounds for the explanation and evaluation of historical events. In brief, history could be seen as the struggle for emancipation and the conclusion of this struggle would arrive when a society came into being defined by an institutional structure which expressed the human essence.

If, however, as the postmodern analysis claims to disclose, essences are temporary, tendential hypostatisations of meaning and are relative to the particular discourse which posit essences, then two conclusions follow. One: there is no such thing as an essence which could fulfil its mandate as an essence. Although there are definitions *called* essences, they are not "real" essences, that is, they do not actually

express the fundamental character of the things of which they are purportedly the essence. Two, rather than being the ground of emancipation, the function of the concept of human essence (howsoever it be construed) is to legitimate the exclusion of different possibilities. Henceforth, in an effort to minimize the oppressive practices characteristic of the West, subjects, and subjecthood in general, must be considered as the posits of forces external to human beings and beyond the control of humanity in general. This is, as we shall now explore in detail, the general principle of the politics inherent in the work of Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida.

1.4: Postmodern Freedom

If it is the case that the totalitarian disasters of
the modern period can be traced back to the ideas of mastery
inherent in the modernist concept of subjecthood, then
postmodern politics, if it is to live up to its self-given
radical mandate[103] must be scrupulous in avoiding a
reinstantiation of modernist values in its politics. If
postmodern thought were to simply re-interpret the values of
self-determination and self-creation then it would merely be a
renovation of modern theory, and not the first light of the
new dawn which we have seen it proclaim itself to be. The
general stakes of a new politics are nicely outlined by Keith
Pheby in his aptly named text, *Interventions: Displacing the
Metaphysical Subject:*

---

[103]Radical with regard to modern theory and not to the specific
political practices postmodern politics recommends. It does not
recommend radical reconfigurations of the social if by "radical
reconfiguration" is meant an all-embracing social transformation.
Radical efforts at total reconstruction are the end points of
modernist eschatologies and are therefore to be eschewed in
principle. Postmodern radicality would thus consist is the
disclosure of the roots of totalitarianism in the humanist
essentialism of modernist theory and in the creation of a space in
which new, unforseen political practices can develop.

> In as much as deconstruction resists entrenchment,
> resists being defined univocally by the dominant
> culture, it cannot fail to strike a transgressive
> posture when confronted with the hegemony of Western
> rationalism and its technological domination of the
> earth.[104]

While transgressive *postures* are much in evidence, whether

these can be transformed into effective checks against the

forces of exclusion is less certain. There may be some truth

to the linkage established between metaphysics and oppression,

but the postmodern road stretching beyond metaphysics may not

unambiguously entail the effects hoped for.

Let us begin the investigation of postmodern politics

by recapitulating a theme developed in the previous section.

The attempt to deduce political practice from a philosophy of

history is, Lyotard argues, inherently terroristic. He

argues:

> ...the social whole is made up of a multitude of
> encounters between interlocutors caught up in different
> pragmatics. One must judge case by case... I am not
> saying that all positions are equivalent, far from it,
> but they all partake of a similar attitude toward what
> one could call "rational terrorism" in matters of
> history and political decisions. That is, it is not
> true that a political position can be
> derived from a reason in history...[105]

Terror flows from the attempt to deduce politics from a

---

[104]Keith Pheby, *Interventions: Displacing the Metaphysical Subject,* (Washington: Maissoneuve Press), 1988, p.2. Pheby uses the term "deconstruction" to denote a general politics premised upon the repudiation of the concept of subjecthood. He thus includes Foucault and Lyotard, as well as Heidegger and Nietzsche, in this camp.

[105]Lyotard, *Just Gaming,* p.74. See also in this regard, *Rudiments paiennes,* p.146.

purportedly rational and universal standpoint. Any "human" project (Marxist, liberal or otherwise) can only constitute itself by the exclusion of other possibilities. The attempt to rationalize this exclusion does not differentiate these projects from an irrational, groundless terror, but only makes the terror more insidious.

Thus, the "basic" problem plaguing Western history is a philosophical one. There is no indication given in Lyotard that determinate material practices and modes of social organization established the possibility for oppressive models of thinking and argumentation, but he does imply that a mode of *thinking* may be responsible for oppressive practices. Thus, Lyotard's efforts to escape the omnivorous rationality of modernity continually revolve around the defence and extension of non-universalizing forms of discourse. This is an essential point which runs throughout his always changing critical strategies.

In his "pagan" writings of the 1970's he opposed to rational humanism the specific practice of "small narratives." These small narratives were characteristic of all those diverse points of struggle which emerged after the Second World War. The defining trait of these movements was that they refused to legitimate themselves by appeal to any universal standard deduced from a philosophy of history. These groups, including women, gays and lesbians, and oppressed ethnic minorities bore names which "were not listed

on the official register" (n'etaitent pas porte au registre

officiel)."[106] As he describes these practices:

> Ces luttes sont des luttes de minoritaires visant à
> rester minoritaire et à être reconnu comme tels... En
> interdirant leurs cultures, leurs patois, on veut
> détuire leur force affirmatrice, la "perspective" en
> sens nietzschéen, que trace chacun de ces luttes dans
> une temps qui n'est pas cumulatif.[107]

That is, they do not move in an historical continuum

established by a metanarrative. They are immediate events

which arise in response to particular exclusions. They posit

the distinctness of the group rather than negate general

social contradictions. Unlike the Marxist notion of working

class revolution, which claimed that in emancipating itself

the working class would emancipate humanity from class

contradictions and the law of value, these small struggles

seek only to make manifest particular voices and to strike

immediate blows against the forces of exclusion.

If one seeks to reduce these struggles to some general

historical schema one thereby destroys their essentially

affirmative character. This is so because these struggles

stem from,

> ...une autre espace, une autre logique, une autre
> histoire que ce dans lesquelles le platonisme et le
> judaïsme conjugés ont cherché et cherchant encore, sous
> l'autorité des jacobinisme, leninisme, trotskyisme,
> maoisme, libéralisme, à consigner ces spasmes et les
> neutralisés. [108]

---

[106]Lyotard, *Rudiments paiennes,* p.146.

[107]*Ibid.*

[108]*Ibid.,* p.77

"Platonisme et judaisme conjuges," ie, universal theory, (the rationalism of Plato is united with the absolute normative presence of the Jewish God in universal theories - God (reason) speaks and those under its authority follow) destroys the radical character of these struggles by situating them as a moment in a general historical process. They are not particular aspects of a general emancipatory movement, however, they are just what they are in the specific context of their emergence- minority struggles.

Thus, one must not suppose that what is being realized in such struggles is an underlying human essence repressed by social forms opposed to the existence of that essence. Oppressed minorities are not created because of "inhuman" social conditions. That is, minorities are not oppressed because social dynamics repress a fundamental trait which they share with everyone else. On the contrary, minorities are constituted linguistically as different social positions lacking all essential connection to one another. The condition of possibility, the content and the "identity" of any minority are all linguistic:

> ...minorities are not social ensembles, they are
> territories of language. Everyone of us belongs to
> several minorities, and what is important is that
> none of them prevails. It is only then that one can
> say that society is just.[109]

The principle of justice does not provide criteria to decide which minorities are oppressed and which are dominant. It

---

[109]Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p.95.

simply stipulates that the maximum diversity of linguistic

territories be maintained. It makes no reference to the

content of these territories. That is, it does not disqualify

any minority for reason of what it is or what it believes.

Its essential concern is with maintaining diversity, not with

judging content.

Thus, Lyotard's justice depends upon the separation of

ethics from ontology. These are two distinct genres separated

by a differend. Ethics is performative, ontology constative.

Ethics constitutes its sphere of competence, ontology

represents a sphere said to exist in its own right. As there

is no natural basis to ethics, The Good, or here, the Just,

cannot be a natural kind or objective property inferred from

states of affairs. From this essential difference between

ontology and ethics Lyotard argues that there must be a

multiplicity of justices. If there is no valid way of

deducing a single all-encompassing ethical-political program,

then one must tolerate divers programs whose natures are

relative to the territory of language in which they

respectively operate. Only given such tolerance can "rational

terrorism" be obviated:

> ...there is first a multiplicity of justices,each oneof
> them defined by the rules specific to each game. These
> rules prescribe what must be done so that a denotative
> statement, or an interrogative one, or a prescriptive
> one etc. is received as such and recognized as "good"
> in accordance with the criteria of the game to which it
> belongs... Justice here does not merely consist in the
> observance of rules... it consists in working at the
> limits of what the rules permit, in order to invent new

moves, perhaps new games.[110]

Lyotard later intensifies his attack upon humanism in a manner which would seem to rule out the possibility of humans deliberately inventing new games. Nevertheless, despite his claims in *Peregrinations* and *The Differend* that humans do not use language as an instrument, that humans are situated and determined by phrases, he neither drops the link between justice and the existence of a multiplicity of linguistic territories nor the concern with novelty. This leads to the essential suspicion of this present investigation- that a key aspect of the modernist understanding of subjecthood, namely the difference between self-given determinations and externally imposed determinations, is presupposed by the very critique of subjecthood. Having noted this, let us proceed with the analysis of the subsequent developments of Lyotard's political thinking.

While Lyotard eventually drops the notion of "small narratives" and later the notion of narrative as such because they are too humanistic, he always maintains a desire to preserve the incommensurable, the specific, and the different. In *The Postmodern Condition*, where narrative and language-games are still important analytical tools, this desire is played out through a critique of consensus. Consensus is terroristic because it "does violence to the heterogeneity of language-games." The goal of debate is "paralogy," not

---

[110]*Ibid.*, p.100.

consensus.[111]

In general what Lyotard affirms is a society of maximum
tolerance towards different perspectives. He presents this as
a bulwark against the tyrannical rule of instrumental reason
and capitalist efficiency. As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner
have argued, there is a certain common frame of reference
between Lyotard and Frankfurt critical theory. Both are
concerned with mitigating the destructive effects of hegemonic
instrumental rationality.[112] Unlike (early) Frankfurt
critical theory, however, Lyotard resists identifying an agent
who could effect decisive social transformations, and he does
this for reasons which we know to be essential. Such an
account of agency is part and parcel of the history of
instrumental reason. Thus, resistance to the dynamics of
efficiency must be in a real sense passive. This passivity
becomes more and more pronounced, although the tension noted
above, between the Lyotard's linguistic determination of the
subject and the imperative to work at the margins and invent
new rules, is never fully resolved. In any case, as his work
develops language is increasingly identified as the creative
and constitutive power to the detriment of individual
creativity. Thus, he claims in *The Differend:*

> You don't play around with language. And in this sense
> there are no language-games. There are stakes tied to

---

[111]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* p.65.

[112]See, Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical
Interrogations,* pp. 247-248.

> the genres of discourse... There is conflict,
> therefore. The conflict, however, is not between
> humans... rather, they result from phrases.[113]

Political conflict thus exists in the form of the conflict between different forms of discourse. Politics "is not a genre," but rather, "the multiplicity of genres, the diversity of ends, and par excellence, the question of linkage. It plunges out into the emptiness of the "it happens that."[114]

What this means is that there are different accounts of politics- different perspectives, programs, institutional arrangements, accounts of the goals of political organization and so forth. Each genre links phrases together in a certain way, that is, each authorizes certain inferences and prohibits others. A libertarian, for example, may infer from the premise that society exists as an artificial construct of autonomous individuals that only impositions explicitly consented to by each rational individual are valid. Another chain of inference may then follow from this conclusion. Someone who does not share the first premise will contest the links deduced from that premise. There is no universal rational basis for deciding between the two positions, however, because they are separated from one another by a differend. The differend must be recognized, although it is still possible to attempt to find new types of linkage which could unite previously separated genres. There is still some

---

[113]Lyotard, *The Differend,* p.138.

[114]*Ibid.,* p.138.

hope in Lyotard's argument at this point, even if that hope appears to contradict his dissolution of subjecthood.

Increasingly, however, the preservation of hope and the possibility of resistance to the tyranny of efficiency have pushed Lyotard further and further away from a critical engagement with social dynamics. By 1988 he had left behind the belief that new links could be forged between genres and embraced the more pessimistic view that, "all politics is a program of administrative decision-making, of managing the system."[115] The system itself has become an organism driven by an immanent evolutionary dynamic of self-differentiation. It extends itself by eliminating the "native indeterminacy" characteristic of people before they have been subsumed by one or another sector of society. This evolutionary process, "does not proceed from the reason of mankind, say, of the Enlightenment. It results from a process of development, where it is not mankind at issue, but differentiation."[116] This process of differentiation is, "reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone."[117]

However, there is still some possibility of resistance, but it is a paradoxical one in the context of Lyotard's work

[115]Lyotard, "Oikos", *Politcal Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1989, p.101.

[116]Lyotard, *The Inhuman,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1991, p.6.

[117]*Ibid.,* p.7.

from the late 1970's to the present. The only chance one has

to escape from the logic of efficiency is to retreat *inward,*

to a non-differentiated subjective space which Lyotard calls

"the inhuman." This is not inhuman in the moralistic sense in

which violence is said to be inhuman, but rather inhuman in

relation to what humanity has become in the contemporary world

- a mere function of the various subsystems of which society

is composed. This interior space of "native indeterminacy"

expresses what, "[Lyotard has] always tried, under diverse

headings- work, figural, heterogeneity, dissensus, event,

thing, to reserve- the unharmonizable."[118] However, the

unharmonizable in the early work, at least apparently, was

never associated with any properly human capacity, even if

this be the purely negative gesture of withdrawal. Even

silence was said to be a phrase in *The Differend* and thus an

expression which found its conditions of possibility not in an

autonomous subjective capacity, but in the external rules

governing that genre of phrasing. This at least allowed for

the possibility that the refusal of ontologically grounded

political theories would create a context in which

unanticipated phrases could emerge. Now, externality in

general is characterized as irredeemably oppressive. That is,

the totality of the social is reduced to a disentropic

evolutionary force which subsumes any practical development

beneath itself and turns everything to its own interests.

---

[118]*Ibid.,* p.4.

What cannot be used is selected out. The system may be judged oppressive to the extent that "native indeterminacy," which is in principle undetermined, is constrained by this evolutionary process.

Perhaps, however, this return of inner subjective space in Lyotard casts his previous work in a new light. Perhaps he brings into the open that which had been presupposed throughout, namely some subjective capacity distinct from the normalizing functionalism of contemporary society. After all, contemporary society was always judged to be oppressive. He always championed *invention, affirmative* narratives, and new linkages between phrase *regimens.* If there were no distinction between subjecthood and external social dynamics, then the criticisms he levels at society, including his criticisms of the modernist character of subjecthood, could not appear as criticisms. If all capacities definitive of human being are nodes constituted by discourses which are in principle uncontrollable or ungovernable by humanity in accordance with rational and universal principles, if, indeed, as we have seen him suggest, such strategies of universal governance associated with humanism are the "essence" of totalitarianism, then there are no grounds to criticize the logic of efficiency as oppressive or restrictive or destructive, since nothing is affirmed to exist in the absence

of this dynamic.[119] This contradiction in Lyotard's work is symptomatic of a general contradiction facing anti-humanist political criticism. As such, further exploration of it will be deferred to the second part. Let us now turn to see how this same tension arises in Foucault's work.

If diverse and contradictory interpretations by a plethora of commentators is one sign of great theoretical ingenuity and importance, and I believe that it is, then Foucault is a thinker of first-rate importance. More so than either Lyotard or Derrida, Foucault has been subjected to numerous incompatible interpretations, even by those who support his work. Habermas highlights the neo-conservative implications of Foucault's work, while David Ingram argues that Foucault provides a more incisive account of power than does Habermas, but that their respective arguments are

---

[119]Although critics of Lyotard have argued that the unbounded pluralism favoured by Lyotard's politics was untenable and likely to devolve into a repetition of liberalism, which is inconsistent with his critique of metanarrative, supportive commentators have continued to ignore the immanent contradictions of his work. Gary Brodsky, for example, ignoring completely Lyotard's critique of consensus, argues that, "it is plausible to hope that the values and reasons needed to settle disputes will emerge as they are needed" and that, "the postmodern position provides grounds for hope." See Gary Brodsky, "Postmodernity and Politics", *Philosophy Today,* #31, Winter, 1987. More interestingly, in an important collection of papers devoted to Lyotard, there is not weight assigned to Lyotard's most recent critique of any activist politics. See, *Judging Lyotard,* Andrew Benjamin, ed., (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul), 1992. A similar oversight operates throughout Mark Poster's reading of Lyotard in, *The Mode of Information,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1990. For the critique of Lyotard mentioned at the opening of this note see, Stuart Sim, "Lyotard and the Politics of Anti-Foundationalism", *Radical Philosophy,* #44, Autumn, 1986, pp.8-13, and Kellner and Best, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations.*

compatible.[120] Michel Druron judged Foucault to be a

nihilist, while Deborah Cook sees Foucault as affirming the

uniquely self-creative ethical powers of concrete

individuals.[121] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe see in

Foucault the source for a renaissance of democratic theory,

while Michael Clifford and Steven David Ross judge Foucault to

be gesturing to a completely new form of radical politics

which does not require contact with old democratic values.[122]

Aron Keikel sees in Foucault an affinity with Heidegger's

critique of technology and Mark Poster finds in Foucault the

groundwork for a critique of the means of communication

characteristic of the computer age.[123] This list is by no

means exhaustive, but it gives the flavour of the debates

surrounding his work. Foucault was pleased by this

---

[120]See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press), 1987, and David Ingram, "Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of Reason", *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault.*

[121]See Michel Druron, "Deconstructing the Subject", *Inquiries Into Values,* (Lewiston New York: Mellon Press), 1990, and Deborah Cook, *The Subject Finds a Voice.*

[122]See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* (London: Verso Books), 1985, and Clifford, Michael, "Crossing Out the Boundary: Foucault and Derrida on Transgressing Transgression", *Philosophy Today,* Fall, 1987, and Steven David Ross, "Foucault's Radical Politics," in, *Praxis International,* Vol.5, #2, July 1985.

[123]See, Aron Keikel, "La fin de l'homme et le destin de la pensée", *Man and World,* Vol.18, #3, 1985, and Mark Poster, *Critical Theory After Poststructuralism,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1990, and Poster, *The Mode of Information,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1990.

multiplicity of interpretations and took it as a mark of success.[124]

The specific radicality Foucault's politics is related to his archaeological and genealogical decentering of the subject. While he approached the decentering operation differently over the years, it was (until his last works) this effort to decenter the modernist subject that most engaged him. As he claims in a retrospective comment on his work: "the goal of my work over the last twenty years... has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings *are made* [my emphasis] subjects."[125] Note that he does not say,"how human beings actualize their subjecthood," but rather "how they are made subjects." If they are made subjects then subjecthood is not a defining human capacity but a social construct. If they are made subjects by external dynamics which mold, shape and determine inert human material, and Foucault situates his work against this process, then the decentering of subjecthood is also a critique of subjecthood. Foucault was not content to merely analyze this process, he rebelled against it, he saw it as a reduction of humanity to a mere object of disciplinary society. On the whole, however, this charge of reductionism was incoherent, since, as with Lyotard, Foucault generally

[124]See Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations", *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 383-384.

[125]Foucault, "The Subject and Power", *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, p.208.

claimed that there was no subjective surplus beyond power-relations upon which subjects could mount a stand against the external forces of oppression. Again, however, like Lyotard, Foucault eventually restores to the subject some of its lost capacities in an effort to clarify the grounds of his critique of modernity. Once again, this restoration leads to the suspicion that some notion of self-determination was presupposed by the critique of the modernist form of self-determination. Before examining the shape of the rehabilitated notion of subjecthood in Foucault, however, it is necessary to chart the development of his politics in order to see what he felt a radical practice not grounded in subjecthood might look like, and in order to highlight the normative and political tensions which this account contains and to illuminate his specific contribution to the general themes of postmodern political philosophy.

First, it bears repeating that Foucault throughout his work explicitly rejected a political practice based on an essentialist understanding of human being. Even after he had restored a notion of the subject to his work, he reaffirmed his distrust of essentialist characterizations of subjecthood:

> I've always been a little distrustful of the general
> theme of liberation, to the extent that, if one does
> not treat it with a certain number of
> safeguards,...there is the danger that it will refer
> back to the idea that there does exist a nature or a
> human foundation which, as a result
> of a certain number of historical, social, or economic
> processes found itself concealed, alienated, or

imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism.[126]
This hypothesis, Foucault claims, "cannot be admitted without
the most rigorous examination." In the previous sections we
have seen how rigorous Foucault's examination of this
hypothesis has been. Consistently interpreted, his original
estimation of the effects of power would rule out entirely any
such nature or essence. The purported essence was reduced to
the status of an historically contingent product of different
disciplinary powers. In the absence of an essential capacity
for self-determination Foucault thus offered a politics of
"transgression."

This notion of transgression has always been a major
concern of Foucault and is perhaps the core of the specific
radicality of his thought. In its initial formulation (never
entirely surpassed) transgression was described in terms of
the overcoming of self-identity and the rational values
associated with it. Foucault's rejection of any politics
which derives its legitimacy from its being entailed by a
human essence on Foucault's part makes his work resistant to
facile assimilations to democratic and egalitarian political
paradigms. The experience of the "radically other" which he
mentions in regard to his attraction to Blanchot, Bataille,
and Nietzsche (see footnote 76) is neither necessarily nor
obviously amenable to democratic or egalitarian principles.

---

[126]Foucault, "The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice
of Freedom", *The Final Foucault*, James Bernauer and Rasmussen,
David, eds., (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 1987, p.2.

Indeed, in his initial discussions of transgression, the opposite would seem to be the case. That is, transgression strikes out at all universal normative limitations upon activity. As he describes such a gesture:

> Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being... but correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive, no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it. Perhaps it is simply an affirmation of division; but only in so far as division is not understood to mean a cutting gesture, or the establishment of separation- the measuring of a distance, only returning that in which it may designate the existence of difference.[127]

The entire article proceeds in this elusive fashion, but if one keeps in mind Foucault's understanding of the reductive character of modernist discourse, good sense can be made of it. Like Derrida, Foucault argues that this discourse always constitutes itself by marking off an "outside." For Foucault this outside, originally, is formed by those "limit-experiences" which he associated with the work of Blanchot et al, experiences of madness, erotism, anything in which one "loses one's self." These are not negative, in the Hegelian sense of being dialectical sublations of a practice inadequate to its concept; they are not "higher" moments of a general process. Nor are they "positive" in the sense of being fixed and determinate practices whose function is the realization of a definite desire. They are discourses and practices which erupt and affirm the distinction between reason and the

---

[127]Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p.36.

outside.

The hero of transgression in 1972 is not humanity but
language. It is this transgressive language which begins to
speak in the opening created by the "disappearance of Man,"
the disappearance, in other words, of dry scientism and
moribund humanism. This space has not yet been filled with
anything determinate, but rather constitutes the possibility
of thinking in a different fashion:

> It is no longer possible to think in our day other than
> in the void left by the disappearance of man. For this
> void does not create deficiency... It is nothing more
> and nothing less than the unfolding of a space in which
> it is once more possible to think.[128]

It is essential that this new type of thinking not be
restricted by any type of rationalist or humanist limitation.
Thus, *The Order of Things* concludes with baroque prophecies
about the creative power of language supplanting humanity and
all the values associated with humanism. Such prophesizing
led some, Aron Keikel being the best example, to posit a close
relationship between Foucault and Heidegger. However, while
this is perhaps a fruitful avenue to travel if one's interest
is the early works, it shall not be dwelled upon here since
the main interest is in providing an interpretation of the
general social and political thrust of Foucault's arguments.

In that regard, the metaphorical prophecies of the
early works constitute a passing phase. The theme of
transgression will be maintained throughout, but it becomes

---

[128]Foucault, *The Order of Things,* p.342.

more and more distanced from the opaque pronouncements of the
early 1970's. As Foucault's thinking developed to the point
at which he became interested in the relation between power
and knowledge, his politics became more focused and concrete.
The political function of genealogy is to articulate the local
knowledges which Western rationalism has ruled out over the
centuries as merely local, unscientific, or too dangerous for
public dissemination. Transgression thus becomes harnessed to
a practical project which consists in disrupting the hegemony
of official knowledge:

> By subjugated knowledges I mean two things: on the one
> hand I am referring to the historical contents that
> have been buried or disguised in a functionalist
> coherence or formal systematization... On the other
> hand, I believe that by subjugated knowledges we should
> understand... a whole set of knowledges that have been
> disqualified...beneath the required level of
> scientificity... a differentiated knowledge incapable
> of unanimity and which owes its force only to the
> harshness with which it is opposed to everything
> around it.[29]

Thus one might supply the knowledge of the schizophrenic, the
street-person, the "pervert," as examples of "subjugated
knowledge." While there are obvious affinities with Lyotard's
idea of "small narratives," there are no self-evident
affinities with any practice which would unambiguously resist
the "most dangerous traditions" which have resulted from
essentialist conceptions of humanity. There are no reasons to
rule out Paul Bernardo as a transgressive hero engaged in the
constitution of a knowledge harshly "opposed to everything

---

[29]Foucault, "Two Lectures", *Power/Knowledge,* pp.81-82.

around it." It must be added that Foucault does not make any effort, at least until the end of his life, to establish limits to transgression.

Even so, this understanding of transgression is a fitting counterpart to Foucault's Orwellian vision of the social as an omniscient and omnipotent machine of power. If all public institutions are conceived of as analogous to a prison, if broad-based strategies of resistance also rest upon disciplinary power (since the member of a political group must either abide by group decisions or leave), then such "mad" strategies appear as the last resort of individuals trying to flee the normalization factory, ie, society as such. As his work progresses still further this concern with the individual, formerly identified as nothing but the product of power, gains essential prominence.

However, as this concern with the individual expresses itself it forces Foucault to re-consider the heritage of the Enlightenment. The slogan of "release subjugated knowledges" is replaced by Kant's enlightened motto, "Know thyself." Foucault will thus attempt to re-articulate reason and freedom, but not in a humanistic, universalistic fashion:

> ...it is a fact that, at least since the 17th (sic) century, what has been called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain concepts of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics... I believe that this thematic... can be opposed by the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy.[130]

---

[130]Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", p.44.

While this may be true, one might ask why it is a problem that humanism should borrow a conception of man from religion or science or politics. Where else would it get such a conception? Moreover, with the exception of the Renaissance, humanism has not been a discourse in its own right separate from other domains, but rather a general philosophical orientation which supervenes on specialized domains of research. There is no "science of humanism" but rather the idea that science should pursue humanistic ends- the improvement of the material condition of the species as a whole. There is no "religion of humanism," but rather the idea that humans should realize God's love in their conduct towards one another. There is no "politics of humanism", but rather the principle, variously construed by liberals, socialists and conservatives, that human civilization should manifest what is best and highest in ourselves.

The ultimate critical-political import of an essentialist humanism will be the topic of Part Two. For the moment Foucault's argument must be pursued further. First, let us recall that Foucault distrusts the idea of liberation because he claims that it rests upon an essentialist notion of alienation, and because it has led historically to greater oppression. Thus, he replaces liberation with transgression in order to obviate this problem. Transgression does not remain attached to either mad writings or subjugated knowledges, but increasingly comes to be identified with a

critical attitude on the part of individuals:

> This philosophical ethos may be characterized as a
> limit-attitude. We are not talking about a gesture
> of rejection. We have to move beyond the outside-
> inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers...
> it seems to me that the critical question today has to
> be turned into a positive one- in what is given as
> universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is
> occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the
> product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief,
> is to transform the critique conducted in the form of
> necessary limitations into a practical critique that
> takes the form of a possible transgression.[131]

How is this critique related to the "permanent creation of

ourselves in our autonomy," cited above?

This is a complex question. The analysis of Foucault's

arguments concerning power concluded with the discovery that

the "individual is not a pre-given entity." Individuals were

said to be the products of power-relations and society is

conceived of as a factory for the production of individuals

who tow the line. In this scenario there is clearly no room

for a notion of autonomy, or, if there is, it would have to be

understood as one more product of power, something power

creates in people so that, while thinking themselves free,

they in fact simply accept the manner in which they are

constructed by the apparatus of power. Although Foucault does

not use the example, one might think here of the slogan

"freedom to choose," the defining ethos of consumer society.

One believes oneself to be free when buying consumer goods,

and it is true that there is no direct external force which

---

[131] *Ibid.*, p.45.

causes one to buy one item rather than another. However, the "autonomy" exercised in this domain is in fact constituted within a coercive market economy, a manipulative system of advertising, and media-sponsored peer-pressure to conform. While Foucault himself does not analyze the coericve nature of the market, his analysis of the constitutive effects of power over individuals is clearly in accordance with this example. Power works at a surreptitious level, insidiously making people conform even as it causes them to believe that they are freeing themselves from external, determining, forces. It was for that reason that Foucault criticized the notion of rational subjecthood. However, because he criticized the system of power which produced this notion, one suspects that, as in the case of Lyotard, some notion of self-determining subjecthood was being pre-supposed all along, as the unstated foil against which contemporary society is criticized. If that is the case, then the turn towards an explicit notion of autonomy in the later works may be interpreted as an effort on Foucault's part to clarify the normative foundations of his work. Even so, this notion of autonomy is not designed to be a re-hash of "humanist" values.

To articulate a notion of autonomy which is not a humanist one would appear to be a rather difficult task. One of the keys to the success of such an effort would be to avoid grounding the capacity for autonomy in an essential human capacity, to make it an emergent quality and not something

pre-given in a definition of human being. This seems to be what Foucault tries to do in "What is Enlightenment." He argues that,

> ...if we are not to settle for the empty affirmation of freedom, it seems to me that this historico-critical attitude has to be an experimental one... this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry, and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible... and to determine the form this change should take.[130]

Thus, critique is not matter of giving a definition of human being and proceeding to deduce from that definition political systems which would be adequate to the meaning of human existence. On the contrary, the critical attitude is contextual and attuned to the specificities of each case. Thus the disdain for totality is reproduced here at the political level. Ultimately, the critical attitude disengages the individual from the apparatus of power by illuminating the impoverished manner of existence constituted by the apparatus of power. Such a critical reflection is the formal condition of possibility of the "permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy" referred to above. Freedom here would be an on-going experimentation with our limits on the margins of the social machine. Or would it?

Notwithstanding his celebration of the emergent capacity for a "permanent creation of ourselves," he nevertheless agrees that,

---

[130]Foucault, "What is Enlightenment,"p. 46.

>...the following objection would no doubt be
>legitimate: if we limit ourselves to this type of
>always partial and local inquiry or test, do we not let
>ourselves run the risk of letting ourselves be
>determined by more general structures of which we may
>well not be conscious of, and
>over which we may have no control?[131]

This is a strange comment. Foucault's initial analysis of

power operated at this very depth which he now feels could be

overlooked. The point of the first "theory" of power was that

no aspect of human existence escaped the disciplinary

apparatus. Now he entertains objections to the effect that

his notion of autonomy ignores deep-seated social structures

and dynamics. His initial analysis of power left no room for

autonomy but was a thorough-going investigation of deep

institutional structures and dynamics. Thus, to make room for

autonomy, Foucault had to re-work his analysis of power.

Whereas formerly there was no effort made to

distinguish power, force, and domination, such distinctions

become crucial in Foucault's last works. Foucault thus

asserts that,

>...there cannot be relations of power unless the
>subjects are free. If one or the other were completely
>at the disposition of the other and became his thing,
>an object on which he exercised an unlimited violence,
>there would be no relations of power. In order for
>there to be relations of power, there must be on both
>sides a certain form of liberty.[132]

This, however, is quite out of step with the earlier work for

---

[131]*Ibid.*, p.47.

[132]Foucault, "The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice
of Freedom", *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and
Hermeneutics*, p.12.

which the "subject was a function ceaselessly modified" by
external forces.

The newly discovered freedom attaching to subjects
raises questions not only about the coherence of Foucault's
analysis, but also about the nature of this freedom itself.
In "What is Enlightenment?" one is presented with a picture of
autonomy as the emergent quality of a critical attitude
towards society. In the interview from which the above
passage is drawn, and which was conducted in the same year,
1984, as "What is Enlightenment" was written, a different
picture emerges. Here freedom is transcendental, at least
functionally, in so far as it is the condition of possibility
for the existence of empirical power relations. In this same
interview he contends that "[l]iberty is the ontological
condition of ethics."[133] Ethics is a domain defined by those
autonomous practices which stem from the critical attitude.
However, rather than being an emergent quality, autonomy or
liberty is now posited as a presupposition of the possibility
of ethical action. It is thus difficult to agree with
Foucault when he says, in the same interview yet again, that,
"What I refused was precisely that you first of all set up a
theory of the subject."[134] That was true of the work whose
task it was to decenter the subject. However, that
decentering landed him in the quagmire of an analysis of power

---

[133]*Ibid.*, p.4.

[134]*Ibid.*, p.10.

which, in showing how power was completely constitutive of individuals, left no *coherent* room for genuine resistance. In order to make good his desire for resistance, he was led back to the question of the *subject as a potential ground of resistance.* However, liberty of subjects is now an "ontological presupposition" which is clearly not something deducible from merely local, particular empirical analyses. This might not be a very good "theory of the subject" but a theory of the subject it undoubtedly is.

It is not a good theory of the subject because it expends no effort in trying to relate this presupposed liberty to concrete empirical circumstances. That is, it is not clear that individual intellectual disengagement from the coercive apparatus is sufficient for autonomy. Recognition that one is being manipulated does not necessarily end the manipulation if one still must participate in the structure in which the manipulation occurs in order to acquire the goods one either needs or wants. "Alternative" networks (the alternative music scene for example), are really only a different branch of the overarching market system. One may be able to preserve a greater degree of artistic integrity recording for a small label, but this will be checked as soon as one tries to market the album. As the major labels control the distribution of music, one will have to accommodate their demands if one wants to get reasonably wide distribution. The only genuine alternative, short of efforts at large scale social change

(which Foucault rejects) would be to opt out. This strategy, however, is elitist and does not question the operations of power in the detailed, penetrating way which Foucault sought to do.

One might respond that an adequate empirical basis for this liberty cannot be settled in advance, since this freedom is expressed experimentally. Such a response, however, is question-begging because the objection asks the theory to differentiate between a real and an illusory instantiation of this ontological freedom, in other words, what is a real experiment? The response to the objection merely pre-supposes the conclusion about the impossibility of specifying the proper conditions. The mere referral of the objector to the empirical conditions does not settle the problem- how is one to judge empirical instances of purportedly autonomous experimentation? Unfortunately, this problem is left unresolved. Ultimately one is left with liberal banalities such as, "I believe in the freedom of people. To different situations people react in very different ways,"[135] rather than a new and different account of freedom from the one found in previous political philosophy.

Thus, the conflict between the exuberant "outside" of Western rationalism and that rationalism itself is first transformed into a conflict between a multiplicity of

---

[135]Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press), 1988, p.14.

subjugated knowledges and the hegemonic discourse of science, and then into a conflict between autonomous, potentially experimental individuals and the disciplinary forces of contemporary society. There is, however, a common thread running throughout this meandering work, the thread of self-determination. Even as Foucault decenters the modernist account of subjecthood, the essence of the concept is pre-supposed. Foucault takes a stand on the side of the voice of the mad, the marginal, and the mid-wife because he feels that they have something worthy to say. If, as he claimed in the mid-seventies, power is all-constitutive, then these discourses would also have been constituted by power and thus not genuine points of resistance to it. That they were posited as points of resistance entails that, to some extent, these sites were defined by a reserve of self-determining energy. Indeed, I will argue, that is the reason why they stand as alternatives to hegemonic power. However, Foucault at the same time denied that subjects have any essential capacity through which they could determine themselves. He thus appears to try and mend this problem by re-instantiating a notion of subjecthood and by re-working his account of power. However, this re-working does not solve the "normative confusion"[136] (there are no grounds to criticize the effects of power because power constitutes both the given

---

[136]This term is Nancy Fraser's. See, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions", *Unruly Practices*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1989.

system and the character of resistance to it) which exists in his first attempts, since no universal criteria are allowed to govern experimentation. Nonetheless, the unbounded character of experimentation is perhaps his most radical political gesture. The deep-seated problems attending it, and the manner in which subjecthood is presupposed by the critique of subjecthood, indicated but not yet fully substantiated, shall be attended to below. At this point let us turn to Derrida.

The previous chapter concluded with some citations which displayed with admirable clarity the connection which Derrida believes to exist between essentialist accounts of human history and totalitarian politics. The political core of deconstruction and its affinities in this regard to Lyotard and Foucault were thus also made manifest. What must now be illuminated is the meaning of the positive and affirmative character of deconstruction in the political realm. The ultimate question here becomes the following. If, as Derrida asserts, truth, freedom, and subjecthood are values which have led necessarily to totalitarianism, what are the deconstructive values (values which are not merely parasitical on the old ones) which will at least allow one to remain vigilant in the struggle against oppression?[137] Or, if not

---

[137]The clearest radical expositions directly influenced by Derrida will be found in, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Bill Martin, *Matrix and Line: Derrida and the Possibility of Radical Social Theory*, Keith Pheby, *Interventions: Displacing the Metaphysical Subject*, and, Rick Roderick, "Reading Derrida Politically (Contra Rorty)", Praxis International, #4, Jan. 1987.

that, how can one remain vigilant against totalitarianism in the absence of values?

Again, it may prove useful to recapitulate the essential connection posited by Derrida between violence and metaphysics. Philosophy and the political discourse it has entailed (characterized by on-going efforts to identify freedom and reason) has constituted itself only by virtue of the exclusion of "the other." This has been a central theme from the earliest days of deconstruction. Take the following citation drawn from the 1968 piece, "The Ends of Man" as exemplary of the essential political thrust of Derrida's work:

> A radical trembling can only come from the *outside*. Therefore, the trembling of which I speak derives no more than any other from some spontaneous decision or philosophical thought after some internal mutation in its history. This trembling is being played out in the violent history of the West to its other, whether a "linguistic" relationship...or economic, ethnological, political, military relationship etc.[138]

The trembling of which he speaks is, in general, the trembling of rational humanism confronted with that which has been excluded. In the particular context of 1968, the "outside" which prompts the trembling is Algeria and Viet Nam.

The relations of the West with its outside are the enduring political focus of Derrida's work. Indeed, his clearest writings are also his most overtly political. An examination of such writings, especially those which concern apartheid, can provide clear insight into the political

---

[138]Derrida, "The Ends of Man", *After Philosophy: End or Transformation,* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), 1987, p.150.

significance of his philosophical critique.

The history of Europe, Derrida contends, is the history
of a confusion. Europe has always confused its own trajectory
with the proper trajectory of the human species as a whole:

> L'Europe a aussi confondu son image, son visage, sa
> figure, et son lieu... avec celle d'une point avancé,
> dites d'une phallus si vous voulez, donc d'une cap pour
> la civilization mondiale ou la culture humaine en
> générale.[139]

There are thus two fundamental exclusions operating in Western
history. Internally, rational humanism has constituted itself
by the exclusion of women, and externally through the
destruction or incorporation of non-Western cultures to the
Western metropole. Let us consider both of these examples in
turn.

Derrida's rather obvious (and extremely tired) metaphor
of the phallus indicates that for him the exclusionary tactics
of the West are essentially masculine. The radical trembling
which comes from the geographic outside is duplicated on the
inside by the emergent voices of women. As he explains in an
interview with Richard Kearney:

> The discourse of Joyce, Nietzsche, and the women's
> movement which you have identified epitomize a profound
> and unprecedented transformation of the man-woman
> relationship. The deconstruction of phallologocentrism
> is carried by this transformation... But we cannot
> objectify or thematize this mutation even though it is
> bringing about such a radical change in our
> understanding of the world that a return to the former
> logocentric philosophies of mastery, possession,
> totalization or certitude may soon

---

[139]Derrida, *L'Autre Cap,* (Paris: Editions Galilee), 1989,
pp.28-29.

be unthinkable.[140]

For a thinking which prides itself on attentiveness to difference such a simple opposition between men and women is troubling. Certainly Western philosophy has excluded women on the whole (although Plato does claim that the souls of men and women are identical which is at least a partial critique of sexism) but it also generates categories which not only *can* be used to criticize this exclusion, these concepts *have in fact* been so used. The "women's movement" is not nearly so generic as Derrida's catch-all phrase implies, and, in the West at least, this movement began (with Mary Wollstonecraft or Harriet Taylor) by turning the concepts of universal rights against their originally sexist usage. Nevertheless, Derrida clearly establishes the feminine as one essential site of otherness wrongly excluded by rational humanism. The other essential site of exclusion lies in the former European colonies of Africa and Asia, paradigmatically in South Africa.

Derrida's writings on apartheid are his most passionate, polemical, and forceful works. Apartheid, he contends, is the culmination of European history, the brutal objectification of its contradictory heritage. Here the liberal rule of law was employed in a constitutionally valid manner to legitimate the most barbarous state racism. It is necessary to quote him at length on this point:

---

[140]Derrida, quoted in, Kearney, *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers,* p. 121.

Why mention the European age in this fashion? Why this
reminder of such a trivial fact- that all these words
are part of the old language of the West? Because it
seems to me that the aforementioned exhibition [the
article was originally written for the catalogue which
accompanied an international exhibit of anti-apartheid
art] expresses and commemorates, indicts and
contradicts, *the whole of Western
history*. That a certain white community of European
decent imposes apartheid on four-fifths of South
Africa's population and maintains (up until 1980!) the
official lie of a white migration is not the only
reason that Apartheid was a European "creation." The
primary reason, however, is that here it is a question
of state racism... The juridical simulacrum and the
political theatre of this state racism have no meaning
and would have had no chance outside
a European "discourse" on the concept of race... No
doubt there is also here... a contradiction internal to
the West and to its assertion of its rights. No doubt
that Apartheid was instituted and maintained against
the British Commonwealth... But this contradiction only
confirms the occidental essence of the historical
process.[141]

The contradiction is that a universal discourse on rights is

used to legitimately exclude (legitimate because

constitutional) the vast majority of the South African

population. It is unthinkable without a discourse on race for

obvious reasons. Derrida also seems to imply here, and

confirms in "The Law of Reflection"[142] that one can also turn

this discourse on rights around once again, and employ it as a

---

[141]Derrida, "Racism's Last Word", *Critical Inquiry,* pp.294-295.

[142]See Derrida, "The Law of Reflection", *For Nelson Mandela,*
(New York: Henry Holt and Co.), 1987, p.34. Affirming Mandela's
strategy of turning the spirit of the law against the letter of the
law, Derrida writes, "As a "lawyer worthy of the name," he sets
himself against the code in the code, reflects the code, but making
visible thereby just what the code in action rendered unreadable...
This production of light is justice- moral or political... It
translates here the political violence of the whites, it holds to
their interpretation of the laws... whose letter is destined to
contradict the spirit of the law."

critique of the racist restriction of rights. That is, one can oppose the "spirit of the Law" (equal rights for all) to the letter of the law ("all equals all whites). Indeed, Derrida supports this very argument which Mandela presented to the Court during his trial for treason. However, in the passage above, the liberal critique of Apartheid "confirms the Occidental essence of the historical process," whereas Mandela, using the same conceptual tools, is effecting a "true" critique. If this is the case, then Derrida's support for the latter and critique of the former would rest upon the same concept of race that he denounces, since the criteria of true critique would lie not in the concepts employed, but in the cultural heritage of the one who articulates the critique. Derrida's critique would thus undo itself through its very articulation.

This is a general problem which affects the postmodern attempt to think oppression and resistance to it without grounding this thinking in a concept of human self-determination. On the whole, the various sites of oppression generate a critique of that oppression which activates concepts such as self-determination, human rights, and equality, and have employed violent means to acquire them. The postmodern critique of the West, as we have seen, depends upon a criticism of subjecthood and desires to "open" itself to the voice of the other. When the other speaks the same language as the language being criticized by postmodern

critique that critique is caught in a double bind- it either must be silent, and thus allow the same problematic categories to hold sway, or dictate to the "other" what language it should speak. This contradiction will be explored in detail in Chapter 2.3. Let us return to Derrida in order to see whether he has a way out of this seeming dead-end.

As Derrida's work develops it seems to wrestle more and more with working out the political implications of the deconstruction of metaphysics[143]. What is perhaps most interesting in Derrida's account is that he actually attempts to "ground" the political commitments of deconstruction. While there may be nothing outside the text, while all signifiers may play, that is, disseminate new meanings in an unsaturable fashion, Derrida nevertheless claims that there is one "thing" that is undeconstructible. This "basis" he calls responsibility:

> La détermination philosophique de cette responsibilité,
> les concepts de son axiomatique (par example, la
> volonté, la propriété, le sujet, l'identité d'une "moi"
> libre et individuelle, la "personne" conscient, la
> présence à soi d'intention, étc.) peut toujours être
> discutée, questionnée, déplacée, critiqué- et, plus
> radicalment, deconstruitée- ce sera toujours au nom
> d'une responsibilité plus exigéante, plus fidèle à la
> memoire et la promesse, toujours
> au-delà de la présent.[144]

At the root of deconstructive practice therefore is this

---

[143]For a very brief, but well-argued, critique of the facile appropriation of postmodern arguments in the American Academy see Mark Poster, *Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*, p.9.

[144]Derrida, *Du droit à la philosophie*, (Paris: Editions Galilee), 1990, pp. 35-36.

responsibility. It is in the name of responsibility that one deconstructs the metaphysical grounds of previous characterizations of responsibility. Responsibility impels one to exercise a critical vigilance over arguments which purport to root values in a solid foundation. Foundationalist accounts of responsibility, not responsibility itself, are problematic.

In thus invoking an undeconstructible responsibility Derrida offers to a certain extent a means of limiting the play of signifiers without foreclosing altogether on play. In so far as deconstruction is responsible to the "promise" (which is, as shall become clear, a promise of emancipation) there is a normative limitation established upon instances of deconstructive reading. An irresponsible usage would be the merely frivolous undoing of a given argument. A responsible usage, on the other hand, would undo the totalizing claims of a given argument in an effort to allow other possibilities to speak themselves in their own language. Bill Martin provides an excellent explanation of the meaning of Derridean responsibility and openness:

> No other can speak the language of the same. The enforcement of this language (sometimes by straight-forwardly authoritarian, even fascist measures, ie, English only laws, sometimes by what Marcuse calls "repressive tolerance") is a way of keeping the other silent- and of admitting the possibility (in fact the counter-possibility) of the other only if the other submits to the 'Logic of the Same.' Letting the other speak, therefore, means actively resisting the pre-

dominance of the same and its identity logic.[145]
Thus, the openness spoken of here is not the openness of
government sponsored multi-culturalism, for example, which
results in the reduction of cultures to the status of
colourful sideshows. One must really listen to what the
others have to say about themselves. Only in this way can the
full radicality of deconstruction be appreciated. No
currently extant political discourse, "[is] adequate to the
radicality of deconstruction."[146]

Thus, the affirmative, positive moment of
deconstruction must be expressed, paradoxically, in a passive
gesture of attentiveness:

> Deconstruction certainly entails a moment of
> affirmation, acknowledged or not. Deconstruction
> always pre-supposes affirmation... I do not mean
> that the deconstructing subject or self affirms,
> but that deconstruction is, in-itself, a positive
> response to an alterity which calls, summons, or
> motivates it. This other, as other than self, the
> other that opposes self-identity, is not something that
> can be detected or disclosed within a philosophical
> space with the aid of a philosophical lamp... It is
> within this rapport with the other that affirmation
> expresses itself.[147]

This does indeed sound like a victory over oppressive modes of
reductionist categorization, but, like Lyotard and Foucault,
it runs the risk, in the name of affirmation of the other, of
affirming practices which are not at all conducive to the free

---

[145]Martin, *Matrix and Line*, p.146.

[146]Derrida quoted in Kearney, *Dialogues With Contemporary
Continental Philosophers*, p.119.

[147]*Ibid.*, p.118.

articulation of otherness in general. In the name of what principle will Derrida respond when the other speaks the language of widow burning, cliterodectomy, genocide? Responsibility, as responsibility towards alterity, cannot validly argue against *those* languages without appeal to a non-contextual value. If the values be merely contextual, then the other will have its own contextual value and there will thus be a mere confrontation between two equally valid principles.

That topic will be pursued in the following chapter. However, before critique can be pursued, Derrida's understanding of "the promise" must be explored. This promise, once again, is a promise of emancipation. In one of his most recent works, *Spectre de Marx,* Derrida identifies this promise as the living core of Marxism. In 1968, when the students of the Western world rose in solidarity with the Maoist armies of Southeast Asia Derrida consigned Marxism to the garbage heap along with the rest of humanist philosophy. Now, in 1993, when everyone else has abandoned Marxism *tout court,* Derrida appears on the scene in order to re-examine it and to extract from it, "[u]ne esprit du marxisme critique."[148]

This critical spirit is not found in any determinate argument which one could find within Marxism but rather in its dream of a free, just, and equal society. This dream is "messianic" and in order for it to produce positive effects it

---

[148]Derrida, *Spectres de Marx,* p.116.

must be distinguished from any political program which would

posit it as a realizable goal:

> ....ce qui reste indéconstructible à toute
> déconstruction ... c'est peut-être une certaine
> expérience de la promesse émancipatoire, c'est peut-
> être même la formalité d'une messianisme structurel, un
> messianisme sans réligion... une idée de la justice-
> que nous distinguons toujours du droit,
> et même des droits de l'homme- et une idée de la
> démocratie- que nous distinguons de son concept actuel
> et de ses predicats determinées aujourd'hui.[149]

While one may be able to distinguish democracy from a

discourse on the rights of man, it will prove more difficult

to distinguish it from a notion of self-determination,

concretely realizable, and self-knowledge. If the "subject is

not always what it says it is," if meaning is never saturable,

if determinate goals are inherently oppressive because they

close off play, then the possibility of arriving at a workable

democracy from a radical deconstructive argument appears

remote.

Although he realizes that an uncritical celebration of

abstract differences can be self-defeating[150], he

nevertheless concludes that the radicality of deconstruction

can only be realized in a passive openness to possibility:

> Une fois de plus, ici comme ailleurs, partout il'y a
> de la déconstruction, il s'agirait de lien une
> affirmation (en particulier politique) s'il y en a, à

---

[149]*Ibid.*, p.102.

[150]"Il faut aussi lutter contre les effets de "censure" au sens
large... Mais on ne peut pas non plus plaider *simplement* pour la
pluralite, la dispersion,... Car des forces socio-economique
pourraient encore abuser de ces marginalisations, de cette absence
d'une forme generale." Derrida, *L'Autre Cap*, p.116.

> l'expérience de l'impossible, qui ne peut-être qu'un
> expérience radicale du peut-être.[151]

While such radical openness to possibility will certainly

prevent one's own practice from becoming totalitarian, it is

difficult to see how it can play any role in preventing the

world from becoming so.

If Derrida believes his own claim, that, "La

déconstruction n'a jamais eu de sens et d'interet, a mes

yeux... que comme une radicalisation... d'une certain

marxisme,"[152] then he must confront the question, "What is to

be Done." It would appear that the consistent deconstructive

response would be "allow events to play themselves out without

forcing them into a pre-conceived program." However, like

Lyotard and Foucault, such a response is seemingly inadequate

to the severity of the problems disclosed and against which

each constructs his respective arguments. Each of the

theorists in question diagnoses global problems, but each also

rules out global solutions as totalitarian. Moreover, each

identifies problems which could only be problems for a theory

which marks off a difference between what people are in fact

and what they could potentially be in different situations,

while manifestly attacking this very notion of human

subjecthood from which such a change could proceed. The

analytic and the critical moments of postmodern theory are

---

[151]Derrida, *Spectre du Marx*, p.65.

[152]*Ibid.*, p.150.

thus contradictory. If subjects are defined, in accident and in essence, by actual discursive practices, then they merely are what they are. If you happen to be defined by discursive practices, phrase regimens, or arbitrarily saturated contexts which have been imposed from elsewhere, then, as the French say, "ainsi soit-il," so be it. Such external determination can only appear as a problem if one draws a distinction between external and self-determination. One can only be oppressed, excluded, or marginalized if one is not in actuality what one is in essence, what one could be, in other words in a free society. If one seeks to obviate this criticism by responding that there may be a difference between what people are and what people could make themselves to be, but that there is no *universal essence,* then one must countenance the possibility that difference will be played out in locally oppressive ways. As shall now be argued, this is an unavoidable double-bind of radical postmodern philosophy.

<u>Part Two:The Contradictions of Postmodern Social Criticism</u>
<u>2.1:   The Stakes of Postmodern Criticism</u>

Postmodern strategies of critique, in grappling anew

with the logic of the multiple relationships of exclusion and

domination characteristic of the modern world, are of pre-

eminent contemporary significance. As no lasting solution to

these problems has yet been discovered, the renewed efforts of

postmodern thinkers to articulate novel approaches to

questions of pressing global concern stand at the theoretical

forefront of the struggles for a better world.

In being so situated, the postmodern criticism defined

in Part One demands a serious hearing. In particular, the

defining postmodern critique of the modern notion of human

subjecthood must be rigorously questioned. If people are to

develop concrete political strategies which incorporate the

postmodern deconstruction of the subject, then it is incumbent

upon one who shares the goals of those strategies to question

the premises from which a postmodern politics proceeds. The

following three chapters will be devoted to a detailed

criticism of what appear to be the immanent flaws of such a

politics. Before entering into that criticism, however, it would be best to briefly recapitulate the salient features of the deconstruction of subjecthood.

Recall that postmodern criticism found itself forced to reject a foundational role for subjecthood on both methodological and political grounds. Not only has social complexity outstripped the capacities of totalizing theory, not only are social and linguistic forces beyond the rational control of human subjects, but also the politics founded upon an essentialist understanding of human being encumbered history with teleological schemes which entailed the exclusion and domination of difference. That is, modern politics could not realize its universal goals because those goals were constituted at the expense of other groups who, because they had different goals, did not fit in with the modern program. The goal of modern politics, a society of rationally self-determining individuals operating in some sort of harmony, whether this be liberal or socialist, is not, therefore, a universal goal. The "end of history" envisaged by modern metanarratives is really but one "end" forcibly imposed upon weaker groups of people. Thus the modern age was stamped with a terrible irony- the greater the effort exerted in the struggle for positive freedom, the greater the oppression and violence generated.

This irony is not an accidental result which could be obviated by slight adjustments to the modern understanding of

subjecthood. As soon as the subject is embodied as an active

agent in a field of passive objects, according to postmodern

criticism, action on the part of these agents is motivated by

the desire to master the field of objects; a field which

includes other humans. Derrida, echoing Heidegger, puts this

point best:

> The modern dominance of the principle of reason had to
> go hand in hand with the interpretation of the essence
> of beings as objects, an object present as
> representation (*Vorstellung*), an object placed and
> positioned *before* a subject. This latter, a man who
> says "I", an ego certain of itself, thus ensures his
> own technical mastery over the totality of what is.[1]

If the deleterious consequences of this relationship between

subject and object are to be overcome, a different

understanding of human being is required. If mastery over

that which presents itself is abandoned, then perhaps a new

relationship, one with no place for violent oppression, could

be developed between people, especially between those with

power and those ruled out by the exercise of that power. Some

such relationship is the political-moral goal at the heart of

the postmodern philosophical project.

The practical aim of postmodern thinking is a world in

which all those groups who were silenced in the modern world

by being consigned to the inessential side by metaphysical

thought gain, or regain, their proper voice. This point is

eloquently expressed by Iris Marion Young:

---

[1]Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the
Eyes of its Pupils", *Diacritics*, 13, Fall, 1983, pp.9-10.

difference, it displaces the hierarchical opposition
that characterize capitalist, patriarchal societies.
This means that power can (at least theoretically)
belong to those at the margins.[4]

---

[4]Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, (New York: Routledge), 1994, p.119. Haber's project bears a certain resemblance to my own in so far as she questions the viability of a radical postmodern politics. Aspects of her criticism will be employed later in the present work. However, there are some key differences.

First, she understands by the term "subject" "bourgeois individual." On the basis of this conflation, she undertakes a re-thinking of the history of the term. This re-thinking defends the thesis that individuality and community are necessarily counterposed in modern thought. She then proposes to resolve this contradiction through her notion of "subject-in-community." The problem with this position is that it is one-sided reading of modern political thought. Individual and community are empirically counterposed in modern thought, but not essentially counterposed. That is, it is only in a flawed society that the social is a limit and burden upon the individual. Even Mill understands that robust individuality has social presuppositions. This is true a fortiori of Hegel and Marx. The whole of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* argues that historical progress must be measured by the extent to which the essential reciprocity between individual and community is consciously affirmed by individuals and expressed by civil society. Hegel's notion of Spirit- "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I"- is the metaphysical foundation for the resolution of the empirical contradiction between individual and community. Marx most obviously rejects the essential contradiction between individual and community, arguing bluntly that "The individual is the social being." (p. 138, *1844 Manuscripts*.) Thus, Haber's notion of "subject-in-community" is not something essentially distinct from positions characteristic of modernity if the full range of modern thinking is admitted into the argument.

A more serious problem, however, is that she follows postmodern thinking in conflating "subjecthood" with "subject-position." Subject-in-community amounts to a recognition of the different contexts in which empirical identities are formed. But, as shall become clear in the following chapters, an empirical identity is not subjecthood. The later is an underlying, essential capacity for self-creation characteristic of human beings in general. As such, it is the basis from which empirical identities can be freely created by individual subjects acting in definite social contexts. By equating subject-in-community with different empirical identities Haber undermines the grounds for solidarity which her politics nevertheless posits as its goal. One can argue that the individual has social pre-suppositions, but this does not entail that the various positions will live harmoniously unless it can be shown that the freedom of one positions rests upon the

The postmodern effort to think differences in their dispersion and specificity is thus an effort to go beyond liberal tolerance and its motto of *E pluribus unum.*

Thus, the radicality of postmodern thinking involves clearing the way for a new and creative politics of the margins. This politics, as we saw, does not seek to master the whole domain of social and economic problems all at once, does not aim at a transparent relationship between all people, but rather restricts itself to protecting and extending the different ways different people think and feel and act. Given the increasing strength of neo-conservative doctrines of economic austerity and moral conformity, this postmodern politics is of profound significance today. Those on the margins are being told to conform or cease to exist as a public power. Reversing this tide must be the goal of anyone concerned with robust freedom today.

While postmodernism does aim to support the struggles of the marginalized, it is questionable whether it can do so coherently. The arguments of the following chapters will

---

freedom of all positions. By accepting difference as fundamental, Haber's politics lacks strong grounds upon which different communities can act in concert. Furthermore, such a politics risks legitimating the struggles between marginalized communities because it claims that politics must begin from the dispersed cultural positions extant at a given time. But there is nothing in the notion of subject-in-community, resolvable as it is into different subjects-in-communities, which rules out separate, dispersed struggles. In a competitive framework where different groups are competing for scarce resources, it is no more likely that such groups, even if they are all "marginalized," will co-operate rather than compete.

contend that if postmodern politics in its radical form is thought through three self-contradictions emerge. First, pluralism without presuppositions, that is, pluralism which takes the preservation of differences as its starting point, undermines the unity necessary to conceive of a marginalized group and to identify the social forces responsible for marginalization in the first place. Second, the postmodern criticism of the universality of modern theory and practice, in an effort to allow marginalized voices to speak, is prima facie opposed to real struggles of the oppressed which have and continue to draw inspiration from modernist themes. Finally, and most importantly, postmodern thought, to the extent that it supports struggles of the oppressed, must pre-suppose the very essence, subjecthood, which its critique of modern theory ruled out.

2.2: Is Radical Pluralism A Coherent Idea?

As opposed to what it judges to be the close-minded
nature of modern thought, postmodern thinking distinguishes
itself by its openness towards socio-cultural differences and
its playful embrace of novelty in all fields. Thus, central
to the postmodern political agenda is an idea we will call
radical pluralism. Unlike modern notions of pluralism,
radical pluralism is not grounded in a universal normative
framework. This form of pluralism, we will see, is
characterized by a radical openness towards those on the
margins. This openness follows from the rejection of
modernist essentialism. That is, postmodern thinking, because
it believes that the concept of "human essence" is a product
of an exclusionary logic, cannot accept the legitimacy of
exclusive practices which derive their legitimacy through
following coherently from principles derived from the
foundational notion of essence. Radically conceived, no
action or project can claim exclusive province because it is
"truly human" or in the "general interests of humanity." All

the "inhuman" results of the modern period (nationalism, racism, sexism) can be traced back to that very method of political decision-making.

Resting as it does upon the argument examined in Part One, which concluded that the universal is always a particular disguised as a universal by power, postmodernism entails a radical openness towards difference. That is, it refuses to judge the legitimacy of differences because the concepts which judge legitimacy in one time or place are historically specific and therefore cannot be transposed to another time or place without becoming arbitrary and exclusionary.

While historical relativisation of universal concepts was also a feature of modern philosophy, in particular, Marxism, the specificity of the postmodern position depends upon a more profound appreciation of what relativisation entails. As we have seen, the problem with modern approaches to historical relativity is that they failed to understand how such relativity undermines universality. Modern thought always withdrew from the local and the specific at the point where they threatened to undermine the unity of the metanarrative which tried to situate them. That is, the unique and the different were only allowed to appear as a moment in a developmental process or an element in a social totality. In a metaphysical sense, differences were only accidental modifications of an underlying socio-historical essence. History, we have seen, was conceived of as the grand

unfolding of the progressive development of human freedom. Any difference which was incommensurable with this metanarrative was selected out by the narrative in order that it could continue along its imperial pathway.

It is just this unrelenting drive towards unity and totalization grounded in a unifying concept of human essence that fatally compromises modern approaches to difference. Modern philosophy allowed differences into the overarching story only in order to all the more securely strip them of their unique character. Much as radicals are co-opted by the status quo in order to obviate the destructive effects of radical criticism, modern theory allowed different perspectives into its metanarratives in order to silence them. What is really at issue here, according to postmodern criticism, is not the progressive realization of the human essence, but rather modern anxiety about unmastered forces and movements.

While modern theory has not shirked from the Gulag and the death-camp in its efforts to master incommensurable elements, it has also worked at the insidious level indicated above. Especially within the West, the defining motifs of modern thought have infiltrated the margins where the differences lie and has compelled the differences to speak according to a script already prepared for them. This surreptitious re-writing of the content of differences is the "human" face of mastery. On the one hand, totalizing thought

will forcibly eliminate any distinct element which cannot be assimilated. On the other hand, it assimilates differences by providing the concepts through which opposition to given order will be conducted.

Thus, the subsumption of differences by modern thought is most effective when it convinces the margins to play by the rules which already define the existent world. According to the postmodern critique, political opposition to the given world fails when it roots itself in a concern for clarity, truth, order, discipline. When these categories enter into political discourse, even revolutionary political discourse, the game has already been won by the forces which that discourse hopes to oppose. Rather than confronting the given society with a difference which is unmanageable, which would really shake the society to its foundations, such strategies merely repeat the categories which ensure the perpetuation of the existing society.

The implications of this criticism of modern theory for the meaning of radical pluralism can be clarified by way of two examples- early feminism and Marxism. The feminist movement began in the West as a critique of liberal constitutionalism. Early feminists strove to illuminate the contradiction between the universality ascribed to civil rights and the particularity of their restriction to propertied men. That is, women demanded to be included in the universal category rather than manifest a difference which was

unique.

Marxism, although it called into question all the property relations of capitalist society, did not call into question the link between material wealth, scientific knowledge, and human freedom. In fact, Marxism did not seek to re-define that relationship at all, but rather to reproduce it at a higher level. Communism would produce more wealth and be truly scientific.

In both cases, according to postmodern criticism, the defining ideas of the society being criticized are left as they were. The significance of this critique will become apparent if we turn briefly to the texts of Derrida and Foucault with regard to feminism and Marxism.

Derrida, commenting upon Nietzsche's understanding of the relationship between feminism and the feminine, notes that, for Nietzsche, "Feminism is nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man."[5] Yet Derrida does not believe that Nietzsche is an incorrigible misogynist because he is an anti-feminist. On the contrary, his opposition to feminism could become a great boon to women. Feminism, not the feminine, is the problem. Feminism repeats the modern discourse of truth, while the feminine is "that which will not be pinned down by truth."[6] Feminism plays the game of the

---

[5]Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1978, p.65.

[6]*Ibid.,* p.55.

master. While such a game may be tactically necessary, it must be viewed with suspicion. As he argues in a separate interview concerning the text just cited, it is important to argue that the development of women's struggles cannot simply be plotted along progressivist lines. To do so would be to "surrender to a sinister mystification: everything would collapse, flow, flounder in this same homogenized, serialized river of the history of mankind..." It is thus necessary to try to think beyond the oppositions characteristic of libratory discourse. He opens up the possibility of, "a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating...I would like to believe in ...this indeterminable number of blended voices."[7]
Thus, the struggle of the feminine against discrimination must not simply be a repetition of the dominant motifs of modern "progressive" politics.

A similar criticism is levelled by Foucault against Marxism. Unlike right-wing critics such as Popper, who attacked Marxism as a pseudo-science, for Foucault, the fact that Marxism could be a science is its ultimate problem. As he argued, "if we have any objection against Marxism, it lies in the fact that it could effectively be a science."[8] If it is a science then it is not a radical criticism of the modern

---

[7] Derrida, "Choreographies", *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1995, pp.91, 108.

[8] Foucault, "Two Lectures", *Power/Knowledge,* p.84.

world; it is not a solution but part of the problem.

The point to be gleaned from these two examples is that modern thought, even at is extremes, cannot allow real differences to manifest themselves in their specificity. It must either assimilate them (by making them accidental properties of an essence) or eliminate them. In either case essence plays a fundamental role. In the first case the difference is controlled when it is comprehended as a modification of an underlying identity. In the second case the liquidation of the difference is justified because it was not of the essence, and therefore "inhuman," of no consequence.

As a critique of modern approaches to the question of differences, then, postmodernism highlights the repressive and/or violent implications of the concept of essence. As such a criticism postmodernism has much to recommend it. It is certainly true that monstrous crimes have been committed in the name of civilization and humanity. In a less extreme vein, oppositional movements which continue to operate according to modernist strategies (ie, as unified movements defined by clear principles, definite goals, organizational discipline) have failed to overcome pervasive social problems.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the postmodern alternative of radical pluralism, that is, a release of differences from all constraints imposed by

essentialism, is a coherent idea. It must be determined whether social criticism can begin from difference and still remain critical of a society whose fault is said to lie in its exclusion or destruction of differences. If social unity grounded in an essentialist understanding of humanity is the problem, can a radical critique which frees differences from attachment to essentialism be the solution? Concretely, can a society which takes differences, their maintenance, and extension as primary be a society where differences actually are maintained and extended? The first step towards answering these questions is to remind ourselves of how postmodernism was characterized first of all as a passive overture towards difference.

The postmodern response to otherness, aiming as it does at an appreciation of what differences are beyond the confines of humanist toleration and mutual respect, is first of all a passive response. If there is an analogue to toleration in radical pluralism, it is the idea of openness. This is evident if we recall the diction utilized by the theorists under investigation when they spoke of what would appear if essentialist thought were overcome. Thus Derrida spoke of the need for a politics which would offer an "experience of the impossible,"[9] and deconstruction as opening up, "the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure [of Western

---

[9]Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, p.60.

metaphysics.]"[10] Foucault invoked a transgression "unleashed in its movement of pure violence ...toward the limit,"[11] and later in his life called upon us to engage in "the undefined work of freedom."[12] Lyotard, meanwhile, saw in postmodern creations the attempt to "present the unpresentable."[13] What unifies all three positions is that each resists categorization, naming, and strict definition. "Is there any worse violence," Derrida asks, "than that which calls for the response, demanding that one give an account of everything, and preferably thematically?"[14] This rhetorical question sums up with crystalline sharpness the core of postmodern openness. There will be no response to the other, if by response is meant commentary, thematic packaging, or criticism. Radical openness means listening to what the other has to say, whatever that may be, for the real atrocity occurs when one silences the other before the other has had a chance to speak.

The value of openness thus lies in the silence which defines it. It is neither affirmation nor negation of what the other will say. It holds itself back from commentary,

---

[10]Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* p.46.

[11]Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression", *Language, Counter-memory, Practice,* pp.34-35.

[12]Foucault, "What is Enlightenment", *The Foucault Reader,* p.46.

[13]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* p.81.

[14]Derrida, *On the Name,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1995, p.25.

criticism, or agreement, so that something new, perhaps
impossible or even, for Foucault, "violent" may emerge. Yet
silence is necessary, for only by holding commentary in
abeyance can the categorizing, classifying, limiting thought
of modern philosophy be overcome. This silence, however, is
motivated by a profound respect for the those at the margins,
it trusts that, at very least, they have something to say
which cannot be heard if one is too quick to judge and define.

This lack of judgement, therefore, is not indifference
or nihilism. Nor is it mere modern tolerance, which listens
only in order to package, ignore and ultimately silence.
Radical openness towards the other is silent precisely so that
the other no longer need be silent. Modern tolerance listens
only so long as what the other says does not disturb the
structure which apportions an already defined space to the
other and insists on the protocols which determine what it is
acceptable to say. Precisely because postmodernism is not a
structure already in existence or a program to be realized, it
cannot engulf what the margins say. It therefore can hear in
raw, unbridled form all that modernity has excluded- the
feminine, the mad, the gay, the Native.

This essential element of the radical pluralist
approach to the other was lucidly explained by the Derridean
social critic Bill Martin. Recall his words already cited in
1.4:

> No other can speak the language of the Same. The
> enforcement of this language (sometimes by straight-

> forwardly authoritarian, even fascistic measures...
> sometimes by what Marcuse calls "repressive tolerance"
> is a way of keeping the other silent... "Letting the
> other speak" ... means actively resisting the pre-
> dominance of the Same... This also means resisting
> translation in the name of that Tower of Babel which,
> "exhibits an incompletion, the impossibility of
> finishing, of totalizing, of saturating..."[15]

Thus, radical pluralism is a cacophony, at least at the

outset, to which the postmodern critic must passively respond

by actively listening.

Openness to the other gets beyond the enclosures of

modern thought by refusing to make demands on the other. If

this is a "progressive" political stance, in the sense that a

new space for the articulation of difference emerges, it is

owing to the silence of the theorist, and not to what the

other in fact will say. For if the first step towards radical

pluralism is silence so that the other can speak, then one

must hold one's tongue regardless of what is in fact said by

the other. The wrong, the violence, enters into politics when

limitations are placed upon the other, even if these

limitations are well-intentioned and "humanist." The other is

not obliged to be polite or tolerant; the theorist is the one

who is obliged to listen. This does not necessarily oblige

the theorist to actually support every utterance of every

group who begins to speak, but it does oblige the theorist to

let whatever is going to be spoken be spoken without critical

comment.

---

[15]Martin, *Matrix and Line*, p.146. The quotation which
concludes the passage is from Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel."

Again, it is worth citing further textual evidence to

support this interpretation. In their most uncompromising

formulations, each of the three theorists examined here sought

for a form of practice whose aim was to go beyond modern forms

of politics in unanticipated ways. For Derrida, this practice

was associated with the "nature' of writing once it had been

restored to its originally destabilizing character. As he

argues,

> ...perhaps writing is the desire to launch things that
> come back to you as much as possible in as many
> different forms as possible. That is, it is a desire
> to perfect a program or a matrix having the greatest
> potential variability, undecidability, plurivocity,
> etc., so that each time something returns it will be as
> different as possible.[16]

Generalized to the field of politics, such an argument implies

that the writings, or the voices, that one encounters must be

allowed to produce their own differences through an unbounded

process of dissemination. The voice of the other cannot

return "as different as possible" if it is constrained by

interpretations of that voice which confine it within already

well-established political idioms. The variability,

plurivocity, etc, can only emerge if the theorists lets this

voice be, lets it, in other words, produce whatever effects it

will according to its own movement.

One finds a similar desire to let the work of the other

be, to let it produce novel effects, in Foucault's notion of

---

[16]Derrida, quoted in, Richard Bernstein, "Serious Play: The
Ethical-Political Horizon of Jacques Derrida", *The Journal of
Speculative Philosophy,* Vol.1, No.2, 1987, p.94.

genealogy. The point of genealogy was not to manage history, which Foucault conceives of, following Nietzsche, as an on- going, multiple play of dominations against one another, but simply to chart the many-sides of this movement and to position oneself so as to be able to introduce new practices. As he argues, "... the law is a calculated and ruthless pleasure, delight in the promised blood, which permits the perpetual instigation of new dominations, and the staging of meticulously repeated scenes of violence."[17] Foucault does not desire to break out of this movement, but rather, so long at least as he spoke of transgression, to operate within it, to effect new ways of going beyond established boundaries, in a "lightning flash" that was neither positive nor negative. The point was not what was done, but rather the fact that what was done was unforseen and unpredictable.

Lyotard as well was centrally concerned with allowing the novel and the unmanageable to be expressed against modern theory whose character it was, according to Lyotard, to desire mastery over all of reality. In a retrospective reading of his work, Lyotard identifies this unmanageable element as what he has always sought to illuminate and let speak. He argues that what humanism "crushes" is, "what, after the fact, I have always tried, under diverse headings- work, figural, heterogeneity, dissensus, event, thing- to preserve- the

---

[17]Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", *The Foucault Reader,* p.85.

unharmonizable."[18] Note that Lyotard says "preserve." In other words, the unharmonizable already exists. In order for it to produce new effects, one must refuse to attempt to assimilate it to a metanarrative. Again, letting this element be is crucial to what it is that makes Lyotard's work distinct from past forms of theorizing.

Thus, it is reasonable to infer that the first practical consequence of radical pluralism is that the distinction between "progressive" and "reactionary" groups must be given up. Such a political cartography cannot be constructed unless one can identify the essential vehicle which is moving across the historical terrain in one of two directions. That vehicle, the human essence, has been deconstructed, and therefore no longer exists as a possible means of orientation in the political landscape. Thus, there is no longer any basis for determining which voice(s) express the more legitimate or valuable differences.

If the distinction between progressive and reactionary must be given up then it follows that radical pluralism cannot simply side with those groups who have "traditionally" formed the progressive side of political struggle- workers, women, and racial and cultural minorities. If no social group has the truth, but simply a difference to manifest, and if the manifestation of difference is what radical pluralism permits, then each group with a specific difference must be allowed its

---

[18]Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.4.

proper voice. Once the criterion of truth has been given up, one cannot object to the expression of minority differences which, from a modernist perspective, would be said to "misrepresent" a second group. Misrepresentation pre-supposes that there is a truth which discourse can represent. This idea, we have seen, is rejected by radical pluralism.

The refusal to judge thus has the interesting implication that all differences become equalized. In modern theory it was possible to hierarchize struggles according to their importance in the attainment of the ultimate objective, and to how clearly each group understood the ultimate aim. However, once the essence whose realization would fulfil the goal of history is eliminated, it no longer makes sense to arrange different social agents according to their role in the overall struggle or their understanding of the that struggle. To get rid of the idea of any over-arching struggle to which different groups had to conform was the point behind the criticism of the notion of essence. In place of the over-arching struggle steps an indeterminate number of differences unconcerned with the truth of history but rather with the manifestation of particular differences.

Now then, if this equalization of differences is entailed by the radical pluralist "liberation" of difference form the tyranny of modernist universalism, it entails another consequence, one which may prove to be radical pluralism's undoing. The deconstruction of a universal human essence

undermined the distinction between progressive and reactionary groups. To the extent that maximizing the space of indeterminacy can be said to be a "value" for postmodern thought, the deconstruction of essence would be fundamental to the achievement of the goal. Once essence is reduced to a tendentiously constituted particular, the neat and tidy distinctions of modern theory are undermined, and the way has been cleared for the margins to speak themselves with a voice unfettered by concerns over clarity, truth, or political progress. The diversity of the social is thus released from the constraints imposed upon it by totalizing modern theory. Construction commences upon Derrida's ever unfinished "Tower of Babel."

However, not only is society composed of different groups, these groups are in turn composed of different sub-groups. Therefore, just as the distinction between progressive and reactionary groups must be dissolved by consistently applied postmodern thinking, so too must the distinctions within groups between progressive and reactionary elements. Moreover, group identities themselves must be questioned and dissolved according to the logic of radical pluralism. Just as no social group represents the truth of a history, so too no sub-group, no avant-garde, represents the truth of a group. Just as radical pluralism must open itself to all possible differences at the level of social groups, so too it must listen to all the perspectives within those groups

which concern the general difference which first distinguishes

the group.

Again it is important to substantiate this inference by

returning to the texts themselves. Thus Derrida, speaking

once again of feminism, concentrates not upon what would unify

it, but rather on its proper goals, which Derrida believes to

be the manifestation of the multiple possibilities of

sexuality freed from "all codes." He thus hopes for a world,

> ...beyond the binary differences that govern the
> decorum of all codes... I would like to believe in the
> multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like
> to believe in the masses, this interminable number of
> blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual
> marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply
> the body of each "individual."[19]

From this passage it is clear that no one of these voices is

more important than any other. What is crucial to Derrida's

hope is the multiple, blended, "non-identified" character of

the dance as such. To give any one dancer the lead in such a

piece would be to undermine what is beautiful about it.

Everyone involved in such a movement only fully partakes of it

when they recognize the multiplicity which they themselves

are, and thus gets beyond the binary thought which picks out

more and less important elements.

For Foucault, recall, the problem with modern radical

politics, especially Marxism, was that it rested upon a

scientific claim to have mastered the understanding of

history. On this basis the political world could be

---

[19]Derrida, "Choreographies", *Points,* p. 108.

apportioned into progressive and reactionary segments, which
could then be further sub-divided into leaders and followers.
In this way, non-conforming groups could be marginalized and
disempowered. The proper political response to this entailed
giving voice to all those groups, who because their discourse
did not rest upon rational subjecthood, had been refused entry
into the struggle. What genealogy struggles against is
precisely the idea that society is a whole which can be taken
apart and reconstructed by a single social agent. He argues,
"The whole of society" is precisely that which should not be
considered- except as something to be destroyed...[20]." This
is what genealogy sought to do, not by determining another
standpoint from which society could be mastered, but by
unleashing fragmentary, multiple, voices of criticism against
society. This goal cannot be fulfilled if, for example, the
voice of "women" is substituted for the voice of the
"proletariat." The only way to "do away with the whole of
society" is to attack it from an indeterminate number of
angles. Otherwise, the movement against society will
replicate the problematic, totalizing logic of that society.
Remember that to get beyond the subject, ie, the ground of
totalizing society, for Foucault, meant, "an experience that
might be its real destruction or dissociation, its explosion

---

[20]Foucault, "Revolutionary Action-   Until Now", *Language,
Counter-Memory, Practice*, p.233.

or upheaval into something radically 'other.'"[21]   To get at

this radically other means getting beyond the group identities

which characterize us in this society. Otherwise, the other

would not be radically so.

Lyotard is more clear and concrete on this score than

Derrida and Foucault. Through his engagement with the work of

Habermas he was led to the conclusion that "consensus does

violence to the heterogeneity of language games." He

elaborates on this score as follows:

> ...as I have shown,... consensus is only a particular
> state of discussion, not its end. Its end, on the
> contrary, is paralogy. This double observation (the
> heterogeneity of the rules and the search for dissent)
> destroys a belief that still underlines Habermas'
> research, namely, that humanity as a collective
> (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through
> the regularization of the "moves" permitted in all
> language games and that the legitimacy of any statement
> resides in contributing to that emancipation.[22]

Thus, only by fragmenting given language games, rather than

constructing higher levels of unity, can one approach a

politics which would "respect both the desire for justice and

the desire for the unknown."[23]

Thus, if the postmodern critique of essentialist

identity is truly radical, then, it must question unities such

as the "Women's movement" the "First Nations" or "African-

American." Not only that, however, it must also equalize the

---

[21]Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, p.46.

[22]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.66.

[23]*Ibid.*, p.67.

perspectives and the differences released once those unities
have been fractured. It follows that REAL Women is as valid a
voice for women to speak on issues of political concern as the
NAC. It means Louis Farrakhan or Clarence Thomas is on a par
with Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. The political landscape
thus becomes highly ambiguous. One cannot decide which voice
is the call of progress, because a) progress as a value is no
longer an issue and b) no voice has any more validity than any
other.

However, if one looks closely, one will see that
radical pluralism has been forced by its own logic to turn
from a passive response to the other to an active engagement
with the other. Postmodernity held criticism in abeyance in
order that it could hear differences as they speak beyond the
hierarchies and unities of modern thought. However, modern
thought not only underlay Marxism and liberalism, but also the
Women's movement, the civil rights movement, the gay and
lesbian movement, and so forth. The problem postmodernism
faces is evident from the description of these forces as
"movements." This word implies a unity of direction and
purpose as well as an underlying common element according to
which membership in the group which creates the movement can
be decided.

Thus, if postmodern criticism is to be adequate to its
own imperative to listen to differences as they are outside of
modernist unities, it must turn from passive listener to

active deconstructor of unities wherever they appear. It must
not be content with, for example, listening to women trying to
sound like men, but must deconstruct that discourse in order
to hear the voice of the "feminine." Radical pluralism,
thought through according to its own logic, thus sets itself
against all unities based upon underlying identities which
carve out an exclusive province within the social. In opening
itself towards the margins it must simultaneously clear the
margins of the lingering effects of modern philosophy, not, it
should be made clear, in order to once again tell the margins
what to say, but only in order to hear the specific
differences as they are beyond modernist forms of discourse.

Still, this is a significant change. The
distinguishing feature of radical pluralism was said to be its
ability to really listen to those excluded by the given
society. It turns out on analysis, however, that this ability
to listen is predicated upon a prior clearing of the ground of
any remaining modernist unities. The ground must be so
cleared in order to eliminate the exclusions which result from
unities like "the women's movement" and to enable the
radically new and transgressive to emerge. If this active
moment were ignored, then all those who did not feel
themselves part of official movements would be silenced and
nothing new would be heard. Only those differences already
operative in the given world would speak. Such a result would
not amount to the radical overstepping of modern limitations,

it would merely be the repetition of those limitations themselves.

Thus, although postmodernity contains the imperative to listen to the other, this imperative cannot be fulfilled without an active deconstruction of totalizing closure wherever this be found. Recall that Marxism, or fascism, or capitalism were not the primary causes of social problems in the postmodern perspective. They were effects of essentialist thinking and it is this which postmodern criticism sought to undermine. This task cannot be fulfilled by merely shifting from a "traditional" master narrative to a "marginal" master narrative. At a metaphysical level, which is the key level for postmodern criticism, an essentialist feminism, for example, cannot be any better than an essentialist Marxism. It too could be exclusive (most obviously of men) in just the same way that modern thought was exclusive.

Thus, thought through consistently, postmodern pluralism is defined by a passive and an active moment. The passive moment holds in abeyance systematizing, categorizing, totalizing thought. The active moment clears the social field of all past totalizations in order that the non-systematic, different, transgressive voices of the margins can speak. Radical pluralism is not, or should not be, concerned with the truth of essential identities. It is concerned with what happens, whatever that might be, once these identities have been stripped away.

Notwithstanding the increase in tolerance which radical pluralism would likely bring about, its overriding concern with difference raises a vexing question. The question concerns whether or not the deconstruction of essentialist identities actually release differences in a raw and unmediated forms? Perhaps it is the case that all that such a deconstruction accomplishes is the release of new identities from more general categories. If this is the case then deconstruction will be an on-going process, and, indeed, we have seen in part One that all three thinkers believe that their critical work is in fact endless. If it is endless, and it must be because an end to it would pre-suppose that a determined goal had been attained, then it will face two serious problems. One, it will undermine the conditions necessary for the more robust articulation and defence of marginalized peoples and two, it will discover that the manifestation of differences is "always already" the manifestation of an identity. Radical pluralism will thus prove to be an incoherent idea as it will prove unable to accept anything on the order of self-expression, let alone self-determination, and to undo, rather than secure, the conditions for a society where the margins speak freely.

These two issues arise naturally at the moment where one attempts to think about how radical pluralism might be operationalized as a series of political movements. That is, what would "postmodern" struggles to open up liberal society

to the radically different look like? We already know that such struggles cannot be limited to "traditional" struggles of workers, women, and ethnic and cultural minorities, for the criterion to decide between "progressive" and "reactionary" struggles has been given up.

Giving up such binary oppositions may solve the problem of political avant gardes usurping the voices of widely divergent groups in the name of a universal struggle, but it does not overcome the metaphysical problem mentioned above. If, instead of a struggle of different groups united into a single force by the idea of universal human emancipation, we have simply a dispersal of the groups into independent struggles, we have gone beyond a unified conception of human emancipation, but have not reached the level of radical difference desired by postmodern thought. These particular struggles still counterpose identity to structures which oppress that identity, they still depend on groups asserting themselves against different groups. In short, these struggles would still manifest the metaphysical problem which postmodernism attributed to modern politics- instead of creating a space for the unbounded proliferation of differences, they rest upon the assertion of exclusive identities. Instead of a single struggle oriented by the objective entailments of the human essence we would have a loosely affiliated band of groups defined by more particular identities- women's, Blacks', and so on. Such forms of

struggle, however, fall short of the implications of the radical concept of difference characteristic of postmodern thought explored above.

Thus, no matter how finely one sub-divides different groups, so long as one still has groups left over, one has not reached the level of non-exclusive, open-ended difference required by the postmodern conception.[24] So long as one has a definite group of people desiring to speak because they believe that they have something to say about themselves, which concerns themselves, their "truth" or essence, one has not left behind what postmodernism claimed was the exclusionary logic of modern thought. One can go from women, to Black women, to Black lesbian women, etc., but one still has groups defined according to what they are and what others are not. Such distinctions are, at a metaphysical level, quantitative only. That is, although they mark different identities, they are all still identities, and entail, therefore, the same metaphysical problems which undermined, according to postmodernism, modern theories of emancipation-those who do not fit in with the group are ruled out from participation in the struggles of that group.

It appears, therefore, that the logical trajectory of postmodern thought takes it away from groups altogether.

---

[24]This point is overlooked by one of the most celebrated attempts at constructing a radical postmodern politics, Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* (London: Verso), 1985.

No group can be constituted which does not have a criterion to decide who is in and who is out. The very definition of a group is a collection of individuals who share something in common. From the postmodern perspective, one cannot ascend to higher levels of abstraction without excluding more and more relevant differences, but it cannot, on the other hand, simply descend to more and more minute groups, for that still does not leave the orbit of modern thought, and does not, therefore, solve modernity's political problems.

Perhaps, therefore, one can only escape the centripetal force of totalizing thought if one moves from the level of groups to the level of individuals. However, a moment's reflection is sufficient to recall that the unified individual was the core fiction of modern philosophy exposed and decentered by postmodern critique. The rational, self-determining individual was the very model of freedom as mastery which postmodernism attacked with such verve. In its unrelenting drive for self-determination, the human as subject reduced the world, including others, to the status of passive objects. This reduction of the other is just what postmodern conceptions of difference struggle to combat, but the individual as the source of resistance is not a possible ground from which the postmodern struggle can begin if it is consistent with its own critique of subjecthood.

Here it is important to recall that the criticism examined in Part One concluded that the subject was a

"function ceaselessly modified" (Foucault), "a function of language" (Derrida) or a "post through which various types of message pass"(Lyotard). There is no content proper to the subject, therefore, which it (individually or collectively) could counterpose to given discourses of exclusion and definition which would not be simply new exclusions. In short, if there is to be resistance to the given order, it must somehow be groundless if it is to be consistent with the implications of radical pluralism.

It is perhaps this difficult notion of groundlessness which explains why postmodern criticism has to be, in principle, endless and self-reflexive. Each of the thinkers examined in Part One always turns back upon himself, searching out lingering traces of essentialism and then re-starting the effort to free his thinking from it. Derrida is always searching for ways to detach the "promise of emancipation" from ontology, Foucault always digging deeper into the minute forces which constitute us, Lyotard always searching for a new link between phrases. Admirable and necessary as such self-deconstruction may be, it cannot, as we will see, solve the fundamental problems of radical pluralism noted above- a pervasive inability to accept any positive manifestation of difference and, ultimately, a destruction of the grounds of a pluralist society. An example will clearly reveal why these problems are unavoidable.

Perhaps no social movement has grappled with the

question of difference and its importance to "progressive"
politics more fully than the feminist movement in the West.
Feminist activists have long been engaged in the type of
critical self-scrutiny necessary for an openness towards
formerly marginalized and silenced differences. Also, while
noticeably absent from Foucault's thought, the women's
movement has nevertheless been an important movement for
Derrida, as we have seen, and Lyotard invokes women as one
group whose specificity postmodern politics must concern
itself with. Thus, a brief examination of what the
consequences of such an opening towards the margins have been,
and, more importantly, what they would be if the logical
trajectory of difference were thought through to its end, will
illuminate the fundamental incoherence of the idea of radical
pluralism.

The opening towards the margins practised by the
feminist movement has been motivated by the recognition of the
historical fact that white women have traditionally dominated
the movement. The problem manifest in this relationship is
familiar to us- a particular group has been elevated to the
level of universality, a diversity has been reduced to unity
through the identification of the voice of a particular sub-
group and the voice of the whole group as a whole. Thus,
feminism has sought to divest itself of this formerly
unacknowledged exclusivity. As Lynda Hurst notes in a recent
interview with out-going NAC leader Sunera Thobani, "the

acknowledgement that white women can no longer speak for all women, that they must share power or risk the charge of racism... is the toughest feminist issue of the decade."[25]

There is an important shift of focus entailed by this issue whose significance cannot be underestimated. Alongside the external struggle against sexist society, NAC, or any women's group grappling with this issue, must also wage an internal struggle against unexamined sources of privilege and exclusion. Indeed, if the women's movement is to wage a successful struggle for a less oppressive society, the internal struggle becomes a condition for the success of the external. Without a thoroughgoing self-examination, the women's movement will merely replicate the oppressions characteristic of the society it is fighting. In other words, the active struggle against "the Same" must be waged before the "differences" can be heard.

Such an internal struggle cannot, of course, be limited to white women. As no centre can be privileged, everyone must scrutinize their attitudes towards everyone else- white towards black, straight towards gay, middle class towards working class, citizen towards immigrant. However, consistently applied, the "logic of difference" cannot stop at these obvious contrasts. For, as we have seen in the abstract, exclusion is not surpassed by fragmentation alone.

---

[25]Lynda Hurst, "Back to Being Radical," *Toronto Star*, Feb. 25, 1995, p.B1.

The process of subdivision must go on, but if it only generates by its differences the particularities of groups, it makes exclusion more extensive and elaborate. It cannot succeed in overcoming it.

What it will succeed in doing, however, is to produce a reaction from the formerly dominant groups. If white women formerly excluded black women, a reversal of the situation simply reverses the lines of exclusion. White women can, in all consistency, claim to be in exactly the same situation as black women formerly were if they are removed completely from decision-making power. The critique, rather than advancing the struggle against sexist and racist society, returns upon itself to form a circle. Circles, we know from geometry class, have no beginning or end, nor do such self-replicating charges of exclusion. This is not merely a logical point, it has in fact occurred. Hurst writes in the same article:

> Rather more contentiously, she [Thobani] added that, "marginalized women understand our society better than those who live in the four walls of relative privilege. " The battle lines were duly joined. Were white women now the ones to be silenced? White women who had founded NAC, who had fought the big equity fights... They had done it all for Canadian women, so how were they now suddenly racist, exclusionist, privileged?[26]

More pertinently, what has become of the guiding idea of feminism, that women are not *privileged* but *oppressed* by existing society?

The answer is that this idea is undermined by the

---

[26] *Ibid.*, p.B1.

belief that common interests destroy group particularity. The fragmentation of common interests is impelled by the idea that each particular group must voice its own needs, and any infringement on this exclusive right is tantamount to silencing that group. Yet, as soon as this move is taken, the struggle must become a struggle within the organization against all vestiges of such forms of silencing. The external problem and the internal problem appear to be on a par, but in fact the success of the external struggle is conditional upon the success of the internal struggle. Only if the movement cleanses itself of all traces of exclusionary thinking can it be fit to eradicate that thinking from society. However, if this internal struggle proceeds from the idea above, that only group members can articulate the identity of the group, then rather than contributing to the development of a fully articulated common perspective which focuses on the structures responsible for the oppression of women, it will lead necessarily to inner factionalization to the detriment of the external struggle. The point is not that such internal self-scrutiny is not necessary, but rather that it must proceed according to the common interests of the movement as a whole, and resist counterposing one faction to another. As past NAC president Judy Rebick notes, the problem with the proliferation of sites of exclusion is that "the different groups become the overbearing, defining issues, and we're unable to discuss what unites us, which is what inclusion is

supposed to be all about."[27]   Rebick's diagnosis of the

problem is correct, but she errs in her belief that

"inclusion" is about "what unites us."

The point of fragmentation, that which impels it

towards the fateful conclusion we are about to witness, is

that the notion of common ground is identified as the source

of exclusion and, therefore, oppression. For this reason it

is necessary to establish every difference on a par with every

other difference. But once common ground has been abandoned,

the proliferation of differences, and therefore exclusions,

cannot be brought to a halt without re-establishing common

ground, which in turn cannot be done without silencing some of

the voices, or at least reducing their differences to a

general programme.

Thus, not only the voicing of extant differences, but

also the constant engendering of new ones, is the consistent

goal of radical pluralism. However, as this logic works its

way through oppressed social groups, (who, remember, began as

oppositional forces to given society), the groups, and the

basic issues they once confronted and defined themselves in

opposition to, disappear. There can no more be a basic social

contradiction than there can be a unified social group.

However, if fundamental social problems are deconstructed, and

the groups who formerly stood for the overcoming of those

problems dissolve, then radical pluralism, far from being

---

[27]*Ibid.*, p.B8.

radical, in fact ends up accommodating itself to the status

quo. Ellen Wood makes this point with exquisite clarity:

> This latest denial of capitalism's systemic and
> totalizing logic is, paradoxically, a reflection of the
> very thing it seeks to deny. The current pre-
> occupation with "post-modern[sic]" diversity and
> fragmentation undoubtedly expresses a reality in
> contemporary capitalism, but
> it is a reality seen through the distorting lens of
> ideology. It represents the ultimate "commodity
> fetishism," the triumph of "consumer society," in which
> the diversity of lifestyles, measured in the sheer
> quantity of commodities... disguises the underlying
> systematic unity, the imperatives which create that
> diversity itself while at the same time imposing a
> deeper global homogeneity.[28]

Thus, the ultimate result of the radical search for difference

is that the existing social dynamics which regulate identity

and difference are dissolved by the theory but left untouched

in the society. That is, the social forces which are

actually responsible for homogenization, pre-eminently, the

reduction of the earth and its diverse peoples to the status

of exploitable commodities, become impossible to conceptualize

coherently. At the same time, unified resistance becomes

equally impossible to conceptualize, since a premium is placed

upon the need for each specific difference to express *itself.*

Yet, there obviously is something common which can potentially

unite these different groups, and it is just what postmodern

critique decenters- the capacity for self-determination.

Groups may have different empirical identities, but they face

common problems when it comes to expressing these identities

---

[28]Ellen Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism,* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press), 1995, p.261.

in the world. That is the ground of oppression. When such
groups fight back then, they fight for the same thing in
different forms- a world where they will be able to *freely*
express what they are. Postmodern thought, as we have seen,
was built upon a denial of this very capacity for self-
determination. By eliminating this capacity, postmodern
criticism gets what it wants- a world of randomly fluctuating
differences, but only at the cost of undermining the
conditions in which this world could be a critical response to
modern forms of exclusion and oppression.

At best, the on-going, self-fragmenting logic of
radical pluralism can open up new literary avenues for the few
who have the time and education to do so. To stick with the
example of feminism, the cessation of the drive "to be male"
has given way, amongst some female writers influenced by
Derrida, to a an attempt to undermine the dominant
categorizations of women through literary efforts. In this
vein Luce Irigary has written: "I search for myself among
those elements which have been assimilated. But I ought to
reconstitute myself on the basis of disassimilation, and be
reborn from the traces of culture, works already produced by
the other."[29] The search for self, then, does not take place
ex nihilo, nor does it merely repeat the dominant idioms of
the given society. It looks for "the traces of culture" that

---

[29]Luce Irigary, "Sexual Difference", *French Feminist Thought:
A Reader*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 1988, p. 121.

is, those strands of meaning which exist in a given culture
but which have not yet been incorporated into it. It looks
towards "the other," for the as yet uncontrolled elements
which will be assembled (and then disassembled?) in the on-
going search for the feminine.

However creative and novel any resulting literary
productions might be, such a process is still very far from
being able to solve the basic incoherence of the radical
pluralist idea. First of all, despite the fact that the self
seeks for itself in the traces of culture, the argument still
works within a circle defined by the dominant imperatives of
liberal capitalism, taking as it does the solitary individual
and his/her own work upon him or her self as primary. As such
it fails, as Wood argued in the citation cited above, to
challenge at a basic level the forces responsible for growing
homogenization. Indeed, as we saw in Part One, postmodern
thought has attempted to show that such global forces do not
exist. Nevertheless, in an age of capitalist globalization,
where governments around the world explicitly acknowledge that
they are acting under the same economic compulsions, and are
forced to enact the same austerity measures, disavowals of the
reality of global forces become increasingly difficult to
maintain. The denial of the existence of such global forces,
in a global context actually determined by their operation,
can in fact, strengthen those forces by pointing away from
social struggle to some sort of inner self-transformation

possible even within the dominant culture. As such, this focus upon the inner diverts energy away from struggles which could expand access to cultural and economic resources so that more people could partake in the re-definition of themselves.

More fundamentally, however, the attempt at literary re-creation re-invokes the very idea of self-creation which postmodern criticism deconstructs. The value of this operation lies precisely in the creation of an identity which is other than the identity prepared for the person by the dominant culture. As such, it pre-supposes a capacity on the part of people (at least some people) to create themselves. This idea of self-creation, however, was said by postmodern criticism to be illusory. Recall Derrida's comment to the effect that even when one believes oneself to be creating something unique, one is still but a function of language. If that is the case, then the literary effort at self-reconstruction is still a function of language, and cannot, therefore, be understood as a genuine effort of the marginalized to transform themselves.

However, without some capacity for self-determination, without some voice which is the other's own, the radical pluralist concern with the differences definitive of the other makes no sense. The concern is with transgression, deconstruction, or linking, so that the other can begin to speak for itself. Therein lies the value of postmodern criticism. It takes apart modern totalities because these

have in effect silenced real people. However, according to that same criticism, these people have nothing to say for themselves. The process of deconstructing modern systems, then, at once creates a space for people to speak and deconstructs the people so that they are deprived of the capacity to define themselves. For this reason, as Honi Fern Haber has argued, radical pluralism thought through to its logical end, deprives the marginalized of their voice, rather than supplying new grounds which would enable them to speak. She writes:

> While what postmodern politics speaks to is not a fad, since it speaks to the needs of the marginalized Other- to women, to people of color, to gays and lesbians, to the poor and homeless... it, perhaps ironically... denies those needs any political voice. In insisting on the universalization of difference, postmodern politics forecloses on the possibility of community and subjects necessary to oppositional resistance.[30]

Far from ensuring the defence of the other, radical pluralism ends up dissolving the other entirely.

Thus, as an idea whose core content is the preservation and extension of differences, radical pluralism is incoherent. It both undermines the cohesion of the others who are supposed to speak, and rules out, conversely, struggles against the basic social forces responsible for exclusion and homogeneity in the first place. Postmodern criticism then faces a serious problem. Thought through radically, it undermines the very struggles it hopes to support.

---

[30]Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics,* p.3.

This result is not accidental. As the next chapter will show, a consistent postmodern approach must actually oppose essential aspects of the struggles of the oppressed. In the present chapter we have already seen part of this problem. Postmodernism turned out to require an active deconstruction of particular identities while it was also to listen to real, unmediated differences. However, the differences turn out to be but different identities, which again require deconstruction. Radical pluralism thus becomes a downward spiral leading always away from engagement with the dynamics responsible for exclusion. In the following chapter we will explore a similar relationship between radical postmodern criticism and struggles of oppressed groups which have based themselves upon a universal human subjecthood. While we will once again see postmodern critique end up counterposed to the struggles it should, according to its own claims, support, we will also see emerge the key to a solution of the postmodern problem. That key is just what postmodernism has claimed is the ground of oppression— an understanding of humanity as essentially self-determining. We will see how this concept can operate universally without being oppressive, and begin to understand why theory which seeks to ameliorate the conditions of the worst off requires it. In the final chapter we will deepen our understanding of the relationship between the human essence and the manifestation of difference, and watch as the major theorists

of postmodernity themselves re-admit what they had so strongly

denied- subjecthood as the foundation of struggles whose aim

is to manifest oppressed differences.

2.2:   The Universal Voice of the Other

In the previous chapter we observed the paradoxical outcome of radical pluralist thought. The harder one pushes the radical element- differences detached from an underlying identity- the more exclusions one creates. Rather than strengthening the position of those on the margins, then, radical pluralism undermines the unity the margins require, both in order to be a marginalized element, and to have a clear focus on the dynamics responsible for homogenization. Radical pluralism, thought through consistently, does not secure the conditions for a society which is more tolerant of cultural differences, but undermines those cultural differences themselves in its struggle against unity and identity as such.

However, radical pluralism was motivated by the belief that the overcoming of modernist universals, especially the concept of a human essence, would result in a less oppressive world where marginalized groups would be better able to speak their specific differences. For that reason, despite the fact that the logic of radical pluralism undermined the conditions

for group identity and coherent struggle, it still appeared to
be a critical discourse "on the side of" the oppressed. That
is, the active, deconstructive side of postmodernism was
intended only as a means with which to free the voice of the
other from modern categories and limits, not as a substitute
for that voice.

We have seen that this effort is incoherent. As we
consider once again the relationship between the postmodern
deconstruction of modernist universals and the voice of the
other in the present chapter, a more disturbing conclusion
will manifest itself. This chapter will compare the logic of
radical pluralism and the self-understanding of oppressed
groups in struggle against Western imperialism. The
comparison will disclose that such struggles have based
themselves upon a notion of self-determination, have conceived
of this as the essence of human being, and have used it to
legitimate revolutionary struggles against oppressive society.
In other words, the groups we will examine have incorporated
the purportedly oppressive thinking of the West into their
struggles against it. If postmodernism is to be consistent,
it will be forced to criticize these struggles. If it does
so, however, not only will radical pluralism be incoherent, it
will be self-contradictory. Its primary goal is to listen to
the voice of the other, but if it is forced to disagree with
this voice, then it will not listen, but rather substitute
itself for the voice of the other. On the other hand, if

postmodernism does listen and support anti-imperialist struggles, it will be supporting the very type of modern struggles it has worked so hard to overcome. If it does not, then it will repeat what it claims is a great modernist crime-telling the other what to think and say. We will begin this argument with a concise survey of some of the most significant anti-imperialist struggles of the modern period.

On January 1st, 1993, the North American Free Trade deal came into effect. While North American capital celebrated the securing of a free trade zone stretching virtually from the North Pole to the equator, workers, social activists, feminists, and indigenous populations sensed that the increase in the freedom of capital promised by NAFTA meant an increase in their own servitude. Although capital had secured for itself a trade bloc capable of competing against the EEC and the growing power of the Pacific Rim, for workers and others marginalised by the market NAFTA represented yet another diminution of their power and rights. While protest was on the whole rather quiet, in the jungle of the Chiapas region of Mexico shots rang out and villages were seized by the Zapatista Liberation Army.

"... [T]oday we say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. We are the inheritors of the true builders of our nation. The dispossessed, we are millions, and we thereby call upon our brothers and sisters to join this struggle as the only path,

so that we will not die of hunger..."[31] Thus was war

declared upon the Mexican state, and by extension, North

American capital, on the day that NAFTA took effect. This was

no arbitrary act, however. The Zapatista's argued that their

revolt accorded with the Mexican Constitution, and flowed from

the underlying freedom definitive of human beings. The

Declaration argues:

> Beforehand, we reject any attempt to disgrace our just
> cause by accusing us of being drug traffickers, drug
> guerrillas, thieves, or other names that might be
> used by our enemies. Our struggle follows from the
> Constitution, which is held high by its call for
> justice and equality.[32]

The declaration concludes with the observation that the people

who have undertaken the struggle are "full and free" and that

the struggle seeks to create a political and economic system

in which this freedom is concretely realized.

Although the Zapatista's emerged from the specific

circumstances which endangered the very survival of the

indigenous population of Mexico, they did not, as the above

document makes clear, rest their struggle on this

particularity, but rather sought for universal foundations in

the notions of justice, equality, and freedom. This was not,

as Lyotard claimed anti-imperialist struggles were, "des

---

[31]"Declaration of War", *Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution,* (New York: Autonomedia), 1994, pp.49-50.

[32]*Ibid.,* p.50. In particular, the struggle is legitimated by appeal to Article 39, which reads: "National Sovereignty essentially and originally resides in the people... the people have, at all times, the inalienable right to alter or modify their form of government."

luttes des minoritaires visant a rester minoritaire et a etre reconnu comme tels."[33] As Luis Hernandez commented,

> ... the great virtue of the Zapatista's has been that their discourse is sufficiently wide to be interpreted by many sectors according to their own interests and objectives. At a moment in which nobody was betting on great change, in which their was enormous skepticism about possibilities of bringing about satisfactory change through revolution, the January 1 insurrection was a breath of fresh air blowing from the South.... The uprising seems to want to tell us that we don't have to conform to the way things are going, that the particular authoritarian and vertical form of modernization is not necessarily the only path.[34]

The global outlook of the Zapatista's is passionately confirmed in the words of their leader: "Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro... a communist in the post-Cold War era...."[35] In other words, Marcos is not a "territory of language" but a link in a chain of struggles forged by the outsiders and the oppressed against liberal-capitalist society. This globalism is hardly surprising given the global source of the particular problems they face. NAFTA was a step in the present restructuring of the North American economy in response to the increase in competitive pressures. The same forces threatening the indigenous population of Mexico are threatening factories, jobs, universities, hospitals, and

---

[33]Lyotard, *Rudiments paiennes*, p.146.

[34]"Interview with Luis Hernandez", *Americas Watch*, vol. vxi. #2, Nov/Dec, 1994, pp4-5.

[35]*Canadian Dimension*, Oct.-Nov. 1994, p.1. I am greatful to John McMurtry for bringing this passage to my attention.

basic social security in Canada, the U.S. and Europe.

It is instructive to recall at this point that a key feature of the postmodern perspective, radically conceived, rejected struggles with global aims and outlooks. These were judged to be both impractical and erected upon faulty philosophical assumptions about universal history and human subjecthood. Yet here, in the midst of the purportedly "postindustrial" "information economy," a classic guerilla war was developing which rooted itself in foundational notions of human freedom, justice, and equality. The Zapatista's were hardly unique in adopting such a strategy. Those peoples most marginalized by the world market have continuously made appeal to these notions to explain and legitimate their struggles. In order to emphasize the diametrical opposition of the postmodern interpretation of these struggles to the self-interpretation of those in struggle, an historical overview of some of the major anti-imperialist movements is highly pertinent, indeed, indispensable, to a proper estimation of the philosophical problem postmodern strategies encounter in this regard.

The Zapatista uprising was not the first time that the catalyst for fundamental socio-economic change had originated in Latin America. Thirteen years prior to the Zapatista's the struggles of the FSLN in Nicaragua galvanized the attention of progressive activists throughout the West. Again, the revolution against Samoza and his U.S. backers is explained as

a particular response to a global problem whose solution can

only be achieved through global efforts. As the Sandinista's

themselves explained:

> The Sandinista people's revolution will establish a
> revolutionary government that will eliminate the
> reactionary structure that arose from rigged elections
> and military coups, and the people's power will create
> a Nicaragua that is free from exploitation, oppression,
> backwardness: a free, progressive country.[36]

This particular goal is situated amidst a global critique of

imperialism:

> The Sandinista revolution will...put in practice
> militant solidarity with fraternal people fighting for
> their liberation. A. It will actively support the
> struggles of the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin
> America against the old and new colonialism and against
> their common enemy: Yankee Imperialism. B. It will
> support the struggles of Black people and all the
> people of America for an authentic democracy
> and equal rights.[37]

Note that scant attention is paid to the specific cultural

differences which concretely define the groups whom the

Sandinista's wish to support. These differences are

suppressed, deliberately, so that the common problems facing

each group come to the fore. Note also that the primary

concern is not first of all with releasing the plurality of

voices stifled by imperialism, but rather with establishing a

basic social framework in which voices gain the concrete means

to express themselves: an egalitarian economy and a

---

[36]"The Historic Program of the FSLN", *The Nicaragua Reader*,
Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer, eds., (New York: Grove Press),
1983, p.140.

[37]*Ibid.*, p.146.

democratic polity.

Nicaragua was to the 1980's what Viet Nam was, on a much larger scale, to the 1960's- a point of crystallization for opposition to the barbarities of capitalism- destruction of traditional cultures without remainder, military slaughter, starvation in the midst of abundance. The struggles of the National Liberation Front motivated the radicalization of millions of Western students and workers throughout the decade. In France (1968) and Italy (1969) these struggles, when they were combined with the struggles of workers, brought each nation to the brink of revolution.

Once again, one does not find that the Vietnamese resistance appealed to ideas relevantly similar to the postmodern attempts to "present the unpresentable," transgress given norms in a morally neutral "lightning flash" or to await forever the messianic "promise of emancipation." Despite feeling the full horrors of Western might (napalm, indiscriminate slaughter of civilian populations, suffering under carpet bombing the tonnage of which exceeded that of World War Two), the Vietnamese leadership still made appeal to those purportedly "western" ideas of self-determination and positive freedom as the ideological underpinnings of their struggle.

As in Mexico and Nicaragua, what one finds is that local traditions are reconceived as the particular grounds from which a struggle with universal goals proceeds. As

Frances Fitzgerald argues,

> Ho Chi Minh made the synthesis, turning Western theories and methods against the Western occupation of the country. Through Marxism-Leninism he provided the Vietnamese with a new way to perceive their society and sew it up in the skien of history. He showed them a way to back to their traditional values and a way forward to the optimism of the West- the belief in progress and the power of the small people.[38]

What was it that the "small people learned? Precisely that their lives were not necessarily determined by fate, or by any external force, but rather that they themselves had the capacity to determine their future:

> ...the NLF was making a new map of the world on which the villagers might reroute their lives. The enemy was no longer inside, but outside in the world of objective phenomena; the world moved not according to blind, transcendent forces, but according to the will of the people.[39]

The NLF, I would argue, brought to the fore just what has been called in this investigation subjecthood- the defining capacity of human beings to shape their environment in a manner which is adequate to the free realization of their empirical capacities. More on this point below.

Viet Nam was not the only place convulsed by anti-colonialist struggle in the 1960's and 1970's. In Africa, the

---

[38]Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake,* (New York: Vintage Books), 1972, p.210.

[39]*Ibid.,* p.212. Fitzgerald relies throughout this text on interviews and documents of the NLF and the villagers who worked with them. Corroboration of the authors interpretation may be found in the footnote to the passage cited here, in which an NLF cadre explains the transformation of village life.

nations most responsible for the murderous enslavement of
their fellow human beings- Britain, France, and Portugal- were
one and all (politically) overthrown.   The major
revolutionary forces at the time in Zimbabwe, Mozambique,
South Africa, and Angola were united under the umbrella of the
Organization for African Unity according to the following
principles:

> [... each stood] against colonialism, neo-colonialism,
> imperialism and exploitation of man by man.   They
> sought national unity with the armed national
> liberation struggle.... they were opposed to tribalism,
> regionalism, divisionism, and racialism, arguing that
> the enemy was not necessarily white.[40]

In general, those groups which forged ahead on a unitary
platform (ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, FRELIMO in Mozambique, MPLA in
Angola and, more recently, the ANC in South Africa) were
successful in overthrowing the colonialist political
structure.   Those who followed a factional line, (ZAPU in
Zimbabwe, the PAC in South Africa) became secondary and
ineffective forces.   Yet, if postmodern critique is to be
believed, it is precisely the local, particular, and
fragmentary that can wage the most effective fight against the
forces of exclusion and oppression.   In this case, however,
the people involved in the struggles abandoned the factions in
favour of those groups better able to construct a unified
fighting force.

Exactly the same dependence upon a unitary platform and

---

[40]Phyllis Johnson and David Martin, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe,*
(London: Faber and Faber), 1981, p.14.

universal guiding ideas can be found at the heart of the first anti-colonial revolt, the San Domingo slave revolution (1791-1804). At the time of the French Revolution, San Domingo, today Haiti, was the wealthiest colony of the New World. As French soldiers began landing in San Domingo following the overthrow of royal power, they began to spread word that the revolution in France rested upon the principle of the natural liberty and equality of all humans. This principle stood in stark contrast to the actual inequality of humans as necessitated by the slave trade. Yet, it was this very idea of natural liberty which served to unify and strengthen the sporadic and undisciplined resistance of the Africans to their European overlords. There began a profound interaction between the ideas of the radical Enlightenment and the slave resistance which led in the end to the abolition of slavery and the independence of San Domingo. The idea which galvanized the opposition is beautifully expressed by one of France's greatest critics of slavery, the Abbé Raynal. He wrote,

> La liberté naturelle est la droite que la nature a donner a tout homme de disposer de soi à sa volonté ...[cette liberté] est, apres la raison, le caractère distinctif de l'homme.

Applying this doctrine to the colonial situation, Raynal asked, prophetically,

> Où est-il, ce grand homme que la nature doit à ses enfants vexé, opprimé, tourmentées... Il paraitra, n'en doutons point, il se montera, il levera l'étandard sacré de la liberté... Plus impétueux que les torrents ils laisseront partout les traces ineffacable de leur

> juste ressentiment... tous leur tyrans deviendront la
> proie du feu et de la flame... L'Ancien Monde joindra
> ses applaudissements au Nouveau.[41]

This "great man" called for by Raynal would appear in the

person of Toussaint L'Ouverture, ex-slave and soon to be

leader of a slave army which would defeat, in succession, the

French colonisers, the English, Spanish and French armies.

What is interesting here is that L'Ouverture, although

he had nonetheless tasted the poisonous hypocrisy of a

doctrine of "natural liberty" which deprived him of his own,

he saw that the hypocrisy at work attached to the French

rulers, not the principles themselves. He was thus able to

organize resistance to slavery by pointing out the

contradiction between the principle that humans are free and

the application of this principle which said that some are

nevertheless naturally slaves. Working through this

contradiction rather than abandoning the doctrine permitted

him to assemble a revolutionary force in San Domingo, give it

a clear focus, and gain allies in France. L'Ouverture was not

troubled by the purportedly "Eurocentric" character of the

ideas which guided the radical elements of the French

revolution. Instead, he seized these general principles and

made them concrete through channelling the energy of his

comrades into a force capable of establishing the conditions

for self-determination. In his own words, as he prepared to

---

[41]Guillaume Raynal, "Contre la traite des Noirs", *Histoire philosophique et politique des Deux Indes,* (Paris: Francois Maspero), 1981, pp.191, 202.

wage war against the coming Napoleonic army, he wrote,

> It is sufficient to renew... the oath that I have made,
> to cease to live before gratitude dies in my heart,
> before I cease to be faithful to France and to my duty,
> before the god of liberty is profaned by the
> liberticides, before they snatch from my hand that
> sword, those arms, which France confided to me for the
> defence its rights and those of humanity, for the
> triumph of liberty and equality.[42]

For L'Ouverture and the army he led, unity of all beneath the slogan of natural liberty and equality was the precondition for the concrete self-determination of different peoples.

C.L.R. James, reflecting upon the San Domingo revolt, notes the essential role that the self-activity of the ex-slaves played in transforming those same slaves form oppressed to confident agents:

> There was no need to be ashamed of being black. the
> revolution had awakened them, had given them the
> possibility of achievement, confidence, and pride.
> That psychological weakness, that feeling of
> inferiority with which the imperialists poison colonial
> people everywhere, were gone.[43]

This essential alteration had occurred because the slaves manifested precisely the capacity to determine their own circumstances which the racist doctrine denied they possessed.

The racists claimed that the state of African society, and the squalor of slave existence in the colonies, proved that the Africans were incapable of ruling themselves, that they were, in effect, subhuman. However, these purportedly

---

[42]Quoted in, C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, (New York: Vintage Books), 1989, p.197.

[43]*Ibid.*, p.244.

sub-human creatures thought differently, and proved their
point by beating the best armies Europe could send against
them. They proved, in other words, that they were fully
capable of ruling themselves. That is, they proved to the
Europeans, using the European's own terms, that they were
self-determining beings, humans. In so doing they also proved
that this criterion was not European, but universal. The
liberation of San Domingo from France, proceeding as it did
from the principles of the French Revolution, did not entail
the destruction of the cultural distinctions of the slaves.
On the contrary, this liberation secured those distinctions,
but by appeal to a universal principle- all people are free,
and in being free, to possess the capacity to express
themselves and organize their lives as they themselves decide.
Far from being that which destroys difference, this principle
and the capacity for self-determination which it pre-supposes,
is its very condition. Real and meaningful social and
cultural differences are protected by the links which they
forge between themselves and affirm the underlying humanity of
those who express them. The universal principle cited above
is also, as we have seen, the very principle which
postmodernism denies. We will return to this apparent
contradiction between the denial of a capacity for self-
determination and the affirmation of struggles for difference
below. Before we can understand the contradiction, we must
delve deeper into the sense of "humanity" manifest in the

revolt of the margins against the centre.

It is interesting to compare what James, writing in 1938, said above with what Frantz Fanon would say some thirty years later. They reach an identical conclusion. That is, colonial revolution begins when the colonized people recognize their "humanity." Like L'Ouverture, like James, Fanon was fully aware of the hypocritical deployment of humanist discourse in a colonized environment. Again, like L'Ouverture, James, and so many others who have fought for emancipation, he did not abandon those ideas. Commenting on the Algerian war of independence, Fanon argues,

> General deGaulle speaks of the "yellow multitudes" and Francois Mauriac of the black, brown and yellow masses which will soon be unleashed. The native knows all this and laughs to himself everytime he spots an allusion to the animal kingdom in the other's words. For he knows that he is not an animal, and it is precisely at the moment when he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure his victory.[44]

---

[44]Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* (New York: Grove Press), 1982. The status and meaning of Fanon's work has become subject to a renewed debate in recent years. Most notably, the post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha has argued that Fanon's work is of a piece with the postmodern deconstruction of the subject. Bhabha argues that the colonial context profoundly dislocates the identity of the colonized person and empties out that rational self-identity essentialized by Western humanism. In its place, the postcolonial "subject" is invited to poetically reconstitute him/herself in unstable and diverse fashion. Bhabha takes as his starting point for this work Fanon's studies of colonial society. While I would not dispute with Bhabha (or Fanon) on the psychological impact of colonialism, two important points must be made. First, Bhabha himself admits that there is a humanist and essentialist aspect to Fanon's work. Second, the difference between my interpretation and Bhabha's owes to the difference in the works upon which each interpretation focused. Bhabha draws his postmodern reading out of *Black Skin, White Masks*, which concentrates on the colonial situation. *Wretched of the Earth,* on

This "humanity" is precisely the capacity for active self-transformation which James identified as the key to the revolution in San Domingo.

Both readings echo Marx's claim in the German Ideology that, "revolution is necessary... not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution... become fit for founding society anew."[45] Fanon adapts this to the colonial context in the following manner:

> The mobilisation of the masses, when it arises from the war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the idea of a common cause, of a natural destiny, and of a collective history.

He continues,

---

the other hand, concentrates upon the self-transformation of the colonized people through the process of anti-colonial revolt. The focus upon activity as opposed to passivity may explain the difference between the "postmodern" and the humanist Fanon. See, Homi K. Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity", *Anatomy of Racism,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1990. A few months after I had written these words, I had the *great* fortune of hearing Dr. Lewis R. Gordon of Purdue University speak on Fanon at York University in Toronto. He tackled the postmodern appropriation of Fanon head on, and argued that it was a tendentious distortion designed to eradicate from Fanon anything which contradicts the defining anti-humanism of postmodernism. Gordon's general attitude towards the attempt to read revolutionary humanism out of Fanon is nicely summed up in his critique of the cultural theorist Henry Lewis Gates Jr. Gordon writes, "Gates writes as though there is nothing to be liberated from but liberation discourse itself. His move reflects the failure of the rhetoric of anti-imperialism without an existential component behind it. It is as if he were saying, 'But for the baggage of race, ...but for the baggage of gender...' But, as we know, written history now bears tales of US blockades around tiny islands of colored people..." Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man,* (New York: Routledge), 1995, p.100.

[45]Marx, *The German Ideology,* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1976, p.60.

> At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing
> force. It frees the native from his inferiority
> complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes
> him fearless and restores his self-respect.... the
> people see that the liberation has been the business
> of each and all and that the leader has no special
> merit.[46]

Significantly, Fanon argues that the colonial struggle

essentially opens up global possibilities. Moreover, the

essential possibility which this struggle throws up concerns

the fulfilment of the universal goals of critical Western

humanism, ie, the goals which converge on the project of

making over the world in a fashion adequate to humanity's

self-creative power. As Gordon argues,

> In identifying European man *qua* European man, we,
> following Fanon, signal the importance of decentering
> *him* as the designator of human reality. But this does
> not mean that the project of constructing or engaging
> in human science must also be abandoned. Instead, in
> the spirit of Fanon's call for radicality and
> originality, the challenge becomes one of radical
> engagement and attuned relevance.[47]

Fanon has seen that the capacity to determine reality is not

simply a peculiarly Western capacity constituted at the

expense of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. Precisely

when these groups objectively demonstrate their power to re-

make the world, he argues, will the universality of the notion

of self-determination they express become manifest:

> All the elements of a solution to the great problems
> of mankind have at different times existed in
> European thought. But the action of European man

---

[46]Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* pp. 93, 94.

[47]Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man,* p.103.

> has not carried out this mission which fell to him...
> Today we are present at the stasis of Europe... Let us
> reconsider the question of the cerebral reality and
> the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections
> must be increased, whose channels must be diversified,
> and whose message must be re-humanized.[48]

Now, it must be emphasized that these words were published in
1961 at a time when, just across the Mediterranean,
structuralism, which would begin the "decentering" of the
subject, was taking shape. And yet Fanon, Western educated
but clearly aware of the limitations of Western applications
of this thought in the non-Western world, does nor forsake the
"progressive" side of Western political discourse. Instead,
he seeks to develop it further.

It is instructive to identify the force which will
further the sullied goals of humanism. In each of the case
discussed here, that force is the power of people acting in
concert to change circumstances from those which define an
oppressive context to those which define a free context. The
essential difference between the two is that in the latter
case the laws and institutions of society express the
collective will of the people as manifested in their own
political activity. That those who have tasted the most
bitter fruits of Western imperialism nevertheless continue to
draw on the major "modernist' themes of "Western" political
philosophy, up to and including those struggles which have
flourished in the postmodern age, poses a serious problem for

---

[48]Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.314.

the postmodern attempt to think of political struggle in the absence of humanist grounds.

The problem facing postmodernism in this regard can be brought into focus if we recall Lyotard's claim that nothing in the "savage" community impels it to "dialecticize" itself into a republic of citizens. This is a particular application of what has been shown to be a general postmodern political argument- minorities must remain minorities and not seek universal grounding for their specificity. The crucial question facing postmodernism concerns how it can account for the fact that oppressed minorities in struggle have time and again identified themselves with the universal themes which postmodern thinking claims are but local European phenomena, spread throughout the world not in order to free it, but to control it.

Lyotard's assertion that there is nothing *immanent* to the "savage" community which would set it along a course to political modernization is trivially true. Trivial because it requires that such communities (let us call them traditional rather than "savage," which, at least in English, cannot be separated from pejorative connotations) be abstracted from the on-going globalization of the world economy and, increasingly, culture. Considered at the moment of my birth, there was nothing immanent to me which would cause me to try to obtain my doctorate. Yet, to assert this tells me nothing about my present predicament, options, and possibilities. So too for

traditional communities. The problems they face concern not
what is immanent to them, but rather what they will do upon
their (oft-times forced) entry into given global
circumstances, and I cannot think of one group which has not
been touched by globalization. Once Western money and
technology arrive, traditional community ties begin to break
down. This happens both through force (military intervention
to secure land, for example) and, more insidiously, through
the seduction of youth by the allure of consumer culture. To
the extent that postmodern criticism occludes the global
source of these forces, it too risks becoming just another
product of disposable Western consumerism. If postmodern
thought is to be more than this, it must address the two
relevant problems- how the forces of capitalist globalization
may best be a) resisted outright, or b) incorporated into
those elements of the community deemed essential in a language
which is not just a repetition of the language of Marxism or
left-liberalism.

The survey with which this chapter began discloses a
disturbing (from the postmodern perspective) reliance upon
appeal to a universalist understanding of history and the
capacity for self-determination. That is, faced with the
choice of what to do, non-Western communities have sought to
deploy themes from Western radical thought in their specific
circumstances as the foundation for resistance to Western
imperialism. On each important point the discourse of the

oppressed groups was the antithesis of what a postmodern argument, if it were consistent, would recommend. Whereas postmodern thinking defends the notion of difference as fundamental, the groups surveyed located difference as flowing *from* a common capacity for self-determination. Global solidarity, not disconnected and dispersed struggle, was desired in each instance. Whereas postmodernism recommends dispersed, creative, open-ended responses to oppression, each group found that disciplined, unified, and armed response was required to secure victory. Whereas postmodern thinking announces the end of grand narratives, each of these struggles situates itself within the grand narrative of human emancipation, including those which developed during the "postmodern" era. Whereas postmodern criticism announces the demise of the modernist subject, each of these groups thought themselves to be asserting their human capacity to alter circumstances judged to be inadequate to their common, essential, human abilities. Whereas postmodern social analysis asserts that society lacks a centre, that no sub-system of society is more important than any other, each of these groups sought fundamental alterations in precisely the central economic and political institutions determining their lives. It is manifest that there is a prima facie contradiction between the methods recommended by postmodern thought and the actual methods utilized by oppressed groups. Considered as an effort to ameliorate the life-conditions of

marginalized people, postmodernism thus appears obliged to criticize these struggles, since they are of a piece with the modernist theories so rigorously deconstructed by postmodern thinking.

Surely this must pose a problem for postmodern political thought. It recommends itself as more attuned to specificity and difference, and yet, in concrete instances of struggle to preserve and extend differences, the groups in question appeal to universal goals and values and employ coercive measures to achieve these. If Iris Young is right, and postmodern thought "critiques... the logic of identity because...[it] denies or represses the particularities and heterogeneities of sensual experience,"[49] then it must extend this critique to non-Western peoples who also ground their struggles in the "logic of identity," that is, in the idea that oppression exists where the shared self-creative capacity of humans is squelched by the demands of capitalist enterprise.

However, postmodernism cannot both affirm struggles against oppression as they are and maintain that these struggles do not depend upon a capacity for self-determination. The truth of this claim can be determined by considering the relation between self and other which is the language so often employed by postmodern criticism when

---

[49]Young, "Together in Difference", *Principled Positions,* p.126.

dealing with the relations between the oppressor and the oppressed. These terms are not unique to postmodernism, but extend back in the history of philosophy to, at least, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit.* What the postmodern use forgets is what Hegel took to be essential, that is, that there is an identity which underlines the difference.

In truth, there is no essential difference between self and other because the positions are completely reversible. From the perspective of the coloniser, the colonized is "other." Yet, from the perspective of the colonized, the coloniser is "other." Together, both categories have universal extension; apart, each implies the other. As such, there is no substantive difference between them. What is different is that the colonizer does not recognize in the other what cannot in substance be recognized by postmodernism: the capacity for self-determination.

Postmodernism attempts to maintain this distinction between self and other as the basis of its critical project. But it does so by contending that the other stands on the side of "difference." We have seen however, that this postmodern position, thought through, is incoherent. It pre-supposes what it denies, namely, a capacity on the part of the other to assert its proper identity against the forces which oppress that identity. At the same time, the reality of actual struggles against oppression do not base themselves on a claim to the possession of pure difference, but rather on a claim to

a shared humanity, a capacity for self-determination which is violently denied them. If one approaches this struggle from a certain interpretation of the Hegelian perspective on the relation between self and other one can both understand the specificity of the other and account for why the other tends to situate its discourse within a universal framework.

What one witnesses in the struggle between self and other is not a conflict between "the logic of difference" and "the logic of the same," but rather a struggle between two forces, one of humanity, one of denying this humanity in the other which are identical in principle but opposed in the given context. This struggle is characterized by Hegel as a "struggle to the death" in Chapter Four of *The Phenomenology*. There he notes:

> What is "other" for it is unessential, negatively
> characterized object. But the "other" is also
> self-consciousness; one individual confronted
> by another individual.[50]

What postmodernism characterizes as a necessarily unbalanced relationship is, in fact, a relationship of unrecognized equality in a shared human essence. This equality can only be recognized after each proves to the other their essential freedom. Hegel continues:

> Thus the relationship between the two self-conscious
> individuals is such that they prove themselves and each
> other through a life-and-death struggle. They must
> engage in this struggle, for they must raise their
> certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in
> the case of the other and in their own case. And it is

---

[50]Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.113.

only through staking one's life that freedom is won...[51]

Before the struggle each posits the other as unessential, merely other. Once each engages in the struggle, however, the underlying equality, in essence, the fact that each proves itself a self, an active, self-determining force, emerges and breaks down the apparent difference between the two.

Now, this abstract characterization is certainly no substitute for concrete, empirical analysis of definite struggles. Nevertheless, it discloses an issue of profound metaphysical importance, particularly in the context of the postmodern attempt to conceive of struggle apart from this underlying essence of the human subject. If we think back to the example of San Domingo, the deeper ground of the Hegelian approach becomes apparent. In that struggle the slaves proved to the slave masters that they were not unessential, that they were not "other" but rather active subjects like the masters. Through this struggle both transform themselves. The slaves prove that they are not slaves, the slave owners see that their judgement of the slaves was untenable. They must either abandon that judgement, ie, change their practices and their society, or be eliminated.

This interpretation does, it is true, factor into the equation that which Hegel leaves out, namely, the fact of oppression. However, the fundamental point remains- the

---

[51]*Ibid.*, pp.113-114.

struggle between self and other is really a struggle between two selves. What is manifest through the struggle is that the free development of each position requires the transcendence of the unequal relationship. By proving itself in victory, the formerly oppressed side proves itself to be in essence human, that is, the same as what the oppressive side asserted itself to be, ie, an active subject capable of ruling itself. What is changed is that the one-sidedness of the oppressors claim to difference has been overcome. That is, in showing itself to be a people capable of self-determination, the oppressed people destroys the oppressor's claim to difference. The way is thus opened for reconciliation, reciprocity, and mutual recognition of a common humanity.

This returns the examination to the central problem. If the struggle between self and other is a struggle between two selves, one of which is struggling for what the other already has- self-determination, then postmodern conception of this struggle contradicts not only the nature of the struggle, but also itself. If postmodernism insists that the other must remain other, then it is once again telling the other what it should be, it is once again imposing a Western discourse upon non-Western peoples. By pre-supposing that the criticisms it has made of modern political criticism are applicable to the zones where exploitation and oppression are most extreme, and by ruling out the efficacy of radical economic and political transformation in these zones, postmodern critique substitutes

itself for the actual character of the historic struggles against imperialism. It ignores the fact that no one has forced the discourse of critical humanism upon the oppressed, that they themselves have taken up the notion of human essence as self-determination and applied it concretely in their own situation. To that extent that postmodernism is a radical critique of essentialism, therefore, it is in contradiction to what the oppressed say for themselves, and is thus in contradiction with itself, since it holds that the other "cannot speak the language of the same," or is a "minority seeking to be recognized as such." If it presses forward with this analysis, therefore, it is in practice telling the other what the other is. It also, as we saw in chapter 2.2, deflects attention away from the basic, global causes of oppression. For the Mexican teen-age woman being poisoned in a factory in one of the Maquiladoras, Marxist political economy may have a great deal more relevance than the deconstruction of the subject. Indeed, she might benefit from reading a text which tells her that, together with her co-workers, she has the power to change her situation. Kate Soper makes this point forcefully:

> ... revelling in the loss of progress is a Western
> metropolitan privilege which depends upon living
> in a state of grace where no one is starving you,
> no one is torturing you, no one even denying you
> the price of a cinema ticket or tube fare to
> the postmodernism conference.[52]

---

[52]Kate Soper, "Postmodernism, Subjectivity, and the Question of Value", *Principled Positions*, p.21.

It is possible that in a liberal democracy, where tolerance is
already, to some extent, and operative value, that the
deconstruction of the subject *may appear* to offer the
possibility of increased pluralism (although, as we saw in the
previous chapter, this is only appearance) but in contexts
where these formal guarantees have not been achieved, such a
deconstruction would deprive groups of the concepts for
struggle *which they themselves* lay claim to.

Thus, confronted with the use of modernist themes in
the discourse of the oppressed, postmodern criticism must
either criticize this (and thus impose its own discourse on
the group in struggle) or remain silent (and thus withdraw its
criticism of modernist thinking).

However, there is something troubling about the
attribution of such a contradiction to postmodern thinking.
It would be unjust to accuse the major thinkers who have laid
the philosophical "groundwork' for postmodern strategies to be
unconcerned with the fate of oppressed peoples. Moreover, the
struggles which have been surveyed *are*, in one sense,
struggles for diversity. It is also true that one finds
explicit support for anti-imperialist struggles in the work of
the three major figures under examination. Derrida's support
for the anti-apartheid struggle is well-known, and, to my
mind, by far the most eloquent and powerful of his writings.
Foucault was an enthusiastic supporter of the overthrow of the
U.S. backed regime of the Shah of Iran. Lyotard takes as one

of his main concerns the defence of the rights of the people of the "Third World."

This support notwithstanding, the force of the contradiction is not easy to minimize. By supporting such struggles each implicates himself in large-scale efforts at social transformation which each has attacked as both obsolete and dangerous. The contradiction cannot be solved by appeal to the special character of anti-imperialist struggle, since in each case the groups in struggle identify with forces and ideas which are not restricted to the colonial situation. Each (with the possible exception of Iran) identified itself as a moment in a human struggle for emancipation. Perhaps, however, some of the force of the contradiction may be dissipated if it is explained in the following manner. It is true that there is a contradiction between the self-proclaimed grounds of anti-imperialist struggle and the fundamental positions of postmodern thought, but the goals are not in contradiction. If practical goals are assigned a higher value than theoretical accord then the contradiction is of minor importance. What is important is to support struggles whose net effect is the increase of global diversity.

It could be argued, moreover, that *any* political position will confront a similar contradiction between theory and practice. The postmodernist might ask the Marxist, "do you not contradict yourself when you support trade union

struggles, believing as you do that trade unions exist to manage capitalism, not replace it? And you, liberal, do you not contradict yourself when you support affirmative actions programs whose immediate effect is the deprivation of individual liberty for those excluded by the program?" This is a powerful rejoinder which must be taken seriously.

It is true that theory cannot account in advance for every practical exigency, and therefore practice will sometimes diverge from the abstract path of theory. This means that a certain amount of pragmatic leeway must be granted to anyone who is seriously committed to a political goal but who feels compelled by practical exigencies to embrace a position which, if abstracted from the context, would entail a formal contradiction. So the postmodernist would be justified in saying that this problem is not unique to modern politics, indeed, has nothing specifically to do with modernism, but is simply a fact which follows from theory's having to abstract from empirical diversity. Postmodern thinking, however, in contrast to modern approaches, by proceeding from a strong recognition of contingency, is rather better positioned than totalizing theory to deal with this inescapable imbalance between the seamlessness of theory and the always variable contexts of practice. Indeed, postmodern critique rejected totalizing theory for precisely this reason- no theory can ever fully master empirical "reality," but instead each seeks to master

and reduce that "reality" in order to legitimate itself.

That said, a problem remains. Postmodern thinking
lacks something which is central to a Marxist or liberal
approach to this problem, namely a distinction between the
universal goals embraced by the theory, and contextual rules
guiding practice in given situations. This permits modern
approaches to solve the contradiction coherently as opposed to
simply admitting it and including it within Derrida's "Tower
of Babel" which simply makes a virtue of inconsistency.
There is, in effect, no contradiction in the Marxist or
liberal approach to the imbalance between theory and practice.
Let us consider an example in order to better illustrate the
problem postmodernity will face in this regard.

Take the situation of Marxism in relation to trade
union struggles. The common interest of the working class,
and, by extension, humanity, according to Marxism, is to
overthrow capitalism and release collectively produced wealth
for use by the associated producers for the satisfaction of
their material needs. However, experience teaches that such a
transformation is neither mechanical nor assured. Therefore,
contextual rules of political engagement need to be developed
if an efficacious struggle is to be constructed. This means
that, short of a period of social revolution, Marxists will
support struggles which do not share the ultimate goals of
Marxism, but which nevertheless contest the hegemony of the
profit-appropriating class. A strike for higher wages is a

sound example. By no stretch of the imagination does such an event entail "revolutionary consciousness" on the part of the strikers. It does, however, entail that they have become conscious of their role in the production of wealth. This result amounts to an opening in which arguments with more radical conclusions can be advanced and perhaps receive a hearing. The purported contradiction between a revolutionary program affirming reformist practice, is resolved through the mediation of the tactical principle- support struggles which expose, however minimally, the exploitative structure of capitalist modes of wealth appropriation. A strike over wages is such an event, since by definition it follows that workers have recognized their essential role in the creation of wealth and that they are not receiving full value for their efforts. The mediating principle is thus in accord both with the basic principle of Marxism and the principle governing the strike. It agrees with the first, since it follows coherently as a step in what is already judged to be a cumulative but uneven process (revolution). It accords with the latter since the support it lends to the strike is not at all cynical; to develop revolutionary consciousness requires that revolutionaries honestly support the partial struggles of workers. Only if that support is genuine and not merely instrumental will workers be likely to radicalize. Only if one removes the mediation does a contradiction exist. A similar explanation could be developed from the liberal

perspective, but hopefully the logic is sufficiently clear from the above to alleviate the necessity of a second example.

As postmodern thinking insists on the distinction between universal and contextual principles and rejects the former, the contradiction between what they say struggles are and what those in struggle say they are remains. There is nothing which can mediate the opposition; the contradiction between the postmodern conception of otherness and the self-definition of the other as essentially human remains. As there is no overall goal posited by postmodern theory in the way that Marxism is oriented by the goal of revolution, there can be no tactical principles which mediate the gap between the ultimate goal and the momentary requirements of struggle. The "voice of the other" must be accepted as is, or else translated into a more acceptable idiom by postmodern criticism itself. This translation, however, is just what postmodern criticism resists. The self-definition of the other must therefore be accepted and the practical support offered despite the fact that practices being supported are, according to postmodern principles themselves, the very modern practices criticized.

Well then, so be it, there is a contradiction between what postmodernism defines as the modes of struggle of the marginalized and what the major struggles of the marginalized in fact are. One can still choose to support the struggles, the contradiction notwithstanding. While not denying that

this is a possibility, the present argument cannot silently accept it.

If it is judged more important to support the struggles of the oppressed regardless of the ideas which orient the struggle, it follows that one must be silent and allow the other to speak. This is consistent with the radical agenda of postmodern politics, even if what the other says is not postmodern. Moreover, if this strategy (as opposed to the other strategy, criticizing the struggle) is adopted, it follows that whatever the other says must simply be accepted. This would include intolerant or reactionary turns in the struggle of the oppressed, indeed, why not the tolerance of the oppressor's claim to difference? But these are turns which reduce rather than engender diversity. Indeed, if the postmodern critique of modern theory is to be believed, every struggle examined in this chapter, rooted as they are in an essentialist notion of self-determination, may be expected to yield such negative results. Nevertheless, once criticism of the other has been given up in favour of openness, this openness must be radical, or else collapse back into a quasi-modernist form of thinking.

To demonstrate this predicament, let us once again return to the example of the Marxist. The Marxist is not obliged to support any struggle of the working class, but only those which can be reasonable expected to create further openings towards more fundamental challenges to capitalist

society. A strike over wages is one example. A strike to prevent immigrant workers from gaining employment, however, leads nowhere and is rooted in ideas which the profit-earners depend upon for the perpetuation of their hegemony. Such a struggle, therefore, must be rejected, not supported, by a consistent Marxian struggle for human emancipation. Thus, the Marxist is able to construct a coherent political argument which specifies those instances where support is necessary and where critique is necessary. Hence the notion of "principled support." Not every struggle is supported indifferently, but only those which accord with the overall struggle to emancipate humanity, which is itself developed historically.

Yet, if postmodernism makes the choice to remain open to all struggles of oppressed groups (as opposed to criticizing struggles from a postmodern perspective) no such resource of principled support (that is, support which is conditional upon a reasonable expectation that the struggle in question is challenging the real problem) exists. Recall that there were two choices imposed upon the postmodernist because of the radical character of the critique of modern political practice. Either struggles are criticized for adopting modernist methods (in which case the postmodern discourse is imposed in violation of postmodern openness to the other) or openness is practised radically. However, should the latter occur, the postmodernist who chose strategy two will have deprived him/herself of the grounds to criticize whatever

outcome ensues since support was not principled or

conditional, but rather unconditional- let the other speak.

Foucault's reading of the Iranian Revolution is a

particularly clear example of this problem. While the

revolution was undoubtedly a genuine struggle against American

imperialism, cultural destruction, and unbridled exploitation,

it split roughly along Marxist and Islamicist lines, with the

latter ultimately coming to power. While it may have been

reasonable to support the struggle against the Shah, such

support, from a Marxist or left-liberal perspective, by no

means entails supporting the outcome. Rather, that outcome

is, from this perspective, clearly a failure. What does

Foucault have to say?

> What struck me in Iran was that there is no struggle
> between the different elements. What gives it such
> beauty, and at the same time such gravity, is that
> there is only one confrontation: between the entire
> people and the state threatening it with its weapons
> and police. One didn't have to go to extremes, one
> found them all there at once, on the one side, the
> people, on the other side, the machine guns.[53]

As mentioned in the footnote, Foucault is quite simply wrong

---

[53]Foucault, "Iran, Spirit of a World Without Spirit", *Politics, Philosophy, Culture,* (New York: Routledge), 1990, p.216. The idea that the "people" spoke with only one voice is simply untrue. There was a profound split between revolutionary and Islamic forces, and the latter liquidated the former. An excellent history of the Iranian Revolution from a Marxist perspective is Assef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran,* (London: Zed Books), 1987. Bayat traces the growth of the *shuras,* workers councils in the tradition of radical working class democracy, their role in radicalizing the struggle against the Shah, and their ultimate destruction by Khomeini. It is quite clear from his account that the "people" did not speak with one voice, but with two, one of which was forcibly eliminated.

to assert that there was "no struggle" between the different
elements. However, this mistake need not be dwelt upon.
Instead, attention should be focused upon the manner in which
Foucault's interpretation illuminates the problem that holding
criticism of the "other' in abeyance entails.

In effect, the willingness to let the other speak
whatever language the other decides to speak forces Foucault
to be completely uncritical of what turned out to be a
terribly repressive regime. Failure to distinguish between
different elements (which one might reasonably expect someone
concerned with diverse struggles to do) leads to an uncritical
response to an intolerant theory and practice. In practice,
Foucault ends up supporting that which he himself tried to
expose as fictitious- seamless, unified accounts of socio-
historical processes. In an effort to avoid imposing a
"Western" criticism on an anti-imperialist struggle, Foucault
is ultimately silent on the most important question- was the
victory of Khomeini a victory for the Iranian people? It was
clearly a victory for a small clerical group, and this group
had its supporters. But simply accepting this result means
ignoring the crucial questions- was the support for Khomeini
uncritical support, or was it split between ideological
adherents and pragmatists who saw him simply as a vehicle to
topple the Shah who could later be disposed of? Whatever the
answers to these questions, the point is that Foucault,
accepting as he does the prima facie evidence as absolute,

cannot even pose them. As a result, rather than a rich analysis of all the forces at play in the Iranian revolution (which is what we do get when Foucault speaks of Europe) we get uncritical, undeveloped, "totalizing" judgment. What is more, we get acceptance of a terribly repressive regime, one which can by no stretch of the imagination be adequate to Foucault's final political goal- "the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects."[54] If Foucault cannot bring himself to criticize repressive regimes in the Third World, understand how they are the products of imperialism, then his analysis risks being interpreted as one which posits Third World people as so different form ourselves that they either do not want or are incapable of possessing autonomy, which is exactly the "Eurocentrism" his critical work hoped to avoid. Foucault may not be an explicit supporter of the Iranian regime, but because principled support is not possible given the deconstruction of universal principles, and the consequent impossibility of constructing coherent distinctions between what struggles to support and what struggles to criticize, uncritical support for whatever is thrown up in struggle follows.

It is evident from the above example how closely linked are the contradictions identified in 2.2 and 2.3. Both follow from the criticism of a universalist philosophy of history which has the power to identify progressive and reactionary

---

[54]Foucault, "What is Enlightenment", p. 43.

agents as well as progressive and reactionary goals. The
freedom lent theory and practice through the supersession of
such binary opposition is actually the "freedom of the void,"
to use Hegel's phrase from the *Philosophy of Right.* This
freedom amounts to a freedom from having to specify which
struggles advance the cause of pluralism and which impair it,
which follows if diversity itself is not to be an imposed
universal. It is a freedom from having to provide grounds for
support and freedom from accountability when struggles go
awry, if it can even determine what "awry" would mean here.
In practice it could lead to support for strategies which are
manifestly intolerant, but, because they are outside of the
scope of modernist normative thinking, are worthy
"transgressions." The incoherence of radical pluralism
identified in section 2.2, becomes a contradiction in section
2.3. Postmodern thought cannot *coherently* contribute to the
actual struggles of the oppressed without either undermining
its critique of essentialism or imposing its own voice on the
voice of the other.

The judgement above applies only in the case that
postmodern political thought lends support to anti-imperialist
struggles which root themselves in some version of a modernist
framework. There is postmodern intervention, but it
contradicts the principle that struggles should be plural,
decentered, and novel. Perhaps there is a way in which such
struggles could be criticized without the critic imposing

his/her perspective upon the group in question. This alternative has not yet received sufficient attention. Such an attempt to escape the charge laid above would be successful if a) forces could be identified within the movement of the oppressed which do not draw upon modernist idioms or b) anti-imperialist struggles which *appear* to draw upon modernist themes could be re-interpreted in such a fashion as to disclose that in fact the use of the modernist theme is somehow ironic, that is, employing modernist tools to deconstruct the modernist edifice. The requirements of the first point may be met by groups such as the mullahs in Iran. The danger of adopting this approach, however, is that such groups employ the idea of difference simply in order to shield themselves from criticism of their ultimately oppressive practices. In that case, postmodernism may inadvertently become, as Foucault's position on Iran did, a buttress rather than a criticism, of oppression . It would appear then, that the second option would be the most efficacious strategy to pursue.

A superb example of such an effort is brought forth in the work of the post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha mentioned above. Influenced by Derrida, Bhabha argues that identity does not have the same meaning in the colonial context that it has in the West. Therefore, one must attend to the peculiarities of the use of modernist doctrines in the colonial context. In particular, one must be sensitive to the

"poetics" of identity formation in a colonized space. Unlike

modernity, which sees empirical identity as determined by some

type of underlying capacity (reason, labour), reconstructed

post-colonial identities are fluid and do not proceed from any

underlying essential capacity. The radical difference of the

oppressed is expressed through the positive poetic

deconstruction of the racist representation of the colonised

by the coloniser. As Bhabha argues,

> What the poet calls the "secret art of invisibleness"
> creates a crisis in the representation of personhood
> and, at the critical moment, initiates the possibility
> of political subversion. Invisibility erases the self-
> presence of the "I" in terms of which traditional
> concepts of political agency and narrative mastery
> function. What *takes (the) place*, in Derrida's
> supplementary sense, is the disembodying evil eye,
> the subaltern instance, that works its revenge by
> circulating without being seen.[55]

In Derridean language, anti-colonial struggle is not a

struggle for presence, ie, is not a struggle for the positive

reconstruction of colonial society along Western lines.

Rather, the struggle is ironic. The Westerner makes the

colonized invisible, a person of no account. Apartheid would

be a paradigmatic example. Rather than merely opposing

identity to non-identity, the colonised person subverts the

coloniser by turning this negation into an affirmation. The

coloniser says, "You are invisible, you do not count." The

colonised responds, "You are right, I am invisible, you do not

see me, and you do not see me precisely because I am something

---

[55]Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity", *The Anatomy of Racism*,
p.198.

that you cannot see or control."

A concrete example of this might be the philosophy of "Negritude" popular in Africa during the 1960's. Senghor, a key exponent of this doctrine affirmed that there is an essential difference between African and European thinking: "J'ai souvent pensée que l'Indo-Européen et le Negro-Africain étaient située aux anti-podes, c'est-à-dire aux extremes de la raison discursive et de la raison intuitive..."[56] Aimé Cesaire, another key figure in the development of this strand of thinking writes, "Hooray for those who have never invented anything. For those who have never explored anything. For those who have never tamed anything."[57] In general, Negritude sought to "transform the supposed negative characteristics of African culture into virtues."[58] In the language of Bhabha, that which made the Africans invisible, of no historical consequence, is just what subverts the colonial claim. Positively expressed, subversion would proceed through the poetic "expression" of this difference which refused to reconceive of the colonised identity along western rationalist lines.

Far be it from me to deny that such poetic (re)constructions are essential for colonised people.

---

[56]Senghor, quoted in, Lansana Keita, "African Philosophy: The Search for a Method", *Praxis International*, 5:2, July, 1985, p.146.

[57]Cesaire, quoted in, *Ibid.*, p.147.

[58]*Ibid.*, p.146.

However, they do raise questions pertinent to the criticism of postmodernism at issue here. First, if poetic reconstructions of identity, even if they do not conform to "Western" models, are not motivated by a desire to bring to presence a difference between what the colonised person thinks of him/herself and what the coloniser thinks, then what does motivate them? Would such work not desire to demonstrate that there is an unexpressed surplus within the colonised person (and not merely within the linguistic "substance" through which the surplus is expressed) which he/she both has the capacity to express, and which the colonial context represses? And if this is so, then does not even the poetic subversion of colonialism manifest the key "Western" notion of subjecthood, that is, the capacity to reflect upon and change the given environment according to freely developed plans which stem from the subjects themselves? And if this is so, does this not show, as James and Fanon, for example, argued, that far from being "Eurocentric," the capacity to reflect upon and determine the environment is a universal human essence, realized differently but always and necessarily present when the work of freedom begins? That is, the capacity to play upon the "invisibility" of the colonized person in poetic re-constructions of the self must be seen as one way of actualizing the capacity for self-determination. If it is not, then it is not opposed to the forces of domination, it is a mere being-played-with by the uncontrollable forces of

language and culture, and therefore not in fact genuine
resistance.

If poetic reconstruction is not a way of actualizing
subjecthood, if it is, on the contrary, a simple giving of
oneself to the forces of language, then it will run up against
the problem which made radical pluralism incoherent. If the
goal is always to undermine identity rather than assert an
oppressed identity, then no production can ever be equated
with the true voice of the oppressed. On the contrary, all
positive creations will stand in need of deconstruction. That
is, it will turn out that the other has nothing to say,
indeed, cannot have anything to say, since the saying of
anything determinate and fixed is said to be the very grounds
for the existence of oppression. Rather than deconstructing
the forces of oppression, therefore, the oppressed are called
upon to deconstruct *themselves*.

What has become apparent is that the essential problem
underlying the postmodern position is that its desire to
listen to the other as the other would speak itself implies
emancipation from external forces which determine the other,
but criticizes the only foundation upon which emancipation can
be coherently conceived- a defining capacity for self-
determination, or subjecthood for short. The belief that the
other has something to say, and that this cannot be heard
today, calls forth the idea, manifestly criticized and
deconstructed, that human beings have the capacity to

determine themselves and the society in which they will exist. Nevertheless, it is just that idea which is held to be behind "the worst political systems...[of] the twentieth century,"[59] and for that reason deconstructed. In so deconstructing this idea, however, postmodernism deconstructs the very grounds upon which the other could speak *freely*. The feminist theorist Nancy Harstock asks a pertinent question in this regard. "Why is it," she questions, "that just at the moment when *so many of us...* begin to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?"[60] The general answer, which will be explicated in detail in the following chapter, is that there has been a pervasive failure on the part of postmodernism to think through the necessary grounds of the concept of oppression. Failure to see that oppression presupposes an essential difference between what people have the capacity to become, and what they are in fact made to be, the difference between subjecthood and subject-position, led to the belief that oppression could be overcome without this being viewed as the release of oppressed subjective capacities. The idea of freedom in postmodern philosophy is the maximization of subject positions. However, in reducing subjecthood to subject position, the idea of freedom becomes incoherent,

---

[59]Foucault, "What is Enlightenment", p. 47.

[60]Harstock, quoted in, Jana Sawicki, "Foucault, Feminism, and Questions of Identity", *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, p.312.

because all subject-positions are determined by dynamics which are beyond human control.

Let me stop at this point in order to sum up the results of the present chapter. The central problem examined here stems from the contradiction between the postmodern claim that universal history and essential subjecthood are exclusionary modes of thinking, and the actual use made of these very notions by different groups struggling against western imperialism. The claim that modernist theory and practice are oppressive is contradicted by the appeal made to these very modes by actual groups in struggle. This implies a contradiction in the postmodern argument as soon as it is operationalized in an evaluation of anti-imperialist struggles. Support for such struggles entails support for principles which are the antithesis of postmodern principles. Thus, the specific content of postmodern politics is negated in proportion to the support lent to anti-imperialist struggles which employ universal ideas of history and subjecthood.

On the other hand, if postmodern thinking resists such an outcome, and criticizes such struggles, it falls into a second contradiction. That is, it will contradict the claim that others must be allowed to speak in a voice of their own choosing. The middle path between these two contradictions, ie, attempting to isolate from within what appears to be a modernist discourse elements which are in fact radically

different, either returns postmodernity to the incoherence of radical pluralism, or it again runs up against the fact that when the oppressed speak they manifest a capacity for self-determination and a desire for a different world, one which corresponds to this capacity. That is, the purportedly radically different element, here poetic reconstruction, either repeats the incoherence characteristic of radical pluralism, or pre-supposes the capacity for self-determination which it purports to overcome.

The more fundamental question remains. What is it that explains the concern postmodern thinking shows towards oppressed and marginalized people and groups. If, as the postmodern analysis shows, all subjects are in fact discursively constructed subject- positions with no capacities proper to themselves, what is it that allows postmodern thinking to even conceive of an oppressed subject-position? At root, all positions are equally determined by forces beyond individual and collective control. At root, there is no basis upon which one could determine the difference between an oppressive and a free society. If there is no normative value to the idea of humanity then there is no normative weight to the notion of inhumanity either. In other words, there are no social systems which are fundamentally opposed to human freedom, because human freedom has no meaning if humans are mere positions determined by social dynamics. Human freedom, as we will argue in the next chapter, must mean more than the

unbounded proliferation of sites for the production of differences. The production of differences must be tied in a fundamental way to an essential capacity to produce those differences. While postmodernism affirms the production of differences, it cannot connect this to a capacity to self-consciously create differences without contradicting its critique of modern thought.

However, it is clear that there is genuine concern for the amelioration of social and political problems amongst the major postmodern thinkers. The critique of the modern idea of subjecthood is essentially political- this idea of the subject as the creator of its own reality, it is claimed, has structured and grounded the marginalization of non-conforming groups. However, as I will now argue, this critique only makes sense if human beings have a shared capacity to determine the social environment. Only if there is something proper to humans themselves which is repressed but not destroyed by society can "oppression" or "marginalization" be conceived of in the first place. In other words, by concerning themselves with questions of oppression and marginalization, postmodern thinkers presuppose subjecthood as that which demands that differences be manifested, even as their deconstruction argues that this capacity is a destructive fiction. Only if subjecthood is presupposed do the political concerns of postmodern thought make sense. Something that ought not to be oppressed or marginalized is

pre-supposed by those terms as critical epithets.

.

2.4: The Return of the Repressed

The work of Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida has supplied
the philosophical ammunition for a most decisive battle
against modern political discourse and practice. This is true
of whichever "progressive" strain of modern thought- liberal
or socialist, reformist of revolutionary- one chooses. For,
as has been shown, underlying all of these strategies is the
figure of the essential self-determining capacity of humanity.
Part One demonstrated that the deconstruction and decentering
of this figure is *the* critical aim of postmodern thought. The
postmodern criticism held that there was a necessary
relationship between essentialism and oppression. Postmodern
criticism argued that the notion of self-determining
subjecthood is constructed through exclusionary and oppressive
political practices and systems. As Gayatri Spivak elegantly
sums up postmodern thinking on the subject: "There is an
affinity between the subject of imperialism and the subject of
humanism."[61] Humanism is thus a discourse by Western man
about Western man for Western man.

---

[61]Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, p.202.

The preceding chapters have sought to disclose the contradictions which follow from an operationalization of the radical postmodern political agenda. To recapitulate, radical pluralism, when thought through to its radical end, deconstructs the identity which the oppressed themselves claim and obscures the basic dynamics responsible for oppression. Moreover, the valorization of difference as such runs counter to the universalist claims of actually oppressed groups, leaving postmodernism in a situation where it cannot advance its critique of universal thought without contradicting those it claims to support and its own prescription against imposing one discourse upon another. These two contradictions, while important, are not ultimate. In analyzing them, the argument has been forced to repeatedly hold in abeyance the fundamental question which postmodernity must face: If the subject is nothing but the construct of discourse, how can one conceive of oppression? What exactly is oppressed, if not some essential capacity which seeks to be otherwise?

Thus we have disclosed a continued wavering in the postmodern argument between a claim that those marginalized by modern thought are other than what they are made to be, support for efforts through which the marginalized criticize and struggle against the status quo, and a thoroughgoing denial that humans have the capacity to determine themselves and their society. The affirmation of the struggles of marginalized groups calls out for solid grounding in a

universal human essence. This essence, as was indicated in chapter 2.3 is just the capacity to transform circumstances judged inadequate to the real desires and possibilities of people. As universal, this essence points towards a society where all people are able to explore and realize their potential. As such, it cannot be restricted to some groups only on the basis of particular social, cultural, or economic distinctions. It aims at a society where these are overcome, not so that humanity becomes a generic mass, but so that differences can be freely manifested, that is, where the differences that are manifested do not require the elimination of other differences as a pre-condition of their manifestation.

But postmodern criticism distinguished itself as criticism by deconstructing this essence. In so doing, however, it also deprives the oppressed of what they themselves claim when they fight back against the source of their oppression. What is more, it transforms all struggles which seek to change reality according to self-given plans into delusional battles. That is, because subjecthood has been reduced to discursively constituted subject-position, and this discursive constitution is said to be both necessary and unchangeable, all struggles which claim to struggle for freedom, ie, the overcoming of external, uncontrollable forces constituting the subject, misunderstand the "nature of humanity." Consistently interpreted, our fate is to be

determined, never determining.

As this problem is explored in the final chapter, the conclusion that postmodern political criticism is at root self-confuting will force itself upon us. By siding with the oppressed against the oppressors postmodern thinking must presuppose the essential capacity for self-determination as essential even though postmodern criticism gains its distinctiveness by denying that this capacity for self-determination is a real, general, human capacity. If the radical claim of postmodernism is true, that subjecthood is a "function" of language and thus not foundational, then it loses all positive political value. If, on the other hand, postmodernism is to aid in the realization of the values which it espouses, it must presuppose this capacity.

As this argument is the cornerstone of this critique of postmodernism, it will prove useful to once again briefly recapitulate the conclusions of the postmodern deconstruction of subjecthood. Recall, then, that for Foucault, the subject was a "function ceaselessly modified," that for Lyotard the subject "free humanity" quite simply, "does not exist" and that the self is a post "through which various types of messages pass," while for Derrida, "even in so-called creation the subject is a function of language," one, moreover, "which is not what it says itself to be." Ernesto Laclau and Chantale Mouffe articulate a sterling resume of this critique in the following passage:

> Whenever we use the category "subject" in this text,
> we will do so in the sense of "subject-position"
> within a discursive structure. Subjects, therefore,
> cannot be the origin of social relations- not even
> in the limited sense of beings *endowed with powers
> that render experience possible* [my emphasis]- as
> all experience depends upon precise discursive
> conditions.[62]

The implication is clear- discursive structures imbued with

power situate and determine subjects. There is no dialectical

interweaving of subject and structure. Subjects, poor

creatures, do not even have powers that render experience

possible.

Laclau and Mouffe, drawing their inspiration from

Foucault and Derrida, repeat, nonetheless, the defining

position of structuralism. Indeed, the postmodern critique of

subjecthood generally draws much of its focus from

structuralism's emphasis on the determining character of

social dynamics vis-a-vis subjects within society. The basic

problems of this position are well-known, and summed up

clearly by Kate Soper:

> ...if the experience of individual men and women
> is viewed as unessential to their existence then the
> category of "concrete individual" ceases to have any
> reference to *human* beings; within the confines of such
> a theory, we can no longer speak of individuals as
> dominated by social structures or in need of
> liberation.[63]

The present chapter will be concerned with showing how this

criticism essentially applies to the "poststructuralist"

---

[62]Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* p.115.

[63]Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism,* p.106.

arguments analyzed in Part One.

While postmodern thinking draws upon the structuralist assault on the subject, it rejects the scientistic and mechanical nature of structuralist historiography. Rather than being a process in which general social structures unfold, break down, and regenerate, postmodern thinking, as has been illustrated, conceives of history as a plural, open-ended process of generation. Indeed, the key to postmodern politics lies in its insistence upon the indeterminacy of the future. The problem with modern accounts of history is that they attempt to control what is essentially a chaotic indeterminacy. The ground for this strategy of control is the concept of humanity as essentially rationally self-determining. If this concept can be overthrown then history will be restored to its fullness and open-endedness. The question remains, however, of whether or not this claim can retain any critical-political sense in the absence of foundations within the subject. If not, then postmodernism too will not be able to speak meaningfully of marginalization, domination, or oppression. That this is in fact the case will become evident if some consideration is given to the nature of oppression, and to the conceptual requirements necessary to even conceive of it. These requirements, I will argue, are lacking in radical postmodern thought. Let us now explore why this is the case. As the notion of "the marginal" is often employed in postmodern discourse, let us begin with a

reflection upon what it is to be marginalized.

The margin of a page divides the page into the space where the body of the work is composed, and the space where comments, after-thoughts, and notes for revision are jotted down. Oft-times the Muse inspires after the work has been completed, and thus the margin can contain more interesting insights than the draft of the work contained by the standard space for composition. So too with the social margins, especially according to postmodern thought. The outsiders, those on the wrong side of the thin red line, often contain more interesting, valuable, and critical insights than those "written" in society's official spaces.

Thus, to be marginalized means, first of all, that someone or some group is "ruled out" by "normal" society. There are two political possibilities provoked by marginalization. The first possibility is that the marginalization is self-imposed. The atheist marginalizes him/herself from organized religion. The Beats marginalized themselves from American society in the 1950's. The Dadaists turned their backs on European "civilization" around the period of the First World War. In such cases, because these groups rule themselves out, there is no political problem. Marginalization does not become domination or oppression.

The second possibility is one where "official" society actively structures the marginalization of a group which it deems unfit for participation in the life of civil society.

Rather than embracing their exclusion, groups so treated resist. They demand social changes which will end the marginalization and thus allow the group's members to articulate their identity freely. Workers, women, gays and lesbians, Natives and African Canadians, when they enter into struggle, demand increased access to the resources necessary-money, political representation and power, information, public institutions (day care, schools, etc.) through which they can concretely express, develop, and extend themselves. It is this type of marginalization and these types of struggles which are of primary interest here. In particular, one needs to ask what are the fundamental conditions of possibility for the emergence of resistance.

Jana Sawicki offers an apparently sound starting point from which to address this question. She argues that "oppression must be experienced before it can be resisted.[64]" Thus, the question becomes, "what are the conditions for the possible experience of oppression?" An example may prove a useful aid to answering this question. Let us consider the situation of a woman battling against the Catholic Church for entrance into the priesthood. On first glance there seem to be two crucial elements involved. One, the person experiences her specific difference as a woman, a "dominated subject-position" if you like, as a barrier to inclusion. Second, she

[64]Sawicki, "Foucault and Feminism", p. 294.

experiences the official doctrine of the Catholic Church, the authoritative subject-position. So far everything can be accounted for by postmodern analysis. The conflict could be conceptualized as a conflict between the discursively constructed position of women and the discursively constructed sexism of the Catholic Church. Neither subject-position, however, contains anything which would lead to resistance. A dominated position is dominated because it is constructed by the dominant position in the service of the dominant position. Now, if people are simply functions of their positions, then those in dominated positions would be identical to how they are constructed by the dominant position. Someone within such a position, therefore, would experience only the domination. There would be nothing beyond the position itself. If there is to be struggle *against* this position, there must be a ground for this struggle which is not included in the discursively constructed dominated position. But what is this ground? It cannot lie within the dominated position, *for the* reasons cited above. It cannot, for postmodernism, lie outside of the oppressed position, for that would once again imply something still over them. Thus, if the struggle is to be a struggle of, by, and for those on the margins, then this ground must lie within those who are in fact on the margins.

If one resists, one must not only experience oneself as dominated, one must also experience this domination as wrong. This would not be possible if people were "functions" of the

positions in which they exist. What then explains the wrong? It must be that added to the experience of exclusion is the experience of some potential to do that which you are excluded from doing. Oppression is wrong because it denies people the capacity to express what they in fact are truly capable of. The wrong stems from the fact that the oppressive construction of the oppressed lies about the "nature" of those who are oppressed. It is not true, for example, that the slaves of San Domingo were incapable of ruling themselves. That justification of slavery was wrong, therefore, because it denied the truth of the oppressed- that they were every bit as capable of ruling themselves as the Europeans.

This capacity on the part of the oppressed is not, however, just another discourse. To so interpret this struggle is to deny, once again, the truth of the oppressed which the oppressed themselves manifest when they enter into struggle. No matter how minute such struggles are, they always, and must, assert against the oppressor that which the oppressor denies. The experience of exclusion as wrongful therefore emerges from a consciousness of a contradiction between what the official line says the oppressed are capable of doing and what the oppressed themselves reveal themselves to be capable of doing.

In order to mount resistance to a situation deemed wrong therefore, one must not only experience the situation as wrong, that is, against one's human capacity for self-

determination, one must also really possess this capacity to
fight against the situation. All this entails far more than a
position within a discourse external to oneself. One is
reminded here of Fanon's comment to the effect that the Native
begins to resist at the very moment that he or she recognizes
their humanity. While external political discourses (Marxism,
human rights, etc) may be essential in structuring a fight-
back, before this can happen the people who will wage the
struggle must recognize an identity between what the
oppositional discourse says they are and can do and what they
themselves know they are and can do. One must understand
oneself as a subject, in the sense given by the concept of
subjecthood as the capacity for self-determination.[65]
Without consciousness of this capacity and the corresponding
will to realize it in action, resistance would not arise.
People would simply accept the situation.

However, if in struggling against oppressive situations
people draw upon their capacity for self-determination, then
the struggle in question is not just a struggle of one
particular group against another particular group. That is, a
struggle against oppression is not just a struggle to secure
the identity of the particular group. It is, rather, a moment

---

[65]This applies even to the case where successful resistance is
hopeless. The key to understanding resistance is not in the end,
but in the fact of resistance itself. The martyrs of the Warsaw
Ghetto, for example, knew they could not win. They also knew that
they were not inert matter to be trampled upon- they were living
agents capable of fighting back; their ultimate defeat is
irrelevant to the dignity of the struggle.

in the struggle for the freedom of all human beings impelled by the underlying interest in self-determination they all share. We have stated throughout that the capacity for self-determination is not a capacity which can be restricted to specific groups of human beings. That strategy is the strategy of oppressive thinking which legitimatizes oppression by claiming that only some humans (whites, men, etc) are capable of ruling themselves and determining their own lives. If struggles against oppression are not to repeat this sectarian logic then they must go beyond particularity towards a universal basis. That is, they must recognize that the particular identity they struggle for is in fact one manifestation of the universal capacity for self-determination. In order to clarify this relationship, it is important to determine the precise meaning of the concept of essence in this regard.

The first point which needs to be established is that essence here does not denote a transcendent, ideal, ahistorical substance. Like humanity itself, the concept of essence has a history. This history is one in which the transcendent character of essence is progressively historicized. The rejection of a transcendent status for the concept of essence occurs very early in the history of philosophy in Aristotle's criticism of the Platonic theory of Forms. Rather than a static model, Aristotle conceived of essence as the active principle guiding the development of

real things. His teleological concept of the development of
substance adds to Plato's notion the ideas of process and
activity. Essence is not a timeless form, it is the highest
possibility of things which must work itself out in reality.
While a great step forward, Aristotle's notion of essence is
marred by his teleology. Because his understanding of
development is teleological, the manifestation of essence
proceeds according to metaphysical necessity. That is, the
essence *must* work itself out to its completion, for it is of
the nature of essence to fulfil itself in reality.

A historical concept of essence, while maintaining the
crucial idea that essence is an active force whose realization
would represent the fulfilment of a goal, must deprive essence
of metaphysical necessity. That is, if essence is to change
from being a potential whose fulfilment is necessary by
definition to a tool of social criticism, it must leave behind
teleology and become historical. Essence still denotes the
highest potential of that of which it is the essence, but the
fulfilment of this goal is no longer necessary. It depends
upon the self-activity of those who are characterized by the
essence. Herbert Marcuse understands the meaning of essence
as the grounds of social criticism better than anyone else in
the history of twentieth century philosophy. As he argues:

> When the materialist dialectic as social theory
> confronts the opposition of essence and appearance,
> the concern for man which governs it gives the critical
> motif in the theory of essence a new sharpness. The
> tension between potentiality and actuality, between
> what men and things could be and what they are in fact,

is one of the dynamic focal points of this theory of
society. It sees therein not a transcendental
structure of Being or an immutable ontological
difference, but a historical relationship which can be
transformed in this life by real men...[66]

In becoming historical, the concept of essence leaves its

metaphysical transcendence and becomes a human capacity to

reconfigure the given according to self-chosen plans. While

this capacity must operate under given historical conditions,

it is not reducible to them. Only if this capacity pertains

to human beings as such, not immutably but historically, as

the source from which historical events emerge and which

develops along with the events, can it be a tool of social

criticism.

As such a tool, the notion of human essence as self-

determination identifies the objective barriers standing in

the way of positive freedom. If the essence of human beings

is self-determination, then, as a tool of critique, it

identifies the changes necessary for that essence to be

realized. Freedom equals the socio-historical realization of

what begins as a natural capacity. Humans are free when they

can exercise this capacity as they see fit, as real

individuals in real societies. As such, critique rooted in

this notion of essence must take account of the real

differences operative in different societies in its critical

evaluation of those societies. The point is not to reduce the

---

[66]Herbert Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence", *Negations: Essays
in Critical Theory,* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1968, p.69.

human to a generic standard, but to identify what stands in the way of free self-creation for all people.

This transformative capacity operating in different environments is what creates cultural differences, but it cannot be reduced to these differences themselves. Yet, ironically, this reduction is just what postmodernism entails in its drive to bring the presentation of differences to the very heart of critical politics. Rather than a project to overcome reductionism and enable the free articulation of social and cultural differences, postmodernism, thought through consistently, implies that humans are merely the products of their environment.

While this is true, it remains of the utmost importance to this argument to determine why empirical identity depends upon the essential capacity of self-determination. The argument advanced here against postmodernism claims that because postmodern thought deconstructs the notion of human essence, it simultaneously deconstructs the oppressed which it nevertheless hopes to support. To deny that humans are distinguished by their capacity to deliberately alter circumstances, to insist, on the contrary, that humans are material always already altered by circumstances, is to undercut the distinction between oppressed and oppressor. All are equally under the sway of language. It is language that determines our horizons and projects. Be that as it may, the need for a universal human essence as the ground of struggles

waged in the name of a particular empirical identity has not been fully justified.

In the foregoing argument, the difference marked out was a difference between what an oppressed group understood itself to be "essentially" and what oppressive society forced it to be "in existence." Phrasing it thus leaves open the possibility that "essence" here means nothing more than the empirical identity of the group. While this identity obviously has a profound role to play in any act of resistance, it is not the essence of the group according to this argument against postmodernism.

If empirical identity and essence are conflated, then the argument against postmodern thought would reproduce the first problem of postmodernism. That is, it would lack grounds to distinguish between "progressive" and "reactionary" differences and struggles. All distinctions would be equal and struggles would devolve into an unending cycle of the positing and deconstructing of given identities. There would be no meaningful distinction between such a conclusion and the conclusion of postmodern analysis, namely, that identities are subject-positions determined by the play of cultural forces. Thus, if the critique of postmodern thought is to have any meaningful purchase, it must disclose why the notion of a universal human essence is necessary for the existence of discrete identities.

A beginning to the argument may be made by borrowing a

turn of phrase from Marx. People can define themselves as African-Canadians, lesbians, or anything else they like, but in each case they display a capacity for self-determination which is distinct from the means, language etc., through which it is *expressed.*

In general, humans are distinct as a species because we display this capacity to determine ourselves and to alter reality according to these self-given concepts. In the process of the transformation of external reality we also, and fundamentally, transform ourselves. That is the meaning of Marx's claim in the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach that, "the essence of man is no abstraction indwelling in each separate individual, in its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."[67] While this claim was interpreted by Althusser to mean that Marx had abandoned his earlier humanism, the truth is the opposite. What this claim means is that humanity is what it makes itself to be. Just as the essence of man is "no abstraction," neither is "the ensemble of social relations." These too are the product of human historical activity. The truth of this interpretation can be established by quoting the Third Thesis. Marx writes, "[t]he materialist doctrine about changed circumstances... forgets that *circumstances are changed by men* [my emphasis]... The

---

[67]Marx, quoted in Wal Suchting, "Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach:* Notes Towards an Commentary and a New Translation", *Issues in Marxist Philosophy, Vol.2, Materialism,* Mepham and Ruben, eds., (New Jersey: Humanities Press), 1979, p.18.

coincidence of changed circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice.*"[68] Thus, the human essence is not to be equated with any static predicate, "rationality," goodness" and so forth, but rather with the active capacity to change our environment and ourselves according to our own projects and ideas. As Marcuse understood, this is not a reduction of humanity to a single, exclusive category, it is in fact a release of humanity from all one-sided, ahistorical categorizations.

Thus, the postmodern criticism of essentialism, that it depends for its existence upon the exclusion of practices and people who have historically been excluded by western society, is invalid. This criticism would be valid *if* the necessary result of the essentialist argument is the elimination of differences. That is, if essentialism seeks to eliminate differences by subsuming them under an abstraction ("human's are essentially self-interested," for example) then postmodern thought is correct- this is a dangerous misunderstanding of human being. However, the function of such an essence in critical thinking is not to reduce humanity to an undifferentiated mass, but rather to understand how differences come about and, more importantly, to adjudicate the conflicts which inevitably arise *over* differences. Let us re-examine the argument with which this chapter opened in

---

[68]*Ibid.,* p.12.

light of this abstract characterization of the essence of human being.

Considered in general, a struggle waged in the name of a specific difference is a conflict caused by the imposition of a system upon a group by an external authority which does not take into account the identity, capacities, and goals of the group upon which system is imposed. If this imposition is resisted, not only does the group in question assert its identity against the external authority's definition, it also asserts a general capacity to determine its own conditions of existence. However, this capacity cannot be restricted to certain groups only. To do so is to fall into an imperialist mode of thought. Such thinking pre-supposes that only certain sections of humanity have the capacity to rule themselves. The history, not only of anti-imperialist struggles, but also the women's movement, the labour movement, the struggles of minorities in the West, has proven imperialist thinking fallacious. Each of these struggles has proven that the groups formerly judged inadequate to the task of self-determination are, in fact, adequate to that task. That is, they have proven themselves human in the sense in which Fanon employed the term- capable of resistance and self-rule.

Thus, postmodern thought, which has set itself the task of undermining imperialist modes of thinking cannot, in truth, do without this ontological ground, namely, that human beings are, by their nature as human, defined by their capacity for

self-determination. If, as postmodernity believes, differences should be multiplied, then this can only gain political value if it *expresses* this idea that what is in fact manifested in a struggle against exclusion is the universal capacity for self-determination. If this capacity were not universal, then either postmodernism's affirmation of difference is politically meaningless (difference is just the principle of social relations and not a desirable state of affairs which must be actively created) or it will have to claim, in a Nietzschean vein, that not everyone is fit for the life of difference.

For the most part, and to its lasting credit, such elitism is not openly affirmed in the postmodern argument as it has been interpreted here. However, if domination is resisted, then there must be, if our argument is valid, a universal criterion from which to make the judgement the situation so resisted is wrong. If the criterion is not universal, then it does not determine an exclusion as wrong, but only describes an empirical struggle between different groups neither of which can claim normative legitimacy for their struggle. A universal criterion, on the other hand, marks a difference between wrongfully and rightfully excluded differences. That criterion states that exclusion is wrong when a group which has the capacity for self-determination is excluded by a more powerful group, typically as a means for entrenching the power of the dominant group.

As chapter 2.2 argued, such a criterion is lacking from the radical postmodern position. Nevertheless, one would hope that pluralist thinking would not affirm groups who are opposed to pluralism, yet it lacks grounds for coherently doing so. If, on the other hand, one operates from a universalist platform, one only need support struggles whose goal is the removal of barriers to self-determination, which entails struggles against groups whose project is to deny self-determination.

Thus, operating from the foundation of a capacity for self-determination, one is not obliged to listen to white supremacists, for example. The discourse of white supremacists denies that self-determination is a universal human capacity in favour of white particularity. It thus rules itself out of consideration as a genuine struggle against oppression. It is "inhuman" since it denies what history shows to be the case- other races, given the opportunity, or better, forcibly creating that opportunity for themselves, by defeating the purported "master race," are as capable of ruling themselves as the white race.

A critical, essentialist-humanist position concerns itself with identifying the general barriers to human self-determination and works to overcome these. To the extent that people gain more equal access to resources and democratic modes of political participation to that extent they become free to create themselves according to their specific

character. However, if such a universal ground is appealed to, the group who makes the appeal imposes an obligation upon itself to work for the common good (since the ground upon which the struggle takes place is a collective, historically developed ground) rather than its own particular good to the exclusion of everyone else. That is, as we saw in chapter 2.3, groups in struggle for the freedom to determine themselves identify with other groups in struggle and do not simply speak in their own name but in the name of human freedom. In this way a shared history of struggle is forged which links the oppressed and the exploited. Through these real links the essence of humanity is historically developed and expressed. Given "ensembles of social relations" are challenged on the basis that they do not permit the full self-realization of all the members of that society. Each specific struggle, if it is successful, overcomes another limit standing in the way of a universal, positively free society characterized not by homogeneity, but the free development of specific differences, a society where, "the free development of each is the pre-condition for the free development of all."[69] In this manner an essentialist understanding of humanity is anything but reductionist. It is, on the contrary, the only coherent means of developing a pluralist society which does not undermine its own foundations.

---

[69]Marx, *The Communist Manifesto,* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1986, p.54.

Now it is true, of course, that the articulation of differences will have to involve the use of language. However, if language, or, more generally, cultural dynamics, are the cause of difference, then difference has no political or ethical value; it is no longer something the manifestation of which can be identified as of essential importance to the people who manifest the difference. If difference exists just because society is divided into different domains, and proliferates just because the meaning-generating capacity of language is by definition unbounded, then postmodern thought is nothing more than a description of a state of affairs. Manifestation and exclusion would be analogous to an irresistible natural cycle. In claiming "x' I exclude "y" and so on *ad infinitum.* Since we must speak, and in speaking affirm one thing rather than another, there would be no escaping domination and exclusion. At root, domination would have nothing to do with political systems, it would simply be a defining feature of our existence, more of an existential horizon than a political problem. While there would still be room for a vigilant scrutiny of our words, there could be no question of ever escaping the cycle of exclusion, no question, therefore, of ever reaching the non-exclusionary form of thought postmodernism invokes. Our relationship to such a cycle of exclusion would be analogous to our relationship to our natural death. Death becomes a problem only when it occurs unnaturally as the result of alterable social causes-

poverty, disease, state-sponsored murder- for example.
Natural death is an existential horizon of human finitude,
important, but not a relevant ethical or political problem.

The same can be said for language. If its exclusions
and categorizations become political and ethical problems, it
is only because there is a human reality which these
exclusions distort and constrain. That is, if in applying a
category to a group I do, in Derrida's words, a "violence" to
that group, this can only be because the category which I have
applied to them does not in fact grasp the full reality of
that group. If such categorization is violent, it is because
it actively excludes the *real* nature of the group in question.
If language and culture determine us absolutely, that is, if
we are but "functions" of language and culture, even when we
think we are engaged in the act of creation, then there is no
"real" nature against which we can determine whether certain
categorizations are appropriate or not. In that case, we could
not talk about categorization as violent either, since we
could never determine whether we have in fact excluded
something which should be included. In that case, the
ethical-political concerns of postmodernism become impossible
to explain.

It is the case that language was employed as the key
process which undermined the capacity for rational self-
determination according to the postmodern account examined in
Part One. As the subject could not be without expressing this

being, and this expression had to go through the "detour" of language, the subject found itself embroiled in dynamics over which it had no control. Hence the conclusion that the subject is a function of language. This conclusion, however, misunderstands the nature of subjecthood. Subjecthood, as we have seen, is not a static, ahistorical, exclusive abstraction, it is the capacity for self-determination of humanity which enables humanity to resist all situations where we are reduced to mere functions or objects of external powers. As we are about to see, even maximizing indeterminacy, if it is thought of as an oppositional strategy to oppressive systems, presupposes the capacity for self-determination denied by postmodern analysis.

That this is true can be determined from a reading of the major thinkers who have concerned us in this work. In each case one finds that crucial elements of the modernist notion of subjecthood re-enter their work. If each was himself forced by the logic of his argument to qualify the critique of subjecthood, and the entire edifice of postmodern criticism was "based" upon the critique of subjecthood, then the return of this notion proves more surely than any formal argument on my part that subjecthood is an unsurpassable foundation for critical thinking with "progressive" aims. This claim must now be textually substantiated.

Foucault is the obvious starting-point since, as has been touched upon throughout this investigation, he explicitly

revives the concept of the autonomous subject in his later
writings. He does so, however, without ever explicitly
renouncing the earlier phases of his work in which subjecthood
was decentered. Thus, the question which must be posed here
is: can the revival of the subject be squared with the
decentering of the subject, or are the two strategies mutually
exclusive?

One of the more sustained attempts at squaring both
sides of Foucault's work is a recent text by Deborah Cook.
Cook contends that Foucault's rehabilitation of the subject
does not contradict his archaeological-genealogical work, but
rather completes it. Like Nancy Fraser, Charles Taylor,
Michael Walzer and Habermas, Cook begins from the claim that
the early work was hampered by the absence of a foundation for
free ethical practice which Foucault implicitly deploys
against contemporary systems of the circulation of power. The
last works, it is argued, thus fill in a gap, rather than
contradict, the positions of the early Foucault. Cook writes:

> ...with his idea of *rapport-à-soi* Foucault has found
> a way out of the impasse in which he had floundered
> when he claimed that power and knowledge were in no
> one's hands. His notion of the self would allow him to
> attribute historical events to moral agents- that is,
> to give power back to subjects.[70]

This is quite true, the ethically self-constituting agent
would fill the early lacuna. Unfortunately, it could only do
at the cost of negating every novel insight which archaeology

---

[70]Cook, *The Subject Finds a Voice*, p.131.

and genealogy hoped to offer on the subjects of power and human action. In returning to a notion of ethical agency the central thesis of the analysis of power- that power is an impersonal, diverse, circulation of determining forces- is put into question.

Perhaps, however, the subject which re-enters Foucault's work is not the subject decentered by his earlier efforts. If that were the case, this figure would not irredeemably destroy his earlier analyses. Fraser, playing on the affinity between Foucault and Nietzsche, attempts to justify just such a claim:

> For Foucault and for Nietzsche, the self-directed activities by means of which we control our passions are ordered to certain ends which count as historically conditioned truths about the self... In our ethical activities we create ourselves as subjects.[71]

Even if one grants to this subject the most wild and unbounded potential for autonomous ethical self-creation, even if we conceive of it, as Foucault does, as, "the creation of ourselves as a work of art,"[72] it is clear that the notion remains rooted in the general form of subjecthood so trenchantly criticized by Foucault. Howsoever the creation of ourselves be conceived, it must be rooted in a capacity to create, otherwise we would not be creating ourselves, but rather we would be created. Either humans have an essential

---

[71]*Ibid.*, p.133.

[72]Foucualt, "On the Genealogy of Ethics", *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, p.237.

capacity to create themselves or they do not. Foucault at one

point claimed they did not, in his later works he clearly

believed they did.

In order to see just how little Foucault's ultimate

position differs from the modern notion of subjecthood one

need only compare the last quotation with this comment of

Marx:

> This mode of production [ie, the historically
> conditioned basis of practice [which is analogous to
> the "historically conditioned truths" about the self
> which Cook mentioned] ... is a definite form of
> activity of these individuals, a definite form of
> expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their
> part. As individuals express their life, so they
> are.[73]

Thus, according to Marx, human action results from the

interplay between the historical context in which people exist

(the cumulative results of past action) and their own specific

abilities. This is not different from what Foucault

ultimately concluded, ie, that people create themselves under

historically given conditions. For Marx, the contradictions

of class society will be resisted when workers become

conscious of the fact that their own products control them,

that is, when they become conscious of their determining role

in history. These contradictions will be overcome if and only

if the essential self-determining capacity of humans in

realized socially in a democratic and egalitarian society. It

is instructive to compare this with what Cook has to say about

---

[73]Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, (Moscow: Progress
Publishers), 1976, p.37.

resistance as conceived of by Foucault.

Cook contends that the rehabilitated subject in Foucault's work provides the grounds for resistance and emancipation. She writes:

> The idea that we create ourselves in our ethical
> life is of paramount importance for Foucault's work.
> It is one which allows Foucault not only to make
> claims about the role of subjects in history, but *also*
> about resistance and the prospect of emancipation
> from disciplinary society.[74]

If the subject is what allows Foucault to make claims about resistance, then the entirety of his genealogical work, which did away with the subject, is politically incoherent, as indeed it has been argued to be. If the subject is necessary for resistance, then all the specifically postmodern elements of Foucault's work, in so far as these have a political function, are also incoherent. Foucault's own trajectory proves the central positive argument of the present work—subjecthood is necessary for coherent critical politics which aim to ameliorate the conditions of the dominated and oppressed.

The effects of this incoherence run through Foucault's entire corpus. There is a constant oscillation between the decentering of subjecthood and political positions which presuppose that very capacity. This is the case even in the earliest, most "transgressive" works which concerned the manner in which rationality marginalized the "insane." Take

---

[74]Cook, *The Subject Finds a Voice*, p.132.

for example the following interpretation of Goya's, *The Madhouse:*

> The man in the tricorne is not mad because he has stuck
> an old hat upon his nakedness, but within this madman
> in a hat rise- by the inarticulate power of his
> muscular body, of his savage and marvellously
> unconstricted youth- a human presence already
> liberated and somehow free since the beginning of time,
> by his birth right.[75]

The content of this freedom may be distinct form the social structures envisioned by Hegel or Marx or Mill (which were each distinct) as expressive of freedom, but the fundamental difference between dominating power and capacity for self-determination is present. The madman is free because the "human presence" is manifest. It is this *human* presence which is "liberated and somehow free." Moreover, this presence is not specific to this individual, since the presence "has existed from the beginning of time" while this person clearly has not. The essential role of that which is specific to humanity is thus clearly presupposed by the notion of freedom invoked here, regardless of the fact that this is manifested by a "madman" rather than a philosopher, a worker, or a cultivated liberal citizen.

The presupposition of a capacity for self-determination is even more evident in Foucault's magisterial history of the prison, *Discipline and Punish.* In a work which, as we have seen, argued that disciplinary society manufactures normalized

---

[75]Foucault, *Madness and Civilization,* (New York: Vintage Books), 1988, p.279.

beings down to their very core, Foucault nevertheless

concludes with a call to arms:

> In this central and centralized humanity, the effect
> and instrument of complex power relations, bodies and
> forces subjected by the multiple mechanisms of
> 'incarceration,'objects for discourses that are
> themselves elements for this strategy, we must hear the
> distant roar of battle.[76]

This is a splendid conclusion. However, the argument of the

text concluded that there was nothing within the individual

which could resist power, power was omnipotent and

omnipresent. If that is the case, then there is no one

capable of waging the battle which Foucault hopes to incite.

Recall that even in the period where he was developing

his notion of the subject, Foucault still maintained that he

was suspicious of the notion of liberation because, "there is

the danger that it will refer back to the idea that there does

exists a human nature or human foundation."[77] If, however,

this foundation is lacking then the ontological basis for

resistance is undermined. Foucault himself realized this,

judging from the fact the he himself restored a "human

foundation" for his ethical and political concerns. In so

doing, however, he in fact brings forth that which was

presupposed by his earlier political positions, positions

which, nevertheless, hoped to do without the foundation which

they required. He solves the problem, but his work thus

---

[76]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p.308.

[77]Foucault, *The Final Foucault*, p.2.

becomes a variation on the theme of self-determination, not a radical transgression of it.

The strongest evidence of this is provided in one of Foucault's last interviews. We have seen how critical disengagement from the apparatus of power is the crucial step in becoming an autonomous individual. The source of this disengagement is thought. Foucault defines thought as follows:

> Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning; rather it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the notion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.[78]

This is a truly astounding comment from someone who wrote, in 1977, that the essential problem of philosophy in the last 150 years is, "comment a n'etre plus hegelienne."[79] For the definition of thought given above is exactly that which Hegel gives in the Encyclopedia *Logic*. There Hegel writes, that, "...man is not content with a bare acquaintance, or with the fact as it appears to the senses, he would like to get behind the surface, to know what it is, and to comprehend it. This leads him to reflect."[80] The link which ties Foucault to

---

[78]Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations," in, *The Foucault Reader,* p.388.

[79]Foucault, "La grand colere des faits," p.84.

[80]G.W.F. Hegel, *Logic*, Wallace, trans., (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1972, p.42.

Hegel is that thought is freedom in relation to the object of thought. Thought is, in other words, negative, it dissolves the hard and fast divisions of the world through reflection, and in this way prepares the ground for conscious changes. Thus, Foucault clearly returns to a position where self-conscious subjects are the ground for political agency and positive change.

The same trajectory of growing antipathy towards and ultimate restoration of elements of subjecthood is followed by Lyotard. Lyotard was perhaps the most trenchant critic of the notion of subjecthood. His final works abandon even the linguistic reduction of subjecthood to subject-position in favour of a physicalist reduction of society to a disentropic evolutionary process. Alongside of this reduction, however, there is a simultaneous rehabilitation of certain inner capacities specific to human beings. These inner capacities serve as our only refuge from the inevitable dynamics of development. Before examining this ultimate return of a crucial aspect of subjecthood, however, it is essential to illustrate how this element was presupposed, even in his most stridently anti-humanist work.

Lyotard's politics have always shown a concern for minority opinion and a defence of incommensurability. Right from the beginning of his pagan/postmodern period (which commenced circa 1977) he identified minorities as, in the words of *Just Gaming* "territories of language." Minorities

are therefore not first and foremost groups of people with
different needs, hopes, and projects, but units of discourse
with human material as their content.

Lyotard's concern, recall, is to defend minorities, not
simply to understand them. Thus there is a strong normative
dimension to his social investigations. There is no point
defending something which is inert. There must be something
worthwhile inherent in minorities if one believes that
maximizing minority positions is a worthwhile goal. When
Lyotard offers examples of the minorities he thinks are
important, he mentions groups such as women, gays and
lesbians, and people of the Third World. These groups have,
over the last thirty or so years, been the focus of most
progressive thinking. These groups have been supported
because not just because they are minorities, but rather
because they are minorities who have been excluded from
expressing themselves and, therefore, have suffered historical
discrimination. A minority rules the world, but Lyotard does
not mention that minority as in need of defence. Lyotard
clearly concurs with this assessment; if he did not, he would
have given other examples. Moreover, he offered a political
program- the invention of new games. However, if the groups
who are to invent new games are identified first and foremost
as territories of language, with nothing proper to themselves
which would allow them to alter their own circumstances, then
the injunction to invent new games is self-contradictory.

Invention pre-supposes a capacity to free oneself from mere determination by given circumstances and produce unforseen combinations. However, Lyotard was quite clear that "selves" do not have such a capacity, they are "posts through which various kinds of message pass," able to alter the direction or content of messages only within the limits posited by the system. If that is the case, however, then the ground essential to critique is lost, because no self is deprived of something which they essentially have. However, because Lyotard also objects to the instrumentalism of the given world, one finds the notion of "invention" entering into his argument. This does supply a ground upon which a normative argument could be constructed (because instrumental reason forecloses on the creative capacities of the citizens) but it presupposes an underlying human capacity which his analysis denies through its reduction of said capacity to linguistically determined subject-positions.

If Lyotard were to obviate this criticism by positing language as the creative, inventive force, then his argument would merely be an anthropomorphization of language. There can be no injustice against a non-living process, so if Lyotard believes that exclusion is wrong, and he clearly does, then either groups of humans have been discriminated against, or language has. In either case the wrong stems from the exclusion of capacities which would otherwise be manifested. If this wrong is committed against language, then language

must have capacities which humans violate when they try to control it. Regardless of whether or not this makes any sense, it would nevertheless anthropomorphize language, something which Lyotard explicitly attacks in the passage from *The Differend* cited in Part One. If it is the case that Lyotard's criticism rests upon such an anthropomorphization, then he has understood language according to a humanist metaphor, and therefore extended humanism's reach, rather than ended its reign.

On the other hand, if Lyotard supports the struggles of women, gays and lesbians, and non-Western peoples because a difference specific to those groups is ruled out by liberal-capitalist society, then he must pre-suppose exactly the capacity and the right for self-determination which his analysis seeks to eliminate. If a minority group requires a struggle to exist or grow, then as was argued above, there must be a capacity which is not reducible to the empirically given context in which they are determined. That determination is what needs to be overcome. If self-determination were present in the dominated position as a discursive structure, then that structure would not be an oppressive one. Only if the determining structure impairs something real from being brought forth can it be considered oppressive. Lyotard insists that humans are just networks through which messages pass, their only activity being to alter the direction or modify the content of the message.

Struggles over justice, however, concern not just the content but the form of messages. If justice, even Lyotard's justice of multiplicity is to become actual, then this power to alter the form of society must be present within and claimed by the minorities themselves. To the extent that Lyotard makes normative claims regarding justice, and ties these claims to the expansion of minority positions, he therefore pre-supposes the capacity for self-determination which his social analysis reduces out of existence.

Without the pre-supposition of subjecthood Lyotard's critique of modernity must lack all political meaning and be but a metaphysical position of the highest abstraction. It would simply claim (as indeed his later work does) that difference is a basic ontological principle, not only of human society, but of organic matter in general. There would be no need to struggle for differences, they would manifest themselves as part of an evolutionary process.

It is a curious feature of Lyotard's work however, that as it becomes more reductionist, it returns to an understanding of humanity as endowed with a capacity which is not determined by external forces and dynamics. This capacity clarifies the manner in which humans can invent new games. While he has given up hope that the general direction of social evolution can be resisted, he nevertheless carves off an inner space which must be preserved if any value to existence is to be maintained. This inner space, which

Lyotard calls "the inhuman" is what grounds the basic civil rights characteristic of modern liberal society.

It is perhaps surprising to witness the re-emergence of the notion of right in Lyotard's work. One would expect that this characteristic liberal motif would have collapsed along with the metadiscourse which supported it. Lyotard's postmodern justice did not make any positive appeal to rights, but relied solely upon a critique of the necessarily terroristic nature of efforts to create agreement and unity. Nevertheless, Lyotard today rests his politics upon the defence of the rights of minorities:

> ... la practique militante, dans nos pays du moins, est devenue défensive. Il nous faut constamment réaffirmer les droits de minorities: femmes, enfants, homosexueles, le Sud, le tiers monde, les pauvres, le droit à culture et à éducation...[81]

The fact that Lyotard admits that militant practice today is defensive already proves that a capacity for self-determination on his part has been re-admitted. If these rights are to be defended they must exist. As these rights were not present at the inception of liberalism, but rather were granted only after the groups in question struggled for them, then, even if they are natural, they would still have required the historical struggles to bring them forth into social existence[82]. Natural or not, people gained those

---

[81]Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes,* p.66.

[82]A concise history of the struggle over the expansion of rights may be found in Ellen Wood, "The Demos versus, "We, the People", *Democracy Against Capitalism,* pp. 204-238.

rights for which they themselves struggled. The existence of minority rights cannot be separated from the history of minority struggles. The content of the rights fought for may be particular (for example, spousal benefits for same-sex partners), but the struggle for the special right is not essentially distinct from other struggles for other rights. When struggling for a special right, the group in question is asserting the claim that this special right is necessary for a more complete expression of who they are. This claim, we have seen, underlies all struggles of the oppressed, and is that which makes them struggles of the oppressed. Ultimately, what one is defending when one defends minority rights, therefore, is not the particular right of this or that minority, but rather the general capacity which oppressed groups have displayed to determine their own situation.

Lyotard never explicitly recognizes a universal capacity for self-determination. However, he does re-admit as a ground for such rights as exist today a universal inner capacity which is distinctive of human beings. This space, which Lyotard refers to as "the inhuman" or a "no-man's land" is characterized by its freedom from determination by all external forces. It is an indeterminate inner space whose products cannot be predicted in advance. This indeterminacy explains why this aspect of human being alone is free. As the "inhuman" is beyond the control of external forces, it is the source of whatever creativity humans have. It must be

defended against the encroachments of the forces of efficiency

and control:

> Si l'homme ne preserve pas la region inhumaine ou
> il peut se rencontrer avec ceci ou cela, qui
> echappe tout a faite a l'exercise des droits, il
> ne merite pas les droits qu'on lui reconnait...
> Pourquoi aurions-nous droit a la liberte d'
> expression si nous n'avions rien a dire que
> la deja dit. Et comment avoir chance de trouver
> a dire ce que nous ne savons pas dire is nous
> n'ecoutons pas du tout le silence de l'autre
> au dedans. Ce silence est un exception a la
> reciprocite des droits, mais il en est la
> legitimation.[83]

This "other within" legitimates rights because it is the

source of whatever it is that rights are supposed to protect.

It is an exception to the reciprocity of rights not because

its exercise violates the rights of others, but rather because

it is essentially, "la droit de rester separe.[84]" This

separation is a condition for the fruitful exercise of rights.

As such, it legitimates the rights which are currently

recognized in the West.

If one compares this new-found inner space with

Lyotard's postmodern reduction of the subject to subject-

positions, one detects a trajectory similar to the one

followed by Foucault. The problem Lyotard's early work faced

was that it could not account for the value of the novel

practices which it nevertheless posited as modes of resistance

to the tyranny of efficiency. The "inhuman" solves this

---

[83]*Ibid.*, p.110.

[84]*Ibid.*, p.106.

problem because it counts as a region which is qualitatively distinct from the oppressive forces of the external world. Its products are thus also distinct from the products created by the dominant social forces. The authentic products of this inner realm differ in that they are freely produced and do not in themselves serve purposes of increased efficiency. Hence their distinctive character and value.

While this inner region may not be identical to Marx's notion of labour or the Romantic ideal of expressive individuality, it is definitely analogous to these nineteenth century conceptions. It is analogous, moreover, on the essential point at issue here. That is, Lyotard re-introduces the distinction between external forces of determination and a defining subjective capacity which is in principle free from those forces, even if it is not always so in practice. Rather than being a mere "post" through which messages pass, humans are now understood to possess a capacity to be free within and on that basis create new messages themselves. Freedom as the essence of human being has thus been re-admitted by Lyotard. It now remains to be seen how subjecthood re-enters the work of Derrida.

Derrida's work, original and diverse in content as it is, does contain at least one unifying thread, which is the theme that the future is always undetermined. Derrida plays Hamlet to Western philosophy's Horatio, always reminding it that there is more to the universe than is contained in the

conceptual discriminations of Western metaphysics. What attracts Derrida's profound powers of textual criticism is the tendency within Western philosophy to attempt to foreclose on the future, to master it through teleological philosophies of history. The political upshot of the deconstruction of the arrogance of reason has always been a defence of the unbounded and open character of meanings and practices. Deconstruction always sought to remind us that history is an open field of possibilities whose openness cannot be effaced but that attempts to do so can be made at frightening costs. Thus, in recent years Derrida has begun to speak of a "promise of emancipation" which is always before us but which, if it is to remain critical, must forever be unfulfilled. Crucial to this strategy is the deconstruction of the foundation of teleological thinking, the rationally self-determining subject.

However, although this argument defines the basic orientation of deconstructive politics, Derrida also considers the evaluation of mundane political struggles important. It is just when deconstruction descends from heaven to earth, so to speak, that it finds itself embroiled in the ultimate self-contradiction of anti-humanist, postmodern thinking. The reasons for this outcome are most apparent from a consideration of Derrida's most passionate political engagement, the struggle against apartheid.

In the critique of apartheid the immediate goal of

deconstruction (demonstrating how the binary thinking of Western metaphysics creates the context in which apartheid can grow) runs into its own general philosophical orientation (to undo any and all fixed opposition). It is one thing to espouse a philosophical doctrine designed to maintain hope in a better future which nevertheless refuses to advocate determinate plans. It is quite another to intervene in real political struggles. Unfortunately for deconstruction, the general orientation cannot usefully inform determinate practice. To the extent that deconstruction intervenes in struggles it must take sides, and if it takes sides it must admit that the side it takes has the capacity to define itself.

In the case of apartheid, deconstruction sought to a) demonstrate how Western thought paved the way for South African state racism and b) aid the struggle by deconstructing the discourse of legitimation espoused by the South African state. In so doing, deconstruction fulfils its mandate of being responsible to the other. That is, deconstruction does not impose a plan upon the other, but opens a space where the other can speak for itself. Deconstruction supposedly opens a clearing for a practice which is not totalizing, final, or concerned with the "truth" of the other. The problem is, however, that the struggle of the other itself manifests the capacity for self-definition and a desire for the total overcoming of the oppressive structure which deconstruction

defines as the foundation of oppression. There are only two
ways in which deconstruction could escape from this self-
contradiction.   Either the oppressed Africans are not
subjects or they are subjects in his qualified sense,
functions of language which display certain elements to which
the essentialist notion of subjecthood refers. The
difference, however, is that these elements are, according to
deconstruction, effects, and not causes. They are secondary,
not primary.

The first possibility is ruled out once the meaning of
"subject" in the Western tradition is recalled. "Subject"
denoted the active side of the relationship subject/object.
To the extent that one concerns oneself with the real struggle
against apartheid one is dealing with the self-assertion of a
majority wrongly excluded by a minority. Derrida does support
the struggle, so he cannot intend to reduce the African
majority to the status of passive object. Perhaps, then,
Derrida takes them to be subjects in the qualified sense in
which he uses the term- functions of language which appear to
speak in their own name but which are really spoken by the
language of which they are functions

This alternative, however, is ultimately no better than
the first. Just as in the case of Foucault and Lyotard, if
the real dynamics of struggle are beyond human control, then
there is no reason to actively support the surface appearance
of these struggles. If the true transformative power lies in

language, and if this power cannot be utilized by human beings, then those in struggle are in fact deluded about the nature of their struggle if they think that they are in fact asserting themselves. If humans really are functions of language, then language asserts us. We, at root, do not assert anything. However, if there were not something in the Africans irreducible to their "nature" conceived of as a functions of language, then their resistance to apartheid would be groundless. What they asserted, their true identity denied them by the South African state, would be illusory, as would their goal of gaining control over the forces which determine their lives, the forces which made them "functions" of an oppressive regime. Clearly Derrida does not believe that the struggle against apartheid was groundless. If he did, his commitment to the actual people involved would be inexplicable.

Perhaps the context of South Africa changes something fundamental in the nature of subjecthood. That is, perhaps the colonized space is one from which the colonised can assert what they are. Perhaps there is a special power of the margins which is essentially different from the power of the centre. In other words, it may be the case that the self-activity of the oppressed is fundamentally distinct from the core rationalism of Western thought which Derrida finds problematic.

If that were so, then Derrida could support such

struggles without contradicting his deconstruction of subjecthood. However, if this to be the case then such a fundamental difference must be identified. Try as one might, there do not seem to be any apparent candidates for the role of this difference. The African opposition was mounted from various positions- the left-liberalism of the ANC, the separatist nationalism of the PAC, the Christianity of Bishop Tutu, the workerism of COSATU[85]- but these positions all have their roots in European thinking and pre-suppose the capacity for self-determination characteristic of that thought. Of course, the particular development of these positions is relative to the real context, but at a philosophical level there are no significant differences between the South African and the Western positions which oppose apartheid. Underlying both positions is the idea that apartheid is abominable precisely because it deprives the black majority of access to the wealth of the nation and equal legal standing with whites. In other words, both positions rest on the belief that self-determining human beings are deprived of the ability to manifest this capacity because of an unessential difference- their skin colour and cultural heritage. If Derrida deconstructs this capacity for self-determination, then he deconstructs the most important difference- the difference

---

[85]For a survey of the various opposition forces see, Alex Callinicos, "Working-class Politics in South Africa", *South Africa: Between Reform and Revolution,* (London: Bookmarks), 1988, pp.59-127.

between those who believe that humans are essentially self-determining, a belief which impels those who hold it to struggle against oppressive conditions, and those who believe that only a privileged few should enjoy the benefits of freedom.

As one explores Derrida's position the truth of the preceding claim becomes apparent. Derrida does not posit any special capacity on the part of the marginalised party in a colonial context. On the contrary, he supports the South African struggle on well-established liberal-humanist grounds. While rightly identifying the Western roots of the system, Derrida nevertheless supports Mandela's left-liberal program for change. At his trial, Mandela argued that he was forced to terrorism because the state would not respect the spirit of the law. That is, the South African state claims to be constitutional, based upon the rule of law, not arbitrary force, but was nevertheless structured in such a way that the majority were deprived of all legal standing and were instead ruled by armed might. Mandela claimed that his action was justified because the spirit of the law had been thus perverted in South Africa. Thus, he and his comrades were forced to wield the true spirit of the law, universal equality of all under the law, against its letter. Derrida does not deconstruct, but rather endorses, this defence:

> So the exemplary witnesses are often those who
> distinguish between the law and laws, between
> respect for the law which speaks immediately to
> the conscience and submission to positive law

> (historical, national, institutional)... The
> exemplary witnesses, those who make us think
> about the law they reflect, are those who, in
> certain situations, *do not respect* laws. They
> are sometimes torn between conscience and law...[86]

Conscience, which counterposes the spirit of the law to the letter of the law, can thus force one to act in the name of the rule of law against positive laws which are arbitrary and contrary to the universality implied by the notion "the rule of law." Who would disagree? Certainly not the present author. Although Derrida argues that the extremity of the situation in South Africa gives the confrontation between law and conscience a rawness not found, "except briefly"[87] in the West, he does not claim that it is essentially distinct. Whatever the difference of degree, the struggles of Natives, of students, of workers, of abortion activists, or gays and lesbians in the West which go beyond the letter of the law in the name of conscience are not different in essence from the struggle in South Africa.

So where in this analysis is the deconstruction which Derrida once said was too radical for traditional political idioms? The opposition between law and conscience pre-dates deconstruction by millennia (receiving classical expression in *Antigone*). Why is this opposition not deconstructed? Why is not the monstrous, open character of the future opposed to the quite determinate plans of the Africans for their liberation?

---

[86]Derrida, "The Law of Reflection", *For Nelson Mandela,* p.38.

[87]*Ibid.,* p.38

The answer is obvious- to operate in such a fashion would undermine the struggle one wishes to support.

To the extent that deconstruction is a useful political tool, therefore, it must pre-suppose the notion of subjecthood which its radical philosophical component sought to deconstruct. One cannot remain endlessly open and still wage a focused and efficacious struggle against the forces of oppression. One must plan, choose, and act. This requires someone capable of planning, choosing, and acting. Indeed, it requires someone to plan and choose and act in response to a historical reality of repression which cannot be deconstructed but only overthrown. In his more passionate moments, Derrida appeals to this very notion of historical reality which one would have thought would be utterly incompatible with deconstruction. Nevertheless, Derrida writes in his response to a criticism made of his reading of the South African situation:

> Historical reality, dear comrades, is that in spite of all the lexicographical contortions you point out, those in power in South Africa have not managed to convince the world, and first of all, because still today, they have refused to change the real, effective, fundamental meaning of their watchword- apartheid.[88]

Yet, as we saw in Part One, the critical core of deconstruction held that signs had no "real, effective, fundamental" meaning, that the objective denotation of a sign was not the limit of a sign's meaning, that signs always

---

[88]Derrida, But, beyond...", p.159.

differed and deferred.

However, Derrida cannot bring this strategy into play without deconstructing that "historical reality" of apartheid which quite rightly sickens him. Indeed, he rejects interpretations of deconstruction which see in it, "a modern form of immorality, of amorality, or of irresponsibility."[89] However, in order to arrest the frivolous employment of deconstruction Derrida must restore a non-arbitrary ground to his critical practice.

Like Foucault and Lyotard, Derrida realizes (at least implicitly) the truth of this criticism. Once again, one finds that an essential feature of subjecthood is re-admitted into Derrida's work. This is evident if Derrida's understanding of responsibility is recalled. It is important to remember that Derrida maintains that responsibility is "undeconstructable." It thus serves as the foundation for deconstruction. To be undeconstructable was the essential nature of philosophical foundations from Parmenides forward. For Derrida, however, this foundation is not simply a philosophical principle, it is a certain relationship with regard to what is other from one's self. If I am to be responsible to the other then the nature of this responsibility must be a possible object of consciousness. As my responsibility, however, this object is not a natural

---

[89]Derrida, *On the Name,* p.15.

object, or a mere component of my being as a "function" of language. This responsibility is the very heart of my relationship to others, the animating principle which compels me to work in whatever way towards a better world.

If this responsibility is to be the very soul of my life in the company of others, if I am to fulfil my responsibility towards the other, then it must not only be most intimately my own, but I must also, and essentially, be able to express it through my actions. I must be able to say what I am, in other words- this person, here, with a real responsibility to listen others. This responsibility cannot both be undeconstructable and a vanishing moment in a chain of signification. If it were the latter my responsibility would be endlessly dissolved, since my actions would not be under my control. Therefore, the notion of responsibility entails the capacity for self-determination. If I could not in principle express what is in fact an unchanging feature of my being, it would not be the undeconstructable core that it is said to be.

Furthermore, this responsibility, as a political responsibility towards those external to myself must be reciprocal. As each self is both self and other, each person must share in this defining responsibility. Thus, not only is responsibility a foundation from which our relations with one another flow, it is a universal foundation. In short, responsibility, undeconstructible responsibility, presupposes that humans are not functions of language, but rather

.

subjects- beings with an underlying solidity and capacity to determine the world. Derrida himself admits as much:

> One *answers for oneself*, for what one is, says,or does, and this beyond the simple present. The "oneself" or "myself" thus supposes the unity, in other words the memory, of the one responding. This is often called the unity of the subject, but one can conceive such a synthesis of memory without necessarily having recourse to the concept of subject. Since this unity is never secured in itself as an empirical synthesis, the recognition of this identity is entrusted to the instance of the name. "I" am held responsible for "myself" which is to say, for everything that can be imputed to that which bears my name. Imputability supposes freedom, to be sure, but it also supposes that that which bears my name remains the "same..."[90]

What is remarkable here is that, although Derrida claims that the unity necessary for responsibility, "can be conceived of without necessarily having recourse to the concept of subject," he does not tell us how. In his own formulation he marks a difference between the name and "that which *bears* [my emphasis] my name." The "that which bears" is what is responsible. If, as he says, one is responsible only if one remains the same, and the "that which bears my name" is that which remains the same, then this must be an underlying, stable, self-identical ground for responsibility. Derrida nowhere in the article disagrees with the claim that responsibility requires the unity which he describes, nor does he provide any argument which would persuasively illuminate what this unity might be if it is not the unity of the

---

[90]Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXXV, No.11, Nov.1988, p.638.

subject. In fact, his own description cited above is rather more persuasive as an argument about why the subject is best concept with which to explain the unity required of responsibility. I am a being defined by the capacity to say what I mean, and act accordingly. I do not flee from this responsibility by deconstructing my words, I stand up for myself, I answer for myself, I am the underlying, "that which bears my name." On Derrida's own terms, no mere function of language can be this stable basis, since the "principle" of language is *différance*, and if there is a third alternative, Derrida does not state it.

Thus, Derrida, like Foucault and Lyotard, returns to positions not essentially distinct from those previously deconstructed. Above, he described responsibility in terms of the subject. Even before he began to deal seriously with the question of responsibility he was concerned with the consequences of a one-sided embrace of particularity. Derrida himself admits that the mere affirmation of diversity is self-defeating. He argues that "... on ne peut pas non plus plaider *simplement* pour la pluralite, la dispersion... la mobilite des lieux de filtrage et des sujets qui en dispersent. Car des forces socio-economique pourraient encore abuser ...cette absence d'une forum generale."[91] To the extent that the singularity which Derrida desires to reveal with deconstruction is associated with human beings, these

---

[91]Derrida, *La Democratie Ajournee*, p.116.

beings must be more than functions of language. With his notion of responsibility Derrida supplies this missing element and it is not essentially distinct from traditional doctrines.

The return of the repressed in the work of these defining postmodern thinkers is not surprising if one takes their politics seriously. As Chapters 2.2 and 2.3 argued there are deep contradictions within a politics which both values human diversity and dissolves human beings into posits of non-human forces. Without a ground in subjecthood, such politics wander between the poles of their immanent contradictions. Just as repressed desires manifest themselves in unconscious ways in neurotic behaviour, so too does subjecthood return in postmodern thought. The repressed material returns in disguised or altered form, but underlying this is the material that has been repressed. The concept of subjecthood which makes its force felt in the later works of Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida is not identical in every detail to the subjecthood which they criticized, but the function which it serves is the same. In each case a defining feature of human being is posited as the normative ground of political practice, which is exactly what each claimed could not and should not be.

Conclusion

There is a yawning chasm in the world today between the global problems which affect absolutely everyone, regardless of race, sex, sexuality, or class position, and the lack of credible radical alternatives to the present global system. The "winners" in the new economy are, if one adopts a long-term perspective, no safer than the losers. The intensity of global competition today reinforces Marx's essential insight, which is that capitalism enslaves humanity generally by making all conform their behaviour to the imperatives of profit-maximization.

In the industrialized world the demands of competition have created an unemployable workforce of middle aged blue-collar workers, have led to attacks on health care, education and the arts, and made the future a hopeless and terrifying place for the young. In the non-industrialized world, however, the forces of globalization continue to exact a far more hellish toll. There the young must worry about life itself, threatened as it is by government attacks, atrocious working conditions, poverty, disease, and starvation.

Unbelievable as it may be, the international situation is even more murderous than the situation within states. The hope for a peaceful, liberal, New World Order trumpeted by Western political leaders and ideologues like Frances Fukuyama has been exposed for what it is- tired propaganda. The first act of the post-Cold War era was the murderous decimation of Iraq, or rather, its women and children, by the U.S. and its allies. While I write children in Iraq still starve as a result of the effects of the U.N. embargo. Moreover, the bloody costs of Western and Soviet imperialism continue to be paid by the people of Chechnya, Bosnia, Rwanda, Angola, Mozambique, and still others too numerous to mention here.

Adding further to this horror show is the absence, especially in the West, of radical opposition to the neo-conservative assault on the public sphere. Stalinism has perhaps irredeemably discredited the idea of communism, and the left has not yet been able to resuscitate itself as an international threat to the global hegemony of capitalism. Liberalism is a lost cause in so far as it proves itself on a daily basis to be inadequate to solving the pressing social and economic issues of the day. Nevertheless, perhaps there is one sign of hope in all of this wreckage.

The hope is just this- that it cannot plausibly be denied that the major political problems of the day are global in scope. Cuts to education in Canada are justified by the same arguments used to support the liquidation of opposition

to "development" in the Third World. Global trading pacts aim
to make the world safe for capitalism, and this requires, as
the slogan goes, "restructuring." What restructuring means
concretely is the progressive elimination (where they exist)
or the prevention of growth (where they do not exist) of all
democratic controls over the utilization and distribution of
productive resources. It does not matter if you are a Native
in the juggles of Chiapas or a woman in Toronto. The Mexican
army hunting you down if you are a guerrilla, or the
government which is going to close Women's College Hospital if
you are a female Torontonian, are obeying the same imperative.

This is perhaps a cause for hope for the following
reason. The intensity of the attacks on the democratic gains
made over the last century focuses attention on the basic
issue of the grounds of freedom. The global nature of the
attacks, and the identity of the forces which cause them, may
make manifest that what we are dealing with today is a
violent, relentless, all-out assault on the democratic gains
of the past century and the future freedom of the vast
majority of people on the globe. What global capitalism is
ruling out today is not this or that identity (except
incidentally) but the basic democratic principle that human
freedom requires access to resources through which people gain
meaningful control over their lives. If this principle should
become manifest to people's consciousness, it may plausibly be
hoped that some new global force can appear and resist what in

fact threatens to seriously undermine the continued viability
of a worthwhile human life, or perhaps the future of the
species itself.

It is for this reason that the philosophical labour
contained in this work has been expended. There is a serious
gap between the values which postmodern thought holds dear and
the critique of modern political philosophy which
distinguishes postmodernism. By affirming the merely local
and particular, by refusing to admit a universal dimension,
postmodernism, far from being attuned to the specifics of
contemporary reality, is denying the very grounds which would
make us resist. Perhaps that explains its popularity.

However, the philosophical problem runs deeper than
this. For, as I have argued, the values which postmodern
criticism hopes to encourage do not make sense unless these
are grounded in a universal understanding of what it is to be
human. Only if differences emerge from a shared creative
capacity can these be seen as morally and politically
valuable. Only if differences spring from a common capacity
can links between otherwise distinct groups be forged. There
is nothing in the experience of gay-bashing, for example,
which would impel the person so abused towards a critique of
contemporary capitalism. There is, however, in the experience
of being gay the experience of being denied, by the powers
that be, the means to freely express who you are. This
experience is not unique to being gay, but connects one with

the poor, oppressed, and exploited the world over.

To forge connections in this way does not run the risk of reducing humanity to an indistinct lump. This dogma is hardly a postmodern insight, but has rather been the refrain of the enemies of democracy stretching back to Plato. To argue for a common source of oppression, and a common source from which positive freedom could grow, is to pay the utmost respect to real differences. What this essentialism hopes for is simply a society where people have access to the resources they need so that they can create themselves as they themselves see fit, in a democratic polity overseen by mutual recognition and respect. To make this a credible goal, to clarify the grounds on which it may emerge, and to participate in the struggles through which it may arise, is the job of political philosophy today. May the time not be far off when we can see some real hope for such a world.

Bibliography

Adena, Rosemary. "Theory and Practice: From Ideally Separated to Pragmatically Joined", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.* #43, Fall, 1984, pp.31-40.

Allen, Jeffner, and Young, Iris Marion, eds. *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and New French Philosophy.* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989.

Allison, David B. "Derrida and Wittgenstein: Playing the Game," *Research in Phenomenology,* #8, 1978, pp.93-11

Aronowitz, Stanley. "History as Disruption: On Benjamin and Foucault", *Humanities in Society.* #2, Winter, 1980, pp.55-72.

Babin, Daniel. "Au-dela les lumieres", *De Philosophia.* #7, 1987-88, pp.1-30.

Bayat, Assef. *Workers and Revolution in Iran.* London: Zed Books, 1987.

Benjamin, Andrew, ed. *Judging Lyotard.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1992.

Bennington, Geoffrey. *Lyotard: Writing the Event.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.

Bernauer, James. "Foucault's Political Analysis", *International Philosophical Quarterly.* #22, March, 1982, pp.87-96.

Bernauer, James, and, Rasmussen, David, eds. *The Final Foucault,* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987.

Bernstein, Richard. "Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Jacques Derrida", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* #1, 1987, pp.93-117.

Bhabha, Homi, K. "interrogating Identity," in, *The Anatomy of Racism,* David T. Goldberg, ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

Bove, Paul, A. "The End of Humanism: Foucault and the Power of Disciplines", *Humanities in Society,* Vol.3, #1, Winter 1980, pp.23-41.

Boyne, Roy. *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason.* London: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

Brodsky, Garry. "The Politics of Postmodernism", in,
    Philosophy Today #31, Winter 1987, pp.1-14

Callinicos, Alex. *Against Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Polity
    Press, 1989.

Callinicos, Alex. *South Africa: Between Reform and
    Revolution*. London: Bookmarks, 1988.

Carroll, David. *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida*.
    New York: Methuen, 1988.

Cavallari, Hector. "Savoir et Pouvoir: Michel Foucault's
    Theory of Discursive Practices", *Humanities in Society*.
    #2, Winter, 1980, pp. 118-134.

Clifford, Michael R. "Crossing Out the Boundaries: Foucault
    and Derrida on Transgressing Transgression," in,
    Philosophy Today, Vol.31, #3/4, Fall 1987, pp. 1-11.

Connolly, William. "Discipline, Politics, and Ambiguity",
    Political Theory. #11, August, 1983, pp.24-37.

Cook, Deborah. *The Subject Finds a Voice*. New York: Peter
    Lang, 1993.

Dallmayr, Fred. "Democracy and Postmodernism", *Human
    Studies,* #10, Fall, 1987, pp.36-50.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Felix. *Anti-Oedipus*.
    Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

Dews, Peter. "The Return of the Subject in the Late
    Foucault", *Radical Philosophy*. #51, Spring, 1989.
    pp.37-47.

Dews, Peter, *Logics of Disintegration*. London: Verso Books,
    1987.

Dews, Peter. "Foucault and the *Nouvelle Philosophie*",
    Economy and Society, #8, 1979, pp. 117-128.

Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena*. Evanston:
    NorthWestern University Press, 1973.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Paris: Editions de
    Seuil, 1974.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns
    Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Derrida, Jacques. *Glas*. Paris: Editions Galilee, 1974.

Derrida, Jacques. *Limited, Inc, a,b,c.* Baltimore: Johns
    Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference.* London: Routledge
    and Keegan Paul, 1978.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spurs.* Chicago: University of Chicago
    Press, 1979.

Derrida, Jacques. *La carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au
    delà.* Paris: Flammarion, 1980.

Derrida, Jacques. *Positions.* Chicago: University of Chicago
    Press, 1981.

Derrida, Jacques. *L'oreil de l'autre.* Montreal: vlb,
    1982.

Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy.* Chicago:
    University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Derrida, Jacques. *La faculté de juger.* Paris: Editions de
    Minuit, 1985.

Derrida, Jacques, ed. *For Nelson Mandela.* New York: Seaver
    Books, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. *On Spirit: Heidegger and the Question of
    Nazism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Derrida, Jacques. *Du droit à la philosophie.* Paris:
    Editions Galilee, 1990.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres de Marx.* Paris: Editions
    Galilee, 1993.

Derrida, Jacques. *Politiques de l'amitié.* Paris: Editions
    Galilee, 1994.

Derrida, Jacques. *On the Name.* Stanford: Stanford
    University Press, 1995.

Derrida, Jacques. *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994.*
    Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Principle of Reason", *Diacritics,*
    Vol. 13, #3, Fall, 1983, pp.1-20.

Derrida, Jacques. "No Apocalypse, Not Now", *Diacritics,*
    Vol.14, #2, Summer, 1984, pp.37-51.

Derrida, Jacques. "Racism's Last Word", *Critical Inquiry,*

Vol.12, Autumn, 1985, pp. 108-119.

Derrida, Jacques. "But Beyond...", *Critical Inquiry,* Vol.13, Winter, 1986, pp.151-163.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Ends of Man", *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, eds. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Politics of Friendship", *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. LXXXV, no.11, Nov. 1988.

Dreyfus, Hugh, and Rabinow, Paul. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Druron, Michel. "Deconstructing the Subject", *Inquiries into Values.* Sander, Lee, ed. Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellon Press, 1990.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth.* New York: Grove Press, 1982.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization.* New York: Random House, 1965.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things.* New York: Vintage Books, 1971.

Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* London: Tavistock Publications, 1972.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1973.

Foucault, Michel. *I, Pierre Rivière....* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish.* New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume One, An Introduction.* New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Foucault, Michel. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture.* New York: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1980.

Foucault, Michel. *A Foucault Reader.* Rabinow, Paul, ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Vol.3.* New York: Vintage Books, 1985.

Foucault, Michel. *Technologies of the Self.* Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

Foucault, Michel. *Foucault Live.* New York: Semiotext(e), 1989.

Foucault, Michel. *Remarks on Marx.* New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

Foucault, Michel. "Human Nature: Justice Versus Power, A debate with Noam Chomsky", *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind.* Fons Elders, ed. London: Souvenir, 1974.

Foucault, Michel. "La Grande Colère des Faits", *La Nouvelle Observateur.* May 9th, 1977.

Flynn, Thomas. "Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault", *The Journal of Philosophy,* #82, Oct. 1985.

Flynn, Thomas. "Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity", *Nous,* #23, April, 1989, pp.187-198.

Fraser, Nancy. *Unruly Practices.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Gordon, Lewis. *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man.* New York: Routledge, 1995.

Guattari, Felix, and Negri, Toni. *Communists Like Us.* New York: Semiotext(e), 1990.

Haber, Honi Fern. *Beyond Postmodern Politics.* New York: Routledge, 1994.

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987.

Habermas, Jurgen. *Moral Conciousness and Communicative Action.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Logic.* Wallace, trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Hiley, David. "Foucault and the Analysis of Power: Political Engagement Without Liberal Hope or Comfort", *Praxis*

International, #4, July 1984, pp.192-207.

Hoy, David Cousin, ed. *Foucault: A Critical Reader.*
    Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.

Hurst, Lynda. "Back to Being Radical", *The Toronto Star.*
    Feb. 25th, 1995.

Ingram, David. "Habermas and Foucault on the Subject of
    Reason", *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault.*
    Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Ingram, David. "The Postmodern Kantianism of Arendt and
    Lyotard", *Review of Metaphysics,* #42, Summer 1988,
    pp. 620-937.

James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins.* New York: Vintage, 1989.

Janicaud, Dominique. "Presence and Appropriation", *Research
    in Phenomenology,* #8, 1978, pp.1-12.

Johnson, Phyllis, and Martin, David. *The Struggle for
    Zimbabwe.* London: Faber and Faber, 1981.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Pure Reason.* New York:
    MacMillan, 1987.

Keikel, Arion. "La fin de l'homme et le destin de la pensée",
    Man and World, #18, 1985, pp.3-38.

Kellner, Douglas, and Best, Steven. *Postmodern Theory.* New
    York: Guillford Press, 1991.

La Chance, Michel. "Deploiement et resistance chez Foucault",
    in, *Philosophique,* #14, Spring 1987, pp.36-57.

Laclau, Ernesto. *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our
    Time.* London: Verso, 1990.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Mouffe, Chantal. *Hegemony and Socialist
    Strategy.* London: Verso, 1987.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Des dispositifs pulsionnels.* Paris:
    Union Generale d'Editions, 1973.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Instructions paiennes.* Paris:
    Editions Galilee, 1977.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Rudiments paiennes.* Paris: Union
    Generale d'Editions, 1977.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The Postmodern Condition.*

Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Political Writings.* Oxford: Oxford
     University Press, 1989.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Tombeau de l'intellectuel et autre
     papiers.* Paris: Editions Galilee, 1984.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Just Gaming.* Minneapolis:
     University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute.*
     Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants.*
     Paris: Editions Galilee, 1988.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event.*
     New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time.*
     Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Lectures d'enfance.* Paris: Editions
     Galilee, 1991.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Toward the Postmodern.* Highlands,
     NJ: Humanities Press, 1993.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Moralités postmodernes.* Paris:
     Editions Galilee, 1993.

"An Interview With Jean Francois Lyotard", *Diacritics,*
     Vol.14, #3, Fall, 1984, pp.1-14.

"An Interview With Jean-Francois Lyotard", *Theory, Culture,
     and Society,* Vol.5, 1988, pp.38-50.

Martin, Bill. *Matrix and Line: Derrida and the Possibility
     of Postmodern Social Theory.* Albany: State University
     of New York Press, 1992.

Marcuse, Herbert. *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory.*
     Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844.*
     New York: International Publishers, 1964.

Marx, Karl. *Manifesto of the Communist Party.* Moscow:
     Progress Publishers, 1986.

Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology.* Moscow: Progress

Publishers, 1976.

McCarthy, Thomas. "On the Margins of Politics", *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. LXXXV, No.11, Nov. 1988.

McCarthy, Thomas. "The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism", *Philosophical Forum,* #21(1-2) Fall-Winter, 1989.

McCarthy, Thomas. "The Critique of Imperfect Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School", *Poltical Theory,* #18(3), Aug. 1990.

McClintock, Ann, and Nixon, Rob. "No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's *La Dernier Mot du Racisme*", *Critical Inquiry,* Vol.13, Winter, 1986.

Moi, Toril, ed. *French Feminist Thought: A Reader,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Murray, Patrick, and Schuler, Jean. "Post-Marxism in a French Context", *The History of European Ideas,* #19, 1988.

Navile, Pierre. *D'Holbach.* Paris: Gallimard, 1943.

Paden, Roger. "Foucault's Anti-Humanism", *Human Studies.* #10, 1987, pp.123-141.

Peters, Michael. "Techno-Science, Rationality, and the University: Lyotard on the Postmodern Condition", *Educational Theory* #39, Spring 1989.

Pheby, Keith. *Interventions: Displacing the Metaphysical Subject.* Washington,D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1989.

Poster, Mark. *Critical Theory After Poststructuralism: In Search Of a Context.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Poster, Mark. *The Mode of Information.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Poster, Mark. "Foucault's True Discourses", *Humanities in Society,* #2, Winter, 1980.

Raceviskis, Karlis. "The Discourses of Michel Foucault: A Case of an Absent and Forgetable Subject," in, *Human Society,* #3, Winter, 1980.

Raynal, Guillaume. *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indes.* Paris: Francois Maspero, 1981.

Roderick, Rick. "Reading Derrida Politically (Contra Rorty)", *Praxis International,* #4, Jan. 1987.

Ray, Larry. "Foucault, Critical Theory, and the Decomposition of the Historical Subject", *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* #14, 1988. pp.69-110.

Rorty, Richard. "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity", *Praxis International,* #4, Apr. 1984, pp. 22-48.

Rorty, Richard. "Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation", *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Rorty, Richard. "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism", *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Ross, Stephen. "Foucault's Radical Politics", *Praxis International,* #5, July 1985, pp.49-63.

Rosset, Peter, and Vandermeer, John. *The Nicaragua Reader.* New York: Grove Press, 1983.

Sallis, John, ed. *Deconstruction and Philosophy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Sawicki, Jana. "Foucault, Feminism, and the Question of Identity", *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault,* Gary Gutting, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Schiller, Friedrich. *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Silverman, Hugh. "The Limits of Logocentrism (On the Way to Grammatology)", *Man and World,* #17, 1984, pp. 622-634.

Sim, Stuart. "Lyotard and the Politics of Antifoundationalism", *Radical Philosophy,* #44, Autumn 1986, pp.9-15.

Smart, Barry, ed. *Michel Foucault: Critical Assesments (1).* New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1994.

Soper, Kate. *Humanism and Anti-Humanism.* London: Hutchinson Publishing, 1986.

Soper, Kate. "Postmodernism, Subjectivity, and the Question of Value", *Principled Positions.* Judith Squires, ed. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds.* New York: Routledge, 1988.

Sprinkler, Mark. "The Use and Abuse of Foucault", *Humanities in Society,* Vol.3, #1, Winter, 1980, pp.118-138.

Strozier, Robert. *Saussure, Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Subjectivity.* New York: Mouton de Gryler, 1990.

Suchting, Wal. "Marx's *Theses on Feurbach*: A New Translation and Notes Towards a Commentary", *Issues in Marxist Philosophy, Volume 2: Materialism.* John Mepham and David-Hillel Ruben, eds. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanites Press, 1979.

Wapner, Paul. "What's Left? Marx, Foucault and Contemporary Problems of Social Change", *Praxis International,* #9, July, 1989, pp. 15-32.

Watson, Steven. "Jurgen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Rationality", *Philosophy and Social Criticism,* #10, Fall 1984, pp.17-35.

Wood, Ellen Meiskins. *Democracy Against Capitalism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Young, Iris Morton. "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference", *Social Theory and Practice,* #12, Spring, 1986, pp.1-14.

Young, Iris Marion. "Together in Difference: Tranforming the Logic of Group Conflict", *Principled Positions.* Judith Squires, ed. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993.

America's Update. "Interview with Luis Hernandes," Vol.vxi, #2, Nov/Dec, 1994, pp.1-3.

Canadian Dimension. "Zapatista Leader Makes The Links." Oct-Nov, 1994, p.1.