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Feminism, Postmodernism and the Question of the Subject

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Abstract

Feminism, Postmodernism and the Question of the Subject

Irini Tsakiri

There are few areas in the contemporary intellectual and cultural space that have not been affected by the recent developments in theory that go under the rubric of postmodernism.

A number of feminist theorists have been eager to embrace postmodernism insofar as it challenges the alleged universality and neutrality of the institutions and the ideals of the Enlightenment. However, the delegitimization of these ideals and the ensuing decentering of the subject are innovations that go beyond the horizon of feminist praxis which assumes the existence of a social subject capable of speaking a liberating truth.

This thesis is devoted to a critical examination of the union between feminism and postmodernism. It is concluded that, on epistemological and political grounds, this affiliation is detrimental to feminism.

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For Mary and Fotis

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

What is the status of feminism today? What is its position in the academic world, on one hand, and in the world outside academia, on the other? How legitimate is it as a method that, given its political and social implications, has been accused of being less *objective* than other disciplines? How can feminism retain its adherence to *praxis* in the context of a world that widens the gap between "things said" and "things done"? Such questions can be answered only if placed within the wider context of the evolution of feminism.

Ever since its commencement as an organized body of theory and a movement with a particular emancipatory force, feminism has made use of the insights of other disciplines to further its critique of patriarchy. This tendency can be discerned in the various "happy" or "unhappy" marriages of feminism to Marxism, psychoanalytic theory, liberalism, socialism, semiotics, structuralism, etc. Eventually, however, feminists were confronted with a certain dilemma. Adopting the tools of the established disciplines entailed, to a certain extent, espousal of the universalistic presuppositions contained in both science and the humanities. These presuppositions, however, were based on limited perspectives - Eurocentric, male and socially privileged ones - and the task of feminism had been from the beginning the

critique of supposedly universal ideas that became instituted as the "canon". The dilemma was subsequently intensified when feminist thinkers working within the academy realized that their contribution was perceived as inadequate when measured against the *rule of objectivity*. Feminist scholarship, it was announced, could not be academic because it was not immune to the values and the interests of its enacted politics.

The emergence of postmodernism, as the systematic critique of the institutions that were thought of as neutral and universal, opened up a new space for the framework of feminist discourse. It might be that the critique feminists had produced was inadequate to decisively challenge the established order within academia and without but at last some challenging arguments were taken seriously and some change was occuring albeit under a different name.

Many feminist scholars turned to the preparations for the new "wedding". The idea that postmodernism was relentless in its "exposure" of the dominant ideals of reason, truth, and subjectivty for what they "really" were, hit feminists as more than attractive. The possibility of a combined effort to finally demonstrate the historicity of the canon, and thus contest it, inspired a number of feminists to embark on a dialogue with postmodern thinkers.

The results of this dialogue I deem counter-productive for two main reasons. First, because the postmodern thinkers

in attacking reason attack the subject as a false unity. But this attack on the subject comes at a time when many oppressed segments of society - i.e. women, aboriginal people, people of color, etc., are starting to speak for themselves.

Secondly, the total critique of the ideals of the Enlightenment on which postmodernism bases its deconstructive program is self-defeating on two counts. On one hand, even the critique of reason requires a rational standpoint. Nietzsche and Foucault, for example, would be unthinkable without the notion of truth. One cannot deconstruct unless one ground one's deconstruction on something, and postmodernism shuns all such grounds. On the other hand, mere critique is not a sufficient instrument for those who ai 2 still concerned with the transformation of society and the inclusion of their definition of what is just or worthy or meaningful.

My intention in this thesis is to re-examine the merits of the conjunction of feminism and postmodernism. By feminism, I understand the critical theory and the movement that seeks to create conditions for the liberation of women; by postmodernism I understand the amalgamation of recent trends in theory which, however diverse, are nevertheless characterized by a sweeping delegitimization of the ideals formulated by the tradition of the Enlightenment. My contention is that certain modified elements of the modernist tradition have to be retained if feminism is to continue

operating as a liberating praxis.

In the first chapter I shall survey a number of attempts by feminist thinkers to locate the meeting point of feminism and postmodernism.

In the second chapter I will trace the historical evolution of modernity into postmodernity from Kant through Nietzsche to Derrida and Foucault and I will present the debate over the transcendental categories of the Enlightenment.

The third chapter is concerned with the relation of postmodernism to politics. The question becomes, how can decentred subjects ever dream of reaching intersubjective communication and consensus, let alone social change and transformation? In this context it is argued that postmodernism fosters various conservative positions.

The final chapter turns to a reconsideration of feminist theory as the model which can (out of its own material) fashion alternative ways of reflecting on reality and consequently transforming it.

Chapter 1

POSTMODERN FEMINISM

> I mistrust all systematizers
> and avoid them. The will to
> system is a lack of integrity.
>
> Nietzsche[1]

An increasing number of theorists maintain that the Western intellectual tradition is being revolutionized in a way that will transform not only the way people think but the course of Western culture itself.

Jane Flax is one of these thinkers. She believes that Western culture is in the midst of a profound change that will eventually prove to be as transformative as the passage from the middle ages to modernity.[2] The change that is taking place right now in the West, is reflected in what Flax considers to be the three most "representative" ways of thinking:psychoanalysis, feminist theory and postmodern philosophy. These ways of thinking are somewhat perplexing: they are, one way or another, consequences of the Enlightenment project and, at the same time, they dispute the

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1968), #26.

[2] Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12, No. 4 (Summer 1987), pp. 621-43.

validity of the claims that the Enlightenment project produced.

Flax is one of many contemporary feminist theorists who believe that feminism is a technique for deconstructing the presuppositions latent in the traditional formulation of the notions of "self", "reason", "knowledge", "truth", "power", etc. This feminist project of deconstruction is compatible with "the most recent way of ooing philosophy", i.e., post-modernism.

Postmodernism

One of the central theses of postmodernism is the "de-legitimization" of the grand explanatory systems of the West or "metanarratives". These explanatory systems are the philosophies of history and society that were constructed within the Enlightenment and the Hegelian-Marxist traditions. Increasing awareness of the limitations cf these philosophical "metanarratives" led to the re-examination of both the theoretical frameworks and the politics that produced these metanarratives as well as the theoretical frameworks and the politics that these meta- narratives produced. Postmodernist philosophy has thrown into radical doubt sets of beliefs that are still prevalent in Western culture and derive from the Enlightenment. The most salient of these beliefs can be summarized as follows: the idea that there is a permanent, stable, coherent self with distinctive properties; the appeal

to transcendental and universal reason as a basis for objective knowledge of both the natural world and the "self"; the belief in one's capacity to reach (by means of reason) immutable and eternal truth and formulate the basic tenets of neutral, socially beneficial science.

Women, however, were usually excluded from the "population of those capable of attaining freedom from traditional forms of authority."[3] So feminist thought in all its diversity has generated a plethora of constructive critiques of traditional approaches to epistemology, ethics, social relations and notions of self, while showing that what was thought of as universal in its application was a partial, historically situated conception. Theories that claimed to account for human experience had in truth occluded "woman" from their definition of "human" because women had been confined to the domestic realm away from the realm of ideas, politics and production.

The exposure of the androcentrism latent in these theories has been the fundamental goal of feminism until recently. However, internal conflicts and disputes amongst the distinct groups within the movement (black, lesbian,

[3] Ibid., p. 625. For relevant feminist positions see also: Alison M. Jaggar, Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Totowa, N. ".: Rowman & Allanheld 1983); Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and Philosophy of Science (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1983); Zillah R. Eisenstein, ed., Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

hispanic, native) have caused feminist thinkers to realize that there is little, if anything at all, that binds "women" and women's experience together.[4] As the concept of woman becomes elusive the search for unity and a common front appears hopeless. Consequently, some feminists choose to ally themselves with intellectual forces whose proponents doubt essentialist notions of unity, homogeneity, identity. And the major intellectual force of the day appears to be postmodernism. This new alliance is consonant with the belief that "feminism needs continuous cultural reinvention and postmodernist critique,"[5] and it signals a new era in feminist theory and practice, an era that will be characterized by a militant refusal to appropriate the Enlightenment ideals and their inherent gender-blindness.

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson ascribe a new role to the perspectives that postmodernism and feminism have introduced to contemporary critical thought: they believe that both movements are trying to elaborate new paradigms of social criticism without resorting to traditional philo- sopnical

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[4] See, for example, Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference" in Linda Nicholson, ed., Feminism/ Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1990) for a critical discussion of the ideal of the community and of the ways in which those motivated by this ideal can actually suppress or exclude those they do not identify with.

[5] Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s", *Socialist Review 80*, (March/April 1985), pp. 65-107.

underpinnings.[6] Feminism and postmodernism are of course two
different currents. Postmodernists, Fraser and Nicholson
contend, criticize the more philosophical positions of
foundationalism and essentialism,[7] whereas feminists focus on
the task of social criticism and politics. In their view, the
two perspectives can be developed as enterprises that inform,
correct and complement each other. The tendency of feminist
thought to lapse into foundationalism, for instance, can be
rectified by the postmodern critique of essentialism.
Likewise, the feminist analyses of gender relations and the
vigorous conceptions of social criticism that feminists have
been producing can instruct the politically feeble postmodern
agenda.

First the authors introduce the programme of the
"exemplary postmodernist", Jean-Francois Lyotard, and disclose
what they consider to be the internal tensions of his
arguments. Then they proceed to examine the social force of
feminist critique while arguing that much of its theoretical
underpinnings rely upon traditions that "their commitments,

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[6] N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, "Social Criticism without
Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism"
in Andrew Ross, ed., Universal Abandon? The Politics of
Postmodernism, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,
1988).

[7] Although the authors do not clarify their use of the
terms, I take "foundationalism" to mean the grounding of
theories and attitudes in some ultimate reality, and
"essentialism" to stand for a variety of claims that attribute
to people fixed qualities without accounting for the material
conditions that might shape those qualities.

like those of postmodernism, ought, in principle to rule out."[8] Finally, they examine the prospects for a postmodern feminism.

Fraser and Nicholson side with thinkers who are no longer committed to the idea of philosophy (understood as a discourse that provides underpinnings) as the basis of politics and social criticism. Criticism does not have to be anchored in universals, they assert; "it becomes more pragmatic, ad hoc, contextual and local."[9] This is a variation of Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition. Following the crisis of representation,[10] the "grand narratives of legitimation" lost their credibility. Since the claim of some discourses to be privileged has proven suspiciously modern and since metadiscourses have lost their "meta" status, legitimation becomes today, in our postmodern era, "plural, local and immanent."[11]

The same sort of change applies to the political legitimation. No grand theory of justice is needed, for instance, to conceive of a good, just society. Localized, decentralized political bodies and institutions will do the

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[8] Ibid., p. 84.

[9] Ibid., p. 85. For an extensive discussion of Lyotard's position, see chapter 3.

[10] This has become the conventional way of thematizing the crisis of the realist epistemology whereby the medium (whether language or art) represents accurately an external reality in the subject.

[11] Ibid., p.87.

job. Accordingly, overarching theories of the Marxist sort have missed the point precisely because they were too big and purported to explain too much. According to Lyotard, the "social bond" consists in a multiplicity of discursive practices which are discontinuous and intersecting. Failure to recognize this multiplicity results in "totalizing" theories of humanity or society.

Lyotard, the authors argue, by insisting that the social is heterogeneous and that there can never be a social totality, rules out criticism that employs general categories such as gender or class. However, his attack on large-scale narratives offers a new insight into the construction of foundational social understanding and criticism. This insight, the authors maintain, is something that will ultimately help feminist social criticism be effective without falling into the trap of totalizing conceptions.

Feminism, like postmodernism, has exposed the partiality and contingency of theories and institutions that pretended to represent "reality" or account for all phenomena, natural and social alike. In addition, feminists were prepared for new, pluralistic approaches to their theorizing for two main reasons. First, feminists recognized the diverse kinds of sexism that plagued women in different cultures and at different times. Secondly, increased tensions of the racial, class and ethnic type within the movement sensitized women to questions of difference and identity and forced them to

reconsider a host of assumptions. The result has been more "open" ways of theorizing "attentive to differences and to cultural and historical specificity."[12]

Feminism and Essentialism

Feminists, however, have resorted time and again to what Fraser and Nicholson call "quasi metanarratives,"[13] in order to explain the causes of sexism, for example. Thus Shulamith Firestone's appeal to biological differences between women and men as the primary source of <u>all</u> human conflict (class conflict included) enabled her to explain women's oppression but assumed essentialist "male" and "female" qualities outside any specific historical context and circumstances; to the extent that her theory is based on these essentialist claims it is a target of criticism from a postmodernist point of view. Likewise, theories that did not focus on biological differences but rather on the different spheres of social activity proved to be essentialist as well insofar as they depended upon a sharp distinction between "the private sphere" and "the public sphere."

Fraser and Nicholson trace the origins of such

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[12] Ibid., p. 100.

[13] By "quasi-metanarratives" the authors mean the social theories that feminists have adopted to help them identify sexism. These theories, however, treat human beings as ahistorical and trans-cultural entities and thus fall into the trap of essentialism. The unwarranted assumption that all people or all women have been basically the same throughout time is highly problematic.

shortcomings in feminist theories to the tendency to look for one grand theory charged with the exegesis of everything, "the search for the one key factor that would explain sexism cross-culturally and illuminate all of social life. In this sense, to theorize was by definition to produce a quasi metanarrative."[14]

All theorists who based their analyses on putative cross-cultural activities or attributes[15] have been faulted on at least two accounts: on one hand, categories such as "mothering", "sexuality" and "reproduction" do not display a fixed, universal content; rather their content varies over time and according to their particular historical situation. On the other hand, the above categories are not necessarily conjoined in all societies.

As feminist theorizing becomes increasingly self-reflective and mature, one can discern a move away from totalizing theories and towards more specific tasks towards modes of inquiry that display clearly their limited, concrete and specific boundaries. As a case in point the authors refer to the work of Carol Gilligan who exposed the sexist bias in Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development. Women were found wanting in terms of moral development because the model was derived exclusively from the experience of men. Gilligan

[14] Ibid., p. 95.

[15] Fraser and Nicholson name N. Chodorow, Ann Ferguson, N. Hartsock, N. Folbre and C. Mackinnon.

developed the view that women have an rather different way of reasoning morally and speak in a "different voice" about moral issues. This view of women's moral development presupposes an essentialist view of women. In the authors' words:

> Gilligan's disclaimers notwithstanding, to the extent that she did not specify which women, under which specific historical circumstances, have spoken with the voice in question, and to the extent that she grounded her analysis in the explicitly cross cultural framework of Nancy Chodorow, her model remained essentialist. It perpetuated in a newer, more localized fashion traces of previous, more grandiose quasi metanarratives.[16]

It has become quite clear that, although feminists are continuously revising feminist theory to meet these challenges, nevertheless it is difficult to avoid an essentialism and the employment of categories which extend beyond the particular contexts. By criticizing this tendency as well as Lyotard's call for the dissipation of large historical narrative, Fraser and Nicholson hope to make the case for postmodern feminism as a robust form of social criticism.

There are four points, they contend, that are prerequisite for a postmodern feminist theory. First, they exhort feminists not to take Lyotard's attack on grand narratives too much to heart. Sexism qua political and social problem has had a long history and it requires large theoretical tools in order to be addressed adequately. Secondly, postmodern feminism will be "inflected by

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[16] Ibid., p. 99.

temporality", that is to say, its categories will abide by the cultural and historical specificities of different societies and their respective norms and institutions. Thirdly, postmodern feminist theory would be attuned to the contrasts, changes and diversities that constitute the basis of each society instead of trying to fit everything under a universal law. Fourthly, such a theory would denounce any notion of a unitary subject with transhistorical identity, replacing it with a conception of personhood highly complex, multifarious and plural that would include race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and whatever other parameters are considered vital at the time.

Finally, the authors argue that a postmodern feminism would provide the context, both theoretical and practical, for the understanding of the wide range of needs, interests and experiences of women. Such a theory would "look like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues,"[17] and its underlying premise would be that:

> "whereas some women have some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal; rather,they are interlaced with differences, even with conflicts."[18]

This certainly sounds like a promising agenda for social theory and societal analysis at large. It is also one that can perhaps be best appreciated by those who have concluded

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[17] Ibid., p.102.

[18] Ibid., p.102.

that the "multiple identities" of postmodern theory is a notion compatible with the politics of feminism.

Cyborgs

Donna Haraway is another thinker who envisions a happy and creative marriage between feminism and postmodernism. She characterizes her project as "an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism and materialism."[19] She explains that by "faithful" one is to understand not identification and worship but rather blasphemy. Blasphemy recognizes that things need be taken seriously as well as it recognizes the need for community but it also resists the moralization of the majority rule. Haraway chooses blasphemy and irony as the determinants of her work because as she observes:

> Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method.[20]

At the center of her innovative and terrifying tale stands the "cyborg", i.e. the cybernetic organism. The conjunction is not accidental; the cyborg is an attempt at articulating and formulating a concept that assaults all the tools, images and presuppositions of Western civilization.

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[19] Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p. 65.

[20] Ibid., p.65.

The cyborg is the enacted violation of dominant distinctions especially those between reality and fiction, organism and machine, the two genders, the private and the public, identity and difference, nature and culture. The cyborg exalts the confusion of these boundaries and necessitates assuming explicit responsibility for their construction.[21] It is the prophetic vision of a world in which nothing is given, completed or organic. In the cyborg world everything is an issue; everything is subject to questioning and modification.

Haraway asserts that the reason her fictional/realistic myth is possible lies in the boundary breakdowns that have occurred in three fundamental sets of "clean distinctions": between human and animal, between organism and machine and between the physical and the non-physical.

i) The late twentieth century is typified by (amongst other things) the general understanding that humans are not unique and that most of the capacities or faculties that differentiated them, in the past, from the rest of the animal kingdom are in fact shared by animals as well. Animals can use tools, have mental events, social behaviour and language. This understanding coupled with contemporary sensitivity towards animal rights and the moral responsibility surrounding their pro'ection corroborate Haraway's claim that the line between humans and animals, culture and nature, has been reduced to a "faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or

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[21] Ibid., p.66.

professional disputes between life and the social sciences."[22]

ii) Machines are no longer the assembled pieces of matter they used to be. Today, machines are stripped of their innocence, dependence and passivity.

> Modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible...miniaturization has turned out to be about power; small is not so much beautiful as pre-eminently dangerous, as in cruise missiles.[23]

In this context the definitions of what counts as natural and as artificial, as mind and body, as self-developing and externally-designed, seem unprecedently ambiguous. At this point in history, Haraway maintains, "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert."[24]

iii) The technology of the age epitomized in Silicon Valley restructures consciousness and sociopolitical reality. The most potent machines/sources of energy today are microelectronic devices, electromagnetic waves and segments of a spectrum. They are here, they are there, they are everywhere and nowhere. They are "floating signifiers as hard to see politically as materially."[25] They preserve secrets, exchange codes, exercise power over social routines and yet remain invisible.

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[22] Ibid., p.68.

[23] Ibid., p.70.

[24] Ibid., p. 71.

[25] Ibid., p.71.

But how are these breached boundaries related to feminist struggles and feminist theory on the whole? How can the illusion of clearly defined dichotomies, once abdicated, open the path for a shift of perspective needed to contest for meaning and power? The eradication of the dualism of organism/machine, of organic/technical helps redefine and restructure not only the bodies of the late twentieth century occupants of history but their social practices and struggles as well. The dichotomies[26] that shaped Western thought and traditions actually operated as logics of domination over what counted as other, namely, people of color, women, workers, nature, animals.[27] The self (that is the white, male, dominant, autonomous, western, powerful self) defined itself by excluding all the para- meters of the aforementioned "other". The upshot of these transgressed boundaries is that the concept of "man," as it has been differentiated from all things mechanical or animal, that is to say, the humanistic concept of man is irrevocably problematized. Once this concept is problematized, then its corollary concept "woman," the exemplification of the "other," is problematized too. Problematization of this sort reveals previously unthinkable

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[26] Haraway relates a plethora of such dualisms including: self/other, male/female, culture/nature, mind/ body, right/wrong, total/partial, God/man, active/passive, reality/appearance, civilized/primitive, maker/made, public/ private, material/immaterial, etc.; the list seems to be inexhaustible.

[27] "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p. 96.

possibilities of an "oppositional consciousness," a con-
sciousness that does not seek to understand/explain the world
in hope of locating the "one true story" or invoking myths of
primordial unity and order.   Thus, by embracing   the
breakdown of traditional distinctions, feminists are put in a
position whereby they can re-imagine and restate possible
definitions of embodied existence and social reality without
resorting to unifying devices (such as "woman") which have
been proven inappropriate and problematic anyway.[28]

By appropriating the technological and literary tools[29]
women can circumvent the totalizing myth which informs the
search for a common language. Language doesn't have to be
common; the only requisite is that whatever language is
available keeps reinventing itself in an effort to maintain
its proximity to the rapidly changing experience of daily life
and meaningfulness.

Communication cannot be perfect,[30] if by perfection we

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[28] The question of who populates "us" or "we" has had a
long and painful history. Feminists finally realized, with the
"help" of women of color or third world women, that on many
occasions they replicated the imperializing and colonizing
techniques of exclusion characteristic of "man's culture".

[29] Haraway defines as such tools the retold stories of
origin and creation whose main purpose is to delegitimize the
myths of creation based on original innocence, whole- ness,
totality.

[30] The classic Habermasean claim is that perfection of
speech acts through elimination of grammatical and semantic
distortions can lead to truth. Jurgen Habermas,Communication
and the Evolution of Society, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977).
Also his Theory of Communicative Action, trans. Thomas

designate the absence of ambiguity and the adherence to fixed

rules; communication is by definition partial and localized.

Likewise, politics, freed from assumptions of universal

structures, "paradisaic representations of a 'lost' organic

society,"[31] hierarchies of domination and privileged readings

of consciousness and history, can provide fresh sources of

imagination for challenging and eventually changing the

existing arrangements. In Haraway's words:
> Feminisms and Marxisms have run aground on Western
> epistemological imperatives to construct a revolution-
> ary subject from the perspective of a hierarchy of
> oppressions and/or a latent position of moral superior-
> ity, innocence and greater closeness to nature. With no
> available original dream of a common language or original
> symbiosis promising protection from hostile "masculine"
> separation, but written into the play of a text that has
> no finally privileged reading or salva- tion history to
> recognize "oneself" as fully implicated in the world,
> frees us of the need to root politics in identification,
> vanguard parties, purity, and mother- ing.[32]

But how is it that feminisms and Marxisms have shared

assumptions in the construction of a revolutionary subject?

It might be worthwhile to pursue the question of whether

feminism and Marxism share in fact as much ideological impetus

as many thinkers - feminist and other - claim they do. A

rather easily identifiable juncture of the two is implied in

the degree to which they both use psychoanalytic theory.

McCarthy, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984). For a relevant discussion, Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) pp. 15-17.

[31] Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, pp. 15-17.

[32] "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p.95.

As Laura Kipnis argues, the long-standing criticism addressed to Marxism has been that it lacks a theory of the subject.[33] In an attempt to amend this conspicuous shortcoming Marxism overcame its initial mistrust toward the "bourgeois practice" and allowed psychoanalysis to supply the missing theory of the subject. Feminism, in a similar fashion, controlled its original suspicion of psychoanalysis as another "prescription for patriarchy" and started viewing psychoanalysis as a potential political tool strong enough to account sufficiently for the gendered subject.

This appropriation of psychoanalysis, by both Marxism and feminism and contrary to all expectations marked a move back from the realm of politics to an entrenchment in the more benign structures of the unconscious. The emphasis shifted away form the 'collective reality' and toward the analysis of the unconscious in hope of finding theoretical strategies for making sense of reality. But how can psychoanalysis effect social change? How can it defeat hegemony or coercion? As Kipnis explains, "a psycho- analytically inflected political theory constructs a particular and specialized theoretical object"[34] which needs to be named. Any such theoretical

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[33] Laura Kipnis, "Feminism: The Political Conscience of Postmodernism?" in Andrew Ross, ed., Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.149. Although there are different kinds of feminist theory and different kinds of Marxism, the author uses (at this point at least) the terms in a broad and general sense.

[34] Ibid., p.152.

object needs to be construed as representing some anterior reality which will serve as the criterion of success in representing it. Now, if the theoretical object prescribes some theoretical strategies, then by implication it makes also available various political options. It follows then that the construction of a theoretical object reveals or rather represents a political terrain, the product of an interplay between what can be represented and what cannot.

> As with all representation, there is here a certain
> appearance of transparency; the textual operations of
> its own production and organization of meaning are
> effaced. This is a strategy of containment as well as
> of possibility. Or, in other words, as it would common-
> ly be held in psychoanalytic criticism, the discursive
> field is structured by its absences and its repres-
> sions; it is equally a product of the territory it can-
> not represent. What emerges then in the constitution
> of the theoretical object is a dialectic of the re-
> presentable and the nonrepresentable, or what is
> generally called an aesthetics.[35]

Politics and The Aesthetic

It seems appropriate now to consider the aesthetization of politics and the minimized capacity of theory to construct its object of inquiry.

As Kipnis explains, the variations of Marxist and

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[35] Ibid., p.152. For an enticing discussion on the issue of representation, language and logic, see the 'early' Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). See also Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition. The "aesthetic" is used here to signify art and representation as these were conceived within modernism. Ever since Kant the sphere of the aesthetic (his "sublime"and "beautiful") enjoyed an autonomy that allowed it to exist for itself, without purpose and without any link with everyday praxis.

feminist theories that reject the appropriation (for political

purposes) of the psychoanalytic approach tend to favor a

realist aesthetic of the socialist type.[36] The interesting

implication in this affiliation of politics and psychoanalysis

is that it discloses the great extent to which aesthetic

modernism has relied on the Freudian thematics of the subject.

> Many theorists of modernism have found it impossible to
> theorize the twentieth century avant-garde unless
> through Freud's theory of dreams and the unconscious.[37]

The trouble with the pertinent move of some variations of

Western Marxism and feminist theory toward psychoanalysis is

that it suggests a retreat from the world of "real" politics

and a focus on the aestheticization of the political. Thus,

> if psychoanalytic theory can be seen as filling a
> certain hiatus between politics and aesthetics, the
> postmodern critique of modernism would seem to be the
> starting point in evaluating the consequences of this
> gesture and pointing a way toward a theory of absences
> that constitute first-world radical theory at this
> juncture.[38]

The problematics surrounding the relation between

politics and aesthetics has had a long and interesting

history. Aesthetic expression has operated as the

compensation for the loss of engagement in actual political

struggles. Kipnis draws attention to Perry Anderson's

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[36] Kipnis' examples include the feminist appropriation of the realist novel and the related implications of turning women into full-speaking and articulate subjects, the critical realism of Lukacs, etc.

[37] Kipnis, p. 153.

[38] Ibid., p.154.

analysis of the phenomenon. In his Considerations on Western
Marxism, Anderson maps the transformations that typify
Western Marxism and its exponents especially after WW II.
Anderson maintains that the central preoccupations of classic
Marxism (politics, political economy, analyses of
infrastructures, class struggle) were displaced to the
aesthetic, that is, the benign routine of academic "studied
silence" and the retreat to the refuge of professional
philosophy.[39] The divorce of political theory from politics
and the affiliation of the former with high culture became the
exemplification of Walter Benjamin's early warning about the
"aestheticization of politics".[40] Theory lost its inherent
capacity to construct its political object and became an
autonomous moment in need of no external, political, actual
criterion for its verification and justification. This
configuration of politics, aesthetics and theoretical autonomy
determinative of late Western Marxism is replicated, in
Kipnis' opinion, in (at least some) current feminist
theory.[41]

The appropriation of psychoanalysis for a political
aesthetics led certain kinds of feminist theory to the gradual

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[39] Perry Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism,
(London: Verso, 1976), esp. chapter 3. For a relevant
discussion see also F. Jameson, "The Politics of Theory:
Ideological Positions in the Postmodernist Debate," in New
German Critique, No. 33 (Fall 1984), pp. 53-66.

[40] Kipnis, p.155.

[41] Kipnis, p.155.

repudiation of all realist representation and in effect to the rejection of high culture (as opposed to mass culture). However, any politics grounded on the modernist distinction of mass or popular and high culture runs the risk of widening the gap between popular ("mainstream") political positions and the ones of the vanguardist, leftist, radical, marginal variety. As the gap widens so does the distance between theoretical frameworks and everyday social life.

The element that Kipnis actually finds most disturbing about the appropriation by some feminists of psychoanalysis is the lingering Neo-Kantian[42] position vis-a-vis aesthetics that it entails. At the heart of this position lies the autonomy of the aesthetic along with the transcendental subject, coherent and transhistorical. This issue is anything but irrelevant since most current turmoil in various intellectual quarters is generated by the attempts to reformulate modernism and its stance concerning subjectivity and rationality.

The "Decentered Subject"

At the heart of contemporary reformulations of modernity lies the condition of the subject in the postmodern world.

These proliferated discourses that scrutinize the subject, the complex techniques of drawing attention to it and

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[42] Neo-Kantian in the sense that it assumes the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere.

the practices that reinvent it as the site of investigation
and speculation[43] exemplify the so-called "hypervisibility of
the subject". This hypervisibility is indicative of some
alteration in its ideological status and the question
regarding it must be, according to Kipnis, a political one.
The category "centered subject,"[44] that is the subject of
modernism, was associated with the Enlightenment rationality
consolidated in the desire to appropriate the world (both
physical and social) cognitively. The newly emerged category
"decentered subject" is the typical illustration of the
"decline of the great imperial powers of modernity, the
traumatic loss of hegemony of the West."[45] Consequently,
what is lacking from this newly-arrived category (i.e.,
"decentered subject") is a political discourse; and this void,
Kipnis asserts, can be filled by feminism. "Feminism is the
paradigmatic political discourse of postmodernism".[46]

The "Varieties" of Feminism

Feminism of course is far from being a homogenous,
unified theory as the predominant distinction between Anglo-

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[43] Kipnis, p.157.

[44] For an extensive discussion on the topic see chapters
3 and 4.

[45] Kipnis, p.158.

[46] Ibid., p.160.

American and continental feminism suggests.[47] The Anglo-American tradition relies on a theory of language that assumes a recoverable common history and therefore views language as transparent. Its political subject is the biological woman, a focus that makes its resourcefulness for other discourses rather limited. Continental feminism, on the other hand, by emphasizing the materiality of the signifier, and structure over subject[48] and by assuming as its political subject a space rather than a gender seems to provide more durable context for political analyses surpassing the boundaries of discourses pertaining to the political struggles of women only.

Continental feminists insist on the importance of recognizing the power structures that designate the position of the "Other", variously occupied by women, people of color, people of working class, people of particular sexual preference etc. Through this insistence or because of it feminism has to be understood as a decolonizing movement. A movement that allows persons to emerge in their own terms and thus prepares the ground for the rearrangement of both social relations and the theoretical means of comprehending them. In this sense feminism claims the credibility that Marxism has long lost.

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[47] Interestingly enough, the distinction is based primarily on the two "feminisms'" attitudes toward competing theories of language.

[48] Ibid., p,159.

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If Marxism is viewed as the radical political discourse of modernity and feminism as the radical political discourse of postmodernity, it can be said that each functions as a dominant articulating principle through which other, disparate political struggles enunciate the possibility of political transformation.[49]

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[49] Kipnis, p. 161. See chapter 4 for an extensive discussion of the various feminist positions.

Chapter 2

POSTMODERNISM

> It used to be that the great
> literary modifier was the word
> beyond... But we seem to have
> exhausted the beyond, and today
> the sociological modifier is **post**.[50]

History of the Term

Daniel Bell's observation points to a manifold change in the political, economic, and cultural sensibilities of the West. As is the case with all major shifts in the evolution of intellectual history "postmodernism" has been received either with great enthusiasm as the accurate -however provisional - rubric that signifies the current break from the past[51] or with scorn backed by the claim that the need for renewal and innovation produces arbitrary and meaningless terms that lead, eventually, to the destabilization and

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[50] Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 53.

[51] Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, p. xxiv. Lyotard defines this break in terms of what he calls the incredulity towards "the great meta-narratives" which originated in the Enlightenment and its ideals. See also Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern" in L. J. Nicholson ed., Feminism/Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1990); originally published in New German Critique, Vol.33 (Fall 1984). Also, Andrew Ross, ed., in the Introduction to Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism (pp. vii-xvii) offers an interesting discussion of the ways in which the "new sensibility" breaks away from the modernist "world of universals".

"pollution" of bourgeois values and culture. In Bell's words:

> The post-modern temper ... provides the psychological
> spearhead for an onslaught on the values and motivational
> patterns of 'ordinary' behavior, in the name of
> liberation, eroticism, freedom of impulse, and the like.
> It is this, dressed up in more popular form, which is the
> importance of the post-modernist doctrine. For it means
> that a crisis of middle-class values is at hand.[52]

There are countless variations of and approaches to the theme of postmodernism. Whether political, anti-political or post-political, these intellectual movements manifest the emergence of radically new ways of doing and undoing things, of ordering experience, and of understanding the world. "New ways", however, does not necessarily imply that institutions, ideas and practices of the past came to an abrupt end and were replaced by new ones. It rather conveys the idea that there has been a gradual replacement, a kind of mutation from one set of assumptions and practices to the next.[53]

The term first appeared within the context of literary criticism in the late 1950s[54] in the works of Irving Howe and

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[52] Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976), p. 52.

[53] Such gradualism is contrary to Foucault's conviction, expressed mainly in The Order of Things:An Archeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Random House, 1970), that history consists in radical discontinuities. Here Foucault is influenced by Nietzsche who, in accounting for the origin of bad conscience refers to history as a process that is neither gradual nor voluntary, as a process that does not "represent an organic adaptation to new conditions but a break, a leap, a compulsion." On the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1969), p.86.

[54] Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern" in Feminism / Postmodernism, p. 237.

Harry Levin. A later literary exponent of postmodernism, Ihab Hassan, maintains that the word originally appeared in 1934 in Federico de Onis' Anthology of Spanish and Spanish-American Poetry and subsequently in Arnold Toynbee's 1947 A Study of History.[55] Later, the term was adopted by architects[56] who in their attempt to shift the architectural paradigm from the mechanical[57] to the organic produced a wholesale cultural critique of modernism. In the words of a prominent architect:

> The present situation tolerates opposite approaches... If there is a single direction, I prefer the reader will discover that it is pluralistic: the idea that an architect must master several styles and codes of communication and vary these to suit the particular culture for which he is designing.[58]

What could be more "postmodern" in spirit than this evocation of pluralism as the antidote to "normal" canons of style and technique? This "tolerance of opposite approaches" is the prelude to the postmodern practice of collapsing traditional dichotomies and disjunctions which presupposed clearly delineated areas of signification, which in turn

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[55]. Ihab Hassan, The Postmodern Turn (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 85.

[56] See Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972) and Charles A. Jencks, The Language of Postmodern Architecture (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

[57] As exemplified by the industrial design of the Bauhaus or Henri le Corbusier's motto: "houses are machines for living."

[58] Charles A. Jencks, The Language of Postmodern Architecture, p. 7.

presupposed the unquestioned acceptance of ontological truths and essentialist categories. This tolerance, in fact, is the belated reaction to the almost religious adherence to the principles of modernism: high standards of evaluation in literature and the arts (hostility to mass culture) on one hand, and absolute faith in reason and the rationality of progress (the rationale of the Enlightenment) on the other. But how does postmodernism fit under the rubrics of tolerance, diversity and plural- istic values?   We turn now to this question.

"Postmodernism," the term, in congruency with the tendencies, practices and observations it stands for, defies the pressure for furnishing definitions that are stable and that refer to one particular area of signification. The pluralism the term represents can actually be detected in the signification of the term itself which can in fact designate:

> the decor of a room, the design of a building, the diegesis of a film, the construction of a record,... an anti-teleological tendency within epistemology, the attack on the "metaphysics of presence" a general attenuation of feeling, ... the predicament of reflexivity, a group of rhetorical tropes, a proliferation of surfaces, a new phase in commodity fetishism, a fascination for "images", codes and styles, a process of cultural, political or existential fragmentation and/or crisis , the "de-centering" of the subject, an "incredulity towards metanarratives," ... the collapse of cultural hierarchies, ...[59]

Such an abundance of meanings is adequate to confuse the

[59] Dick Hebdige, "Postmodernism and 'The Other Side'," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10 (Summer 1986), p. 78.

"habit" of thinking in terms of categories operating under the banner of sense. But this is no accident: it is a crucial aspect of postmodernism's attack on distinctions and categorizations that have helped shape (or in Foucault's jargon "produce") the Western mind. "Postmodernism" has generated endless debates and conflicts, most of which stem from the now famous Habermas-Lyotard dispute over the project of modernity.[60] However, this much has been conceded by all those discussing it: "postmodernism" does not simply designate artistic tendencies in the West[61] but it is germane to a wide range of modes of thought which demarcate the present intellectual economy.[62] Postmodern theory involves the entire symbolic universe of culture and the changes that occur within it, from language and art to science and politics. It addresses fields of exploration as diverse as philosophy (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard), music (Cage, Boulez), literary theory (Barthes, Kristeva, Jameson), philosophy of science (Kuhn, Feyerabend), architecture (Venturi, Jencks, Bolin), psychoanalysis (Laing, Deleuze, Lacan). Such diversity can

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[60] Lyotard epitomizes postmodernism as the "incredulity toward metanarratives" whereas Habermas maintains that the project of modernity is not finished and that the power of consensus can still uphold the promise of collective emancipation.

[61] Ihab Hassan, The Postmodern Turn, p. 89.

[62] Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern." See also his After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); cf. Allan Megill, Prophets of Extremity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), esp. ch. 8.

make for further controversies, especially amongst scholars who search for the semantic stability of a term before confronting the conceptual problems it evokes.

Modernism/Postmodernism

Following the precedent set by Kant in 1784, thinkers all over the industrialized world keep asking themselves the painful and, so it seems, unanswerable question: "where are we now in philosophy?"

The totalizing explanatory power of categories employed either by Marxist or Liberal theory is diminishing in credibility. Faith in the emancipatory function of reason falls short of its anticipated utopian paradise, and the available tools for making sense of everyday existence prove inadequate in the face of an elusive, rapidly changing reality, typified by bureaucratic control, scientific culture and institutionalized consumerism. The need for re-legitimation, i.e., for reconstructing the theoretical justificatory framework, is more conspicuous than ever.

The legitimation crisis that followed the exit from the mediaeval society (appeal to centers of authority, such as the church, the king or the feudal lord) was resolved by evoking the great metanarratives of modernity[63] exemplified by the unquestioned trust in the accomplishments of reason (science, rational organization of society, progress) as this was

[63] J-F Lyotard's thesis in The Postmodern Condition.

conceived and articulated by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. In the late twentieth century, we are faced with another legitimation crisis, this one following the horrors and injustices committed in the name of the very ideals of the Enlightenment. Enlightened reason collapsed into its "other", into what it purported to replace in the first place, namely, myth (where myth should be understood as the undialectical appeal to normative structures validated by tradition and habit).

The "Modern"[64] has been defined differently by different philosophers. In Hegel, for example, "modern" is the enterprise of the Enlightenment which can be classified in accordance with the three critiques of Kant: science, morality, art. For Theodor Adorno, "modern" designates the artistic creation of the early 20th century. For present purposes we shall focus on the definition of the "modern" according to which human beings are autonomous, transcendental agents capable of knowledge. In this context, knowledge is acquired through the representation of the external world (the object or res extensa) in the conscious world (the subject or res cogitans). "Reality" exists only for the subject which creates the world to the extent that the world represents it; that which the subject cannot represent in thought does not exist.

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[64] For detailed analysis of modernity and its ensuing definition of the self, see Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

These notions of autonomy, representation and rationality founded the "emancipatory impulse" of the Enlightenment in the sense that they aided the invalidation of premodern structures of domination. The newly emerged principle of subjectivity produced the philosophy of reflection: celebration of consciousness capable of knowing both itself and the world "as it really is". In Hegel's words, the principle of the modern world is freedom of subjectivity.[65]

The new historical and intellectual era which began with the Reformation and continued with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution is characterized primarily by an exemplary refutation of the past. The refutation of the past required a new form of legitimation and modernity accomplished this by appealing to its own standards of reason and subjectivity. (There was no point appealing to a principle outside modernity so one had to be postulated from within.) Thus, religious and metaphysical legitimation was replaced by the principles of rationality, autonomy and subjectivity.

Hegel, resisting the romantic and aesthetic approach of a Schiller or a Holderlin, proposed to legitimize modernity by means of a dialectical critique of reason.[66] Although this

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[65] Frederick G. Weiss, ed., Hegel: The Essential Writings (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) p. 269.

[66] D. Ingram, Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) p. 81.

critique was first introduced in the language of aesthetics,[67] it soon surfaced in the political philosophy of Hegel to be later reinvented for the socioeconomic analysis of society by Marx.

Weber on Modernity

A similar approach was adopted by another heir of the Enlightnment legacy, Max Weber, who equated the transition to modernity with the process of rationalization - a gradual progress toward reason. He, however, addressed the question of whether rationalization shows the way to human emancipation and the rational/just organization of society. Even though modernity provided individuals with liberating frameworks - artists, scientists, administrators, merchants became free of deceptions and able to operate beyond and above religious restraints - it also brought about cultural and social transformations[68] manifested in modern law, modern science, and increasing instrumental and bureaucratic control, all heading toward the disenchantment of the world:

> Wherever rational, empirical knowledge has consistently brought about the disenchantment of the world and its transformation into a causal mechanism, a definitive pressure arises against the claims of the ethical

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[67] "La querelle des anciens et des modernes" pointed first of all to the superiority of the modern era with regard to the freedom of expression. If the principle of antiquity was beauty [freedom within nature], the principle of modernity was the sublime [freedom above nature], Ibid. p. 81.

[68] See M. Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York: Scribner, 1958).

postulate that the world is a divinely ordered, that is, somehow ethically meaningful cosmos.[69]

Stripped of moral and religious values and imperatives the rational systems of modernity imprisoned "man", that is, put him in the cage of rigid structures devoid of meaning.

> Once the cognitive structures of a disenchanted consciousness are institutionalized as secularized systems of cultural discourse and social interaction, a process of rationalization is set into motion, which tends to undermine the social basis for the existence of autonomous and rational individuals.[70]

The rationalization of humanity, the standardization of production, the institutionalized autonomy of knowledge, normative rightness and art, and the secularization of the world (both physical and social) led eventually to epistemological and moral positions which valorized scientific efficiency and the idea of progress but at the same time eroded existential meaningfulness, and mechanized human relations.[71] It might have been the case that effectiveness, commodity production, the consolidation of the civil state and market economy were successfully attained but they were attained at the expense of the regression of enlightened reason to ideology and reification. As Adorno and Horkheimer

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[69] M Weber, From Max Weber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.335.

[70] A. Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and Enlightenment" in R. Bernstein, ed., Habermas and Modernity (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1985), p.43.

[71] A theme taken up later on by M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno in the Dialectic of Enlightenment.

contended in the <u>Dialectic of Enlightenment</u>, enlightened civilization had reverted to barbarism.[72]

To state the problem differently, the project of the Enlightenment was undermined from within due to the radical contradiction that accompanied it since its inception. Perhaps the greatest aspiration that characterized the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment was the belief that the rational organization of social life and, sub- sequently, a science of society that would set the terms for a rational discourse were within the scope of conscious, purposive, "enlightened" human beings. At the same time, the enlightened philosophers endorsed the canons of morality and freedom. Hence the inherent contradiction: if human beings *qua* free agents responsible for their moral choices, actions, and everyday *praxis* were to become subjects (literally, objects) of such a science, they would automatically lose their attribute of freedom and they would become determined entities in accordance with the rest of the natural world.[73]

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[72] Ibid., p.xvi. W. Benjamin has also argued for the intimate relation of civilization to barbarism: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another." Thesis VII, from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in <u>Illuminations</u>, (transl. by H. Zohn, edited by H. Arendt, pp. 255-66. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968). **Barbarism** should be understood here as the opposite of reason and civilization.

[73] Allan Megill in his <u>Prophets of Extremity:</u> (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), offers an insightful discussion of this contradiction, esp. in the

Obviously, such a radical dilemma has implications that can easily sensitize us to Kant's `noble` struggle to postulate freedom as the presupposition of morality.[74] However, underneath the Kantian tenet, lies the Cartesian sharp dichotomy of subject and object. This dichotomy between subject and object is part of the framework that would set the terms of the discourse in the evolution of thought, culture and society for the next three hundred years.

The philosophical move toward subjectivity and selfhood that started with Descartes (at least in modern times) consolidated the idea of self as the proper subject-matter of philosophy. The complex implications surrounding this 'newly-founded' position are epitomized in the claims of enlightened thought that a) pretended to have a detailed understanding of *self* and through that of all other *selves* and b) maintained the validity of transcendental or universal truths that spoke for all humankind - historical, cultural, geographical, political or racial differences notwithstanding. "Humanity" and "rationality" became the main preoccupations of the era. But if all people at all times are the same,[75] and if this

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Introduction.

[74] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Practical Reason in Carl J. Friedrich, ed., The Philosophy of Kant (New York: Modern Library, 1977).

[75] The *Zeitgeist* was eloquently expounded by David Hume who wrote: "In all nations and ages human nature remains still the same". Quoted in Robert Solomon, Continental Philosophy since 1750 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 9.

'truth' can be brought home by a simple appeal to reason, then everyone *ought* to believe in the same set of moral codes, cognitive structures and political formations. What enlightened reason did not account for was the divergent opinions regarding its own universality or ability to explicate the 'inner workings' of 'human nature'. From the eighteenth century on, enlightened thinkers would engage in

> some of the most pig-headed disagreements in history, no longer caused by pride, avarice, or religious competition, but by *ideology* bolstered with confidence in 'self-evident' truths about the nature of 'human nature'.[76]

The first en masse criticism of the Enlightenment and its unqualified faith in science, rationality and universal principles was carried out by the Romantics. Their reaction however, as R. Solomon explains, did little more than project their own cultural anxieties and efforts to affirm local political and religious convictions.[77] In this sense, the

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[76] Robert Solomon, <u>Continental Philosophy since 1750</u>, p.11.

[77] Ibid., p.12. R. Solomon makes the case for an alternative understanding of the Romantic criticism of the Enlightenment, one that successfully highlights the tacit points of these two currents. He maintains that demographic and political concerns are greatly responsible for the unwarranted assumptions of both the Enlightenment that imagines itself in a position to speak for all humankind and Romanticism that tries to subvert the claims of rationality by appeal to poetic imagination. It is no accident, declares Solomon, that 'the universality of human experience' is first promulgated in cosmopolitan London and Paris at a time when colonization and the 'conquest of nature' are reigning high whereas the romantic reaction emerges from small German states that reject imperialism and have significant interests in defending traditional religion and nationalistic sentiment.

romantic reaction must be viewed within the larger social and political context of Europe at the time.

Nietzsche

The real challenge for the discourse of the Enlightenment was introduced by the classical philologist who placed his attack on the subject-centered reason within the wider context of the relation of knowledge to power as this appeared in the cultural tradition that surrounded him. Nietzsche based his critique of knowledge and morality on a vehement denial of universal principles. The Enlightenment preoccupied itself with the production of universal standards. Everything, from the invention of the self to the implementation of the `morality of the herd', claimed ultimate validity by appealing to some universal and necessary set of precepts. The most disturbing aspect of this `transcendental pretence' was for Nietzsche the fact that it removed all empirical connotations thus forcing the multiplicity of being and experience to comply with some abstraction empty of any actual signification. The modern preoccupation with a particular paradigm of knowledge dissociated the ideal of objectivity from action (in the sense of self-realization). By differentiating the inner from the outer, the present from the past, the actual from the ideal, modernity took the form of a culture of uncultured people since "the people that can be called cultured must be in a real sense a living unity, and

not be miserably cleft asunder into form and substance".[78]

From the very beginning, modernity forged an abundant sense of

self, capable of excessive knowledge but unfit to actually

`connect' with reality:

> Knowledge, taken in excess without hunger, even
> contrary to desire, has no more effect on transforming
> the external life, and remains hidden in a chaotic
> inner world that the modern man has a curious pride in
> calling his *real personality*.[79]

The cognitive proliferation of modern consciousness rendered

its subjects `wandering encyclopedias', but:

> ... the only value of an encyclopedia lies in the
> inside, in the contents, not in what is written
> outside, on the binding... and so the whole of modern
> culture is essentially internal; the bookbinder prints

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[78] Friedrich Nietzsche, <u>The Use and Abuse of History</u>, Translated by Adrian Collins, (New York: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1957), p. 25. Nietzsche has `argued' throughout his work for the necessity of illusion, playful- ness, creativity. The role of historiography is not to represent or to interpret "correctly" but rather to allow for the creation of life-enhancing stories informed by myth, imagination, the "freedom of dreams". This is clearly the anticipation of the returning journey: from logos to mythos that was to become so predominant in twentieth century intellectual life. Cf. M.Heiddeger's opposition to conven- tional historiography which has produced the notion of the world as a fixed "picture" by projecting and objectifying the past (<u>The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays</u>. Trans. by William Lovitt. New York:Harper & Row, 1977), p. 123. Also M. Foucault's thematization of a historiography that "disturbs what was previously considered immobile; fragments what was thought unified;...shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself", (<u>Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews</u>. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard; trans. D.F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.147.

[79] Ibid., p. 23.

... on the cover: `Manual of internal culture for external barbarians'.[80]

Nietzsche's goal remained the unmasking of the modernist model of rationality and ultimately the disclosure of the intrinsic relation of reason to power. One of the driving forces of his thought is the assertion that what is considered `knowledge' (and by implication that which warrants it, i.e., `truth') is only an instrument of survival, an instrument designed by human beings in order to command their experience and secure a sustainable domination over nature both internal and external. Such domination, of course, required the repression of instinct, insight, imagination - all those things that constitute the *truly* human world as opposed to the *fictional* world of logic and "concept nets". The moment repression of instincts and drives is inaugurated, modern life becomes estranged and reduced to a mechanical mode of thinking, inferring, reckoning and co-ordinating cause and effect.[81] Robbed of the ability to find expression *outward*, instincts turn *inward*, thus enacting what `man' would call his self, or soul;[82] gradually this internalization makes the transition to institutionalized domains of truth, knowledge, science, `right' and `wrong'and the replacement of actuality with conceptualization (mediation) is completed. From that

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[80] Ibid., p. 24.

[81] F. Nietzsche, <u>On the Genealogy of Morals</u>, p. 84.

[82] Ibid., p. 84.

point on, questions of normativity or justification are settled by appealing to these `established' ways of conceiving and doing things. What started as a need to order, classify and render experience meaningful became the cornerstone of institutional frameworks that would control, dominate, define and exclude.[83] The process of ordering was basically a process that revealed the internal tension of the will to power. "To impose upon becoming the character of being, that is the supreme will to power".[84]

Nietzsche's overall project provided the context (however provisionally and unsystematically) for the understanding of the interplay of power and knowledge and the primacy of the former over the formation of the latter. He introduced suspicion as a form of critique, as the perspective from which all discourses and routines dealing with transcendental foundations and universal principles should be considered. He

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[83] Foucault would later maintain that power is not only or necessarily negative: "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact power produces; it produces realities; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth." Discipline and Punish, p. 174. And elsewhere, "if power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted is that ...it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse." Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977. Ed. Colin Gordon; trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper. (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1980) p.119.

[84] F. Nietzsche, The Will to Power, Walter Kaufmann, ed., (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 330.

demonstrated that "truth" is essentially the "prevalent truth" that emerged and consolidated itself out of forces expressing human interests: drives and values, fears and aspirations, passions and prejudices.[85]   More importantly, perhaps, Nietzsche provided a cogent account as to why rationalism, by undercutting tradition and devitalizing the rich life-stories that had nourished humanity for centuries, removed meaningfulness from the human enterprise and cultivated the soil for the growth of nihilism.[86] Having diagnosed the salient tendencies of the modernist ideology he declared: "what I relate is the history of the next two centuries.   I describe what is coming ... : *the advent of nihilism.*[87]

Structuralism

Against this background of total critique of the modern, "humanized" world arises an increasingly systematic refutation of the Enlightenment notion of transcendental self.   The new

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[85] Close to what Foucault would thematize later as the notion of "discursive formations".

[86] Interesting discussions on the theme are furnished by Ihab Hassan, The Postmodern Turn (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987), pp. 196-198 and Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976), pp. 3-4. See also Allan Megill, who distinguishes two kinds of Nietzschean nihilism, a) a passive one which involves a fatalistic acceptance of the world's nullity and therefore hinders any significant attempt at transforming the world and b) an active or aesthetic nihilism which allows human beings to invent a world in the place of the absent one. In Prophets of Extremity, pp.33-34.

[87] F. Nietzsche, The Will to Power, p. 3.

form of criticism, however, shifts from the transcendental self of the Enlightenment to the structure of language as the symbol-system through which all of reality (including self-reality) is mediated. The reason for this shift in sensibility and premisses (epitomized in the structuralism of Levi-Strauss) was the need for "scientific" methods and analytical procedures. With these tools, the examination of the various elements that constitute any discursive system (linguistic or other) in terms of their relation to the rest of the elements of that system - and consequently to all other systems - became possible. Decoding the system of signs that language is would entail the decoding of the structure of consciousness and finally the social reality that surrounds it. This was quite an intellectual transformation: from the omnipotent self that creates the world of objects insofar as this world represents it to the self that - while wanting in onto- logical priority - is merely a construct determined by unconscious desires and dispositions, societal exigencies, linguistic conventions and networks of allegiances.

The appeal of structuralism was great since it promised a science of *objective structures*. Yet what structuralism achieved was little more than the replacement of the substantive, "deeply rooted" self of the Enlightenment with a structure. This structure serves as the point of departure for investigations that would conclude with articulations of "objective laws" of human thought and action. The claim of

structuralists to universal knowledge about human nature via the study of universal structures appeared very attractive to a world preoccupied with science and objectivity. However appealing though, as a theory of human nature and society, structuralism was criticized for retaining the presuppositions of modernism regarding subjectivity and knowledge.[88] On the positive side, structuralists introduced the valuable insight that would open new chapters in many disciplines: the terms of *any* discourse (i.e., *any* system of elements, whether political, linguistic, or cultural) are **relative** to the rest of the terms[89] and can be identified only by the particular way they stand in that system, or discourse.

The new centrality of language (in the analysis of the emergence of the established institutions that demand for themselves universal meaningfulness) was retained in the work of Derrida and Foucault, although they rejected the ambitions of the structuralists to provide objective structures of `human nature'.

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[88] For critical assessments of structuralism, see Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference (trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1978) and Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language. A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).

[89] This notion of *différance* was first introduced in linguistics by de Saussure and fully explored by Derrida.

Poststructuralism

Foucault and Derrida are two of the most prominent heirs of the Nietzschean legacy whose scepticism toward any totalizing concept of humanity placed them in the intellectual frame that followed structuralism, namelly, poststructuralism.

Both authors shed suspicion on the "bankrupt" notions of the Cartesian - modern polarization of subject and object and the related issues of the privileged or right way of understanding and doing things (through representation and interpretation) grounded in some transcendental principle. By using literary deconstruction (in the case of Derrida) and genealogical historiography (in the case of Foucault), they demonstrate that transcendental subjectivity, uniform cognition and "fixed" signifiers are pretensions and illusions that belong to the past.

Although Derrida's project allows for no simple, or single interpretation,[90] it can be tentatively summarized in his proposal to de-reify language and cancel the Western

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[90] A. Megill contends that to try to interpret Derrida's work is to engage in an act of violence since his writings are [purport to be] nonsensical (Prophets of Extremity, p.259). This can be understood in the light of Derrida's own struggle to criticise the language and institutions of which he is part. Hence, his attempt to write words that permit multiple signification and demonstrate (through this semantic fluidity) the "impurity of the sign". Although different (in approach) from the Nietzschean or Heideggerean critique of western metaphysics his venture is akin to all projects that have sought to de-hypostasize the illusion of absolute "presence" as this has been propagated by the assumed correspondence between words and things. Also, Fredric Jameson pursues a similar line of argument in The Prison-House of Language, pp. 173-176.

illusion regarding the primacy of self consciousness - as this is expressed in reified language. By doing so, he departs from the area of Kantian distinctions (theoretical/ practical/aesthetic and theory/practice) and leaps into a world informed by Nietzschean values: irony, parody, playfulness, ambivalence, bliss.

The main target of the Derridean criticism is the philosophy of the subject, the coercive unity/identity[91] that accompanies it and the metaphysical arrogance grounded on the pretensions of that philosophy. Derrida starts with the identification of the illusion of a unitary self, capable of self-knowledge and self-control. This illusion consists basically in the belief that such fixed hypostases as selves acquire knowledge in a permanent way that is not tainted by 'accidents' such as time, space, mechanisms of mediation, etc., and exemplifies the grave mistake called the metaphysics of presence. This metaphysics can be understood best as the identity of subject and object that occurs through the transparency of language. The solid correspondence of referent and signifier enables the transcendental subject to grasp

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[91] Traditionally the need for identity and self-preservation was fulfilled by creating essences that could be reduced to the mind. It was Adorno (before Derrida) who made explicit the problematics surrounding the 'logic of identity', instrumental reason, and the ways these two operated in capitalist societies. Unlike Derrida, however, Adorno reserved a space for the tension between subject and object while warning against the reifying idealism which, by means of the logic of identity, strips entities from their materiality (Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics, New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1973).

fully and once and for all the unequivocal meaning of the static object. Hence, the misconception that surrounds Western thought: transcendental subjects constitute and express universal meanings.

Derrida replaces this ontological and linguistic model that excludes, represses and silences[92] with a more subtly nuanced paradigm whereby grams[93] (the units of analysis that replace signs) combine and recombine, break away and converge in accordance with the spatio-temporal variables that inform the signifying process. This way, Derrida shows that just as speaking and writing subjects are always historically situated, so is language particular, constantly re-invented, and dependent upon 'impurity' due to its relation to contextual existence. Meaning loses its absolutist character and becomes subject to endless dissemination.

Following literary deconstruction, 'full presence' (having lost its linguistic apparatus) is replaced by the more modest conditional and equivocal presence that is partly

[92] For interesting discussions regarding the ways in which 'reason'(as this was conceived and applied in western models of thought) monopolized discourse and colonized the 'Other' see Derrida's "Cogito and the History of Madness" in Writing and Difference and Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Press, 1978). Similar themes form the core of many feminist writers' work on both sides of the Atlantic: from H. Cixous and J. Kristeva to N. Fraser and L. Nicholson.

[93] Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, Translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976); also by the same author, "Differance" in Margins of Philosophy, Translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

absent and (only) partly present. The long career of the Cartesian myth of transparency and certainty comes to an abrupt end and utterances, 'presences', representations as well as subjects become susceptible of multiple interpretations.

With Foucault this proliferation of perspectives is elevated to the status of a persistent critique aimed (once again) at the inventions of modernity - subject and knowledge, truth and the human sciences, historiography and reason. He shows how the modern consciousness, by using techniques of domination and regulation produces a 'self' to subsequently postulate it as the frame of reference for all analyses and practices - especially those pertaining to the social world.

Although Foucault's thought is complex and (itself) constantly changing perspectives and priorities, it cannot be mistaken for anything but variations on the same theme: a meticulously edified critique of the humanism that is rooted in the Enlightenment, exemplified in the multiple forms of knowledge or *épistémè* and expressed in the systems of organization and administration of modernity.

In his early works[94] Foucault surveys the processes that first identify heterogeneity (the poor, the sick, the criminal) delimit it, isolate it and then enact institutions that administer control. The theme is already there. The

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[94] That is, <u>Madness and Civilization</u>, and <u>The Birth of the Clinic</u>.

emergence of the 'subject' is closely related to the humanism of the Enlightenment and the Cartesian model of subjectivity and reason. Madness, for instance, becomes the 'Other' of reason some time in the eighteenth century. It is for the first time also that it is not classified along with poverty, crime and homelessness. The human sciences, with their internal divisions in place are ready to start exerting control over the minds and the bodies of the populace. The appearance of the asylum, the clinic, the prison intersects with the constant surveillance of subjects that do not withstand the critical *gaze* of reason and are therefore rendered objects of cognition - supervised and isolated.

Foucault's historical analysis (his 'archeology') demonstrates that 'knowledge' (and its corollary, 'societal formation') as it is appropriated by both science and history[95] is the product of discourses and practices that are situated in particular social arrangements (or orderings)[96]

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[95] The two forms of reflection that constitute what Foucault identifies as the third *épistémè* of Western thought, in The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Pantheon, 1970.)

[96] The Inquisition provided the model for the observation, description and taxonomy of the facts of the natural sciences while the new methods of 'investigating' humanity gave rise to the human sciences. "These investigations are perhaps to psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy, criminology, and so many other strange sciences, what the terrible power of investigation was to the calm knowledge of the animals, the plants or the earth. Another power, another knowledge". (Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison [New York: Vintage Books, 1977], p.226). For a comprehensive discussion of the situatedness of knowledge,

which, however discontinuous or arbitrary, manage to
legitimize their 'discursive formations' by contesting all
other forms of ('subjugated') knowledge and appealing to
'truth'. "There is a battle 'for truth' or at least 'around
truth' - it being understood ... [as] the ensemble of rules
according to which the true and the false are separated and
specific effects of power attached to the true".[97] Time and
again Foucault suggests that both the meaning and the truth-
value of propositions are intimately related to the operating
systems of practices; for a proposition to even become a
candidate for truth assessment it must have been already
subject to and object of a 'regime of truth'.

> 'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered
> procedures for the production, regulation,
> distribution, circulation and operation of statements.
> 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of
> power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of
> power which it induces and which extend it. A 'régime'
> of truth.[98]

The origins of 'truth' as well as those of 'knowledge' are
intricated with relations of conflict, power, pre-cognitive
interests and a certain arbitrariness that manifests itself in

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ideas and norms, see Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror
of Nature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[97] M. Foucault, Power/Knowledge (New York: Pantheon Books,
1972), p.132.

[98] Ibid., p. 133. The idea that the object of knowledge
('truth', subjectivity, language) is already given, in the
sense that it exists prior to any cognitive approach, is a
notion that many contemporary thinkers, from Gadamer to
Taylor, share. Philosophy's task, then, becomes the disclosure
and the clarification of that which is given, in order to
justify the claims of reflective reason.

the dominion of instrumental reason over subjects and societies. The notion of truth is, as Nietzsche had insisted, rooted in the very urgent instinct of self-preservation which takes the form of either control and transformation of nature, or control and transformation of people,[99] or, perhaps more importantly, control, mastery and administration of the self. It is the will to truth that actually binds power and knowledge together and produces the controversial[100] modern subject which is autonomous as it is disciplined, subjectified as it is objectified. It is the will to truth that determines the horizon of modern forms of knowledge exemplified in the various technologies of domination and the various technologies of the self. These, in turn, having passed the

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[99] The very point has been argued from a different perspective, that of the thinkers of the Frankfurt school. See esp. Max Horkheimer, The Eclipse of Reason, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947); M. Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1987).

[100] Controversial because individuals started being coded as rational, independent and self-reliant agents the very moment they entered technologically advanced organizations of society, totally administered by the scientific and bureaucratic elites. Faced with the impassable conflict between self-assertion and an increasingly repressive and totalitarian frame of social existence, subjects turned or retreated to systematic self-delusion. The powerlessness of the individual is typified by the narcissistic tendency that replaces active and decisive thought as well as the (too important) identity-construction process. For engaging insights on the topic, see Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization (New York: The Beacon Press, 1955); Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (New York: Warner Books, 1979), Daniel Bell, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism and Kathy E. Ferguson, The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

test of competence with regard to cognition and action, assume a seemingly independent existence and are translated into the 'practices', the types of behaviour and being which although authorless manage to create subjectivities. Practices are systematic constructs that create subjectivities.

Chapter 3

THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF POSTMODERNISM

It might be true that both Foucault and Derrida opened up new cognitive possibilities and images of humanity but they are also largely responsible for the "end of man" scenario.[101]   The strong critique of "subjectivity", "autonomy", "reason", "truth", notions crucial to the concept of humanity in the last few hundred years, also affects the status of philosophy whose scope and function have also been called into question. The "end of man" scenario overlaps with the "end of philosophy" argument both of which can be traced back to Nietzsche.

In the postmodern view, power is a network or a web which is invisible and ever expanding and which conditions all relations and institutions, in which individuals produce themselves as knowing subjects and objects of cognition. In the same view, any appeal of the "enlightened" consciousness to address issues of oppression, domination and emancipation are dated paradigms of a romantic innocence whose spell one ought to escape.

To understand how knowledge operates, Foucault and Derrida maintain that first one has to understand the social

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[101] See the Introduction to _After Philosophy. End or Transformation?_ K. Baynes, J. Bohman and Th. McCarthy eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991).

practices and technical processes that create the desire for an understanding of knowledge (i.e., an understanding of understanding). The understanding of understanding does not entail the invention of transcendental justifications of what is rooted in the nature of humanity or transcendental justifications of what is to count as justified belief. The desire for transcendental justification is, on the post - Nietzschean analysis, based upon a latent will-to-power.

The last point becomes of great importance if we consider the relation between theoretical frameworks, on the one hand, and their application in the sphere of human action and association, on the other. It is often that we find discrepancies between theoretical positions and enacted practices.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, for Foucault, the idea of subjectivity is a historical construct, along with reason, truth, transcendental values and knowledge, which emerged out of certain practices. These concepts became reified and assumed a seemingly independent existence. And we then defined ourselves and our self-understanding by reference to these fictions. Foucault makes the thinking/acting subject disappear by interpreting it as a construct of theoretical discourses. But the problem is this: if the thinking/acting subject who is the focus, as well as the instigator of any emancipatory move has disappeared into these structures of theoretical discourse, then any attempt to motivate political

action (or even to nourish an interest in the possibility of political action) becomes impossible. For political action pre- supposes a political subject, which in turn presupposes a subject. This has serious implications for the politics of knowledge, and a *fortiori*, for the politics of postmodern knowledge. To tackle these implications we turn now to the famous Habermas-Lyotard debate.

The Habermas-Lyotard Debate

The attack on the subject is a development that seems unavoidable at least as far as theory is concerned. For countless authors have taken seriously the absence of the subject since Nietzsche's devastating "end of man" argument. This attack has permeated disciplines such as sociology and anthropology which now consider ethnography to be little more than a *genre*.[102] It has also affected scientific theories insofar as many scientists view their work as provisional and inconclusive.[103] The effects of the absence of the subject appear in pop culture and advertisements which show only parts of the human body (or allude to it) and fragmented and speeded

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[102] For a representative example of this new ethnography, see George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); for the new, post-colonial role of anthropology, see the illuminating essay by Clifford Geertz, "Being There, Writing Here," (*Dialogue* no.84 [Winter 89]).

[103] See Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition.

up images and sequences. Discontinuity and incoherence characterize the language and movements of much rock music.

For Habermas, the negation of the subject and the related ideals of modernity breeds various conservative positions.[104] Given this conviction, it is not surprising that Habermas labels both Derrida and Foucault "young conservatives"[105] By the term "young conservatives" Habermas means to distinguish them from the old conservatives [106] who adhere to such pre-modern ideas as authority, privilege, charismatic leadership etc. The young conservatives accentuate the shortcomings of modernism by focusing on the appalling abuses of power that it led to, such as totalitarianism and the mass slaughter of

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[104] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project" in Hal Foster ed., The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p.13. The same essay was first published under the title "Modernity versus Postmodernity" in New German Critique 22 (Winter 1981), pp. 3-14.

[105] Ibid., p.14. See also Foucault's response in "Space, Knowledge and Power," The Foucault Reader, Paul Rabinow ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 284-250.

[106] Ibid., p.14. For an elaborate discussion of the distinctions with regard to the attitudes toward modernity and the corresponding political agendas, see Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate," in The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 103-113. See also Nancy Fraser, "Michel Foucault: A 'Young Conservative'?", Ethics 96 (October 1985), pp. 165-184, for a sound and learned reformulation of the issues that set Habermas and Foucault apart and Martin Jay, "Habermas and Modernism" in Richard J. Bernstein ed., Habermas and Modernity (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985) for an edifying commentary on the aesthetic-practical rationality that Habermas deems defensible only within the confines of modernity.

those who failed to 'see' the 'one true way.' However, despite this critique they inadvertently end up supporting the status quo.

Although it is practically impossible to summarize Habermas' thought, it will suffice for the present purposes to say that his overall position is characterized by a devoted adherence to reason and the ideals of the Enlightenment. In contrast to the postmodern theorists who consider modernity with its large, speculative frameworks of inquiry as having run the course of its self-delusion, Habermas contends that modernity is an unfinished project from whose shortcomings we can learn. He asks rather rhetorically: "should we try to hold on to the *intentions* of the Enlightenment, feeble as they may be, or should we declare the entire project of modernity a lost cause?"[107] If we conflate truth and falsity, if we obviate the distinction between justice and injustice, if we suspend appeals to reason as a means (the means) of resolving conflict, then we abandon the emancipatory potential of modernism and we declare an open season for premodern forms of domination or postmodern types of reaction[108].

Postmodernism repudiates the ideas and the values of the modern and thus invites either explicitly or tacitly

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[107] J. Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project" in The Anti-Aesthetic, p. 9.

[108] Two such examples can be seen in the revival of the New Right and fundamentalism in the U.S.

reactionary politics which restructure culture and society at large, according to the demands of late capitalism[109]. Theory in general and philosophy in particular often function as conservative forces. This force and function depends upon who interprets the theory and for what purposes.[110].

In view of this claim we can examine Lyotard's thesis regarding legitimization in the postmodern landscape. Lyotard chooses the principle of legitimacy as the focal point of his investigation of the postmodern condition of knowledge; he also decides to treat scientific knowledge first and then apply the same finding to the sphere of political reality.

Having argued that the all-inclusive philosophies (or "great metanarratives") will no longer provide legiti- mation, he declares: "let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable".[111] The desire for the

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[109] This is one of the central theses which F. Jameson argues convincingly in "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 147 (Summer 1984).

[110] Allan Megill argues the point in his discussion on Heidegger's philosophy and its political implications in <u>Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida</u>, pp. 194-195. See also: Terry Eagleton, "The Idealism of American Criticism," *New Left Review* Vol.127 (May - June 1981) for a discussion of the ways the "ruling class" uses even literary texts for the reproduction of its own ideology; Paul K. Feyerabend, "Knowledge and the Role of Theories," in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 18 (August 1988), pp.157- 178; Sheldon S. Wolin, "Democracy in the Discourse of Postmodernism," *Social Research*, Vol. 57 (Spring 1990).

[111] Lyotard's "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in <u>The Postmodern Condition</u>, p. 82.

whole, Lyotard asserts, has given humanity plenty of terror.[112] The aspiration to match or to reconcile the concept and the sensible (to match the subject and the object) produced the "grand narratives" of modernity, which are epitomized in the history of the Enlightenment and the assorted Hegelianisms and Marxisms that it spawned. Modern scientific knowledge could not use the foundations of narrative knowledge. As Lyotard explains:

> Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables ...[science] is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game.[113]

Since reason (qua representational thought) and the rational subject (qua autonomous moral/epistemological agent) could no longer provide the legitimation that scientific knowledge needed, this legitimation was sought in a particular kind of discourse, the "metanarrative". This discourse would situate and identify all other (first-level) discourses without ever being endangered by their contingency and historicity. But now the "incredulity toward metanarratives," or the suspicion toward any kind of totalizing discourse, reopens the question of legitimation. Where is legitimation to be attained in this new condition of knowledge? To answer this question, Lyotard turns to that eminent modifier of post-modernity, pluralism.

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[112] Ibid., p. 81.

[113] Ibid., p.xxiii.

Science, as well as art and all other bodies of organized knowledge are now concerned with limits of precise control, undecidables, conflicts, catastrophes and paradoxes; even the meaning of the word knowledge is changing and is now producing the unknown rather than the known.[114] By the same token, legitimation has to be derived from the level of enacted routines, that is to say, from the linguistic practices and communicational interaction of people.[115] By "linguistic practices" Lyotard means the Wittgensteinean "language games" which being polymorphous and heterogeneous contain their own rules, as the needs of the situations dictate. Given the idiosyncrasy of each language game, there can be no metagame or metaprescription to identify and regulate all the rules common to all language games.[116] Legitimation is no longer to be sought in foundational truths. It becomes plural, local and provisional. The same approach, Lyotard maintains, applies to the social pragmatics as well, although the latter is not as uncomplicated as scientific pragmatics. Social pragmatics (or the traditions and tales that set the criteria

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[114] Ibid., p.60.

[115] Ibid., p.41.

[116] Ibid., p.65. This claim echoes Rorty's epistemological behaviorism, according to which what counts as rational is to be understood only within the context of the society and its tools of justifying beliefs. In his words: "truth and knowledge can only be judged by the standards of the inquirers of our own day ... there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence." Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 178.

of competence in a given society) is a monster formed "by the interweaving of various networks of heteromorphous classes of utterances - denotative,prescriptive,performative, technical, evaluative etc."[117] For this reason it would be a delusion to evoke an overarching theory (as Habermas insists in doing) to provide legitimation for each and all first order discourses. The only thing needed to understand social relations is a theory of games based on the agonistics of language.[118] And the agonistics of language entail the agonistics of politics. Furthermore, since Lyotard announces that knowledge will be competing in a worldwide market for power,[119] then language games become the talkative exercise of power over the adversary who incidentally happens to be less versed in both the language and politics of the Enlightenment as well as the language and politics of postmodernism.

Against this radical critique of reason and its reduction to discursive practices stands Habermas' conviction that the project of modernity has to be reappropriated. Reason as well as subjectivity and truth and justice are indeed "things of

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[117] Ibid., p. 65.

[118] Ibid.,p. 16. A similar view is held by Richard Rorty who says "if we understand the rules of a language game, we understand all that there is to understand about why moves in that language game are made" in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, p. 174. The view of language as agonistics, however, is anything but innocent as Sheldon Wolin points out in "Democracy in the Discourse of Postmodernism," esp. pp. 23-25.

[119] The Postmodern Condition, p.5.

this world", if by that is meant that normative standards and conceptual schemes are embedded in concrete historical settings. However, he argues that meaning and validity are terms that stand above the practices in which they are actually evoked. Reason does not have to be subject-centered but validity claims transcend, by definition, the local and contingent character of the circumstance and make communication possible. Any instance of communicative interaction raises implicitly these validity claims and the norms that allow them to emerge in the first place.[120] The subjects who participate in the communicative community have already achieved consensus and are now engaging in an activity of mutual understanding whereby they can criticize and revise both theories and practices.[121] If consensus had not been achieved there would be neither communication nor learning, nor dissent. This point becomes less obscure if we consider people's capacity to understand, assess and transform their predicament by appealing to some standard of justice or truth or correct- ness which is far from the contingency of the predicament itself.[122]

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[120] Jürgen Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, p.97. For a critical discussion of Habermas' claim, see Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in Habermas and Modernity, ed. R. J. Bernstein pp. 161 -175.

[121] Cf. Lyotard's view: "consensus is a horizon that is never reached," in The Postmodern Condition, p. 61.

[122] For an antithetical position whereby truth, rationality etc. are assigned to the "interiority of a language game," see R. Rorty, Contingency, Irony, Solidarity

The relation between postmodernism and politics is a complex and ambiguous one. Under the deconstructionist venture of postmodernism, the "subject" and its "rational demand for emancipation" become just another kind of talk amongst many. The rejection of universal values and propositions of universal validity entails the trivialization of claims that there is something wrong with the world. To detect injustice, for example, one needs to have an understanding of justice - an understanding which supersedes the particularity of the situation. In the postmodern landscape the Habermasean "rational society" falls short of its goal of transformation and emanicipation and remains a bureaucratic, consumer society oriented toward complacency and compliance with established orders.

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Chapter 4

THE FEMINIST CASE AGAINST POSTMODERNISM

A great number of feminist theorists have relied extensively on the work of thinkers who are clustered together as postmodern.[123] The argument for such a reliance has been that the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment staples (transcendental reason, language as representation, positing of the self as a stable, coherent, knowing agent etc.) and the suspicion it has shed on totalizing doctrines offer feminist discourse valuable tools for further problematizing gender, science, male domination and established ways of thinking and acting. The postmodern disclosure of the historicity and hidden political agendas of theories that claimed for themselves the status of universality equip feminists with "useful ideas about method, particularly a wariness toward generalizations which transcend the boundaries of culture and region."[124] Moreover, the attack on the Cartesian subject

[123] See, for example, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," in Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. Linda J. Nicholson; Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics," in Discovering Reality, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983); Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster.

[124] Linda J. Nicholson in the Introduction to Feminism/ Postmodernism, p.5.

created new spaces for the articulation of alternative definitions of the subject. These definitions recognize the fragmentary and provisional character of every "subjectivity" which is constructed by social, linguistic and historical forces. For the feminists, whose critique has addressed the gender-biased nature of supposedly neutral theories[125] and practices, this acknowledgement emerges as an ally that can help them reconstruct subjectivity by including all that has been excluded. The affinity of the feminist project with the postmodern discourse, however, is a problematic one for a number of reasons, the most salient of which (and for the issues at hand) is the question of the subject.

Postmodern theorists from Nietzsche (the instigator) to Lyotard have been successful in showing that the identity of the subject is a social construct and an effect of power. The constitution of subjectivity is simultaneously the constitution of subjugation.[126] The very values of the Enlightenment, these theorists have argued, were nothing less than a source of subordination. The allegedly universal axioms of modernity were simply, it has been asserted,

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[125] See, for example, Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge, Mass., 1982) for a thorough challenge to Lawrence Kohlberg's (Harvard University Press) measurement of moral development which excludes the female experience and Catherine McKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," Signs No. 7 (1982) for a discussion of the "gender-specificity" of the State.

[126] M. Foucault, Power/Knowledge, p. 97.

historical preoccupations instituted on particular values and allegiances. Any totalizing discourse turned out to be partial and situated, with no special claim to legitimacy.

However, an increasing number of theorists are replacing the initial enthusiasm of feminist scholars regarding the postmodern challenge to modernity with a more cautious approach. The "decentered subject", wholly determined as it is by discursive formations, poses a threat to the feminist politics, a politics that assumes a subject that has been coerced, silenced and excluded. The "death of the subject" is a premature observation for those who gained only recently the right to speak for themselves and define their own identity.[127]

Alternative Epistemologies

Given the contradictory character of the claims regarding the status of the subject, a number of feminist theorists have been inspired to deal with epistemological issues and ascertain the relation of these issues to larger frameworks of political and social critique. Since reason is embedded in social practices, its critique must necessarily include social

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[127] I am borrowing here from Rossi Braidotti, "Envy: Or with Your Brains and my Looks," in Men in Feminism, ed. A. Jardine and P. Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987 p. 237) who remarks: "in order to announce the death of the subject, one must first have gained the right to speak as one."

critique.

Sandra Harding is one of the feminists who consider meticulously the complex relation of the Enlightenment project to feminism and postmodernism. Working within the boundaries of epistemology and science,[128] Harding argues that although postmodern thought is beneficial in demonstrating the limitations of the Enlightenment assumptions, it has weaknesses[129] that feminism can do without.

Answering the question why feminists need a theory of knowledge, Harding points out that an epistemology is, by and large, an attempt to fend off attacks form a hostile environment[130] that does not share the feminist agenda. For this reason, both Enlightenment and postmodern episte-mologies which she refers to as objectivism and interpreta-

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[128] In The Science Question in Feminism (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1986) Harding contests the traditional definitions of science, objectivity and truth by showing the pervasive androcentrism that informed these definitions and rendered them prejudiced and partial.

[129] Especially the multiplication of perpectives which reduce feminist claims to one more perpective amongst many. Obviously this is counter-productive for the emancipatory aspect of feminism which besides theorizing is also involved in the practical venture of identifying injustices and exclusions and supplying new definitions of what counts as real or true.

[130] S. Harding, "Feminism, Science and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques," in L. Nocholson, ed., Feminism/Postmodernism, p. 87. See also M. E. Hawkesworth, who argues in "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth" (Signs 14, No. 3 [Spring 1989], pp. 533-57) for the need of an epistemological foundation for feminist theory on the grounds that knowledge has been constituted within traditions which excluded women from participation (p. 551).

tionism, respectively,[131] seem to be unsuitable for assimilating the story women have to tell. When championing the objectivist mode and appealing to "facts" for the justification of their claims, women fail to induce impressions of impartiality, disinterestedness and value-neutrality.[132] When, on the other hand, they approach the issue of justification from an interpretationist viewpoint, then their demands are met with the reply that "this is just one interpretation," and there are many. Given that neither mainstream epistemology allows feminists to frame scientific problems and decide what should count as reasonable evidence or explanation, Harding suggests that there is a need for justificatory strategies that value the feminist perspective and can be accountable for and quide the practical decisions that affect women's lives.[133] She offers two such justificatory strategies: feminist empiricism and the feminist standpoint theories.

Feminist empiricists work primarily on the front of the social biases that have affected both biology and the social

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[131] By "objectivism" Harding designates the kind of discourse that is claimed to be detached from values, interests and emotions and based on objective, scientific methods of disinterested inquiry. [Cf. Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions]. For "interpretationism" she substitutes relativism which she defines as the strategy by which women's claims, both scientific and quotidian, are reduced to opinions as defensible as their counter-claims. Ibid., pp. 87-88.

[132] Ibid., p.88.

[133] Ibid., p. 89.

sciences. By sensitizing researchers and the community at large to the sexism and androcentrism that has permeated scientific inquiry at all its stages,[134] feminist empiricists prepare the ground for theories which, on one hand, acknowledge the situatedness of the knowledge-seeker and on the other subscribe to the value of objective accounts. Of course, the scientific tools feminist empiricists use are not totally unproblematic. They try to follow the principles of scientific inquiry more rigorously, as they claim, than their androcentric counterparts,[135] while reshaping at the same time those same principles so as to purge them of sexist and androcentric biases.

The feminist standpoint theorists develop even further the implications of feminist empiricism. They argue that the social experience of women has been distorted and devalued, given the practical roles that were assigned to them. Women were alienated from the experience of their own activities because the only available perspective of assessment was the one based on the male practical roles and the experience thereof.[136] A shift in perspective, that is, the assessment

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[134] That is, from the initial identification of the problem, to the formulation of the hypothesis, to the choice of relevant data.

[135] Ibid., p. 94.

[136] This claim is referring to the "classical" distinction of the public and the private space. The values attached to the administrative, public world are noticeably absent from the realm of the "housework." The labor involved in the latter sphere of activity was always considered little more

of labor, productivity and social relations from the standpoint of women, can recover undistorted images and the meaning of women's activities.

Both epistemologies are examples of recent feminist attempts to reconstruct theories of knowledge that take a critical stance toward both the covert prejudices of tradi- tional Enlightenment methods and the relativist catalyst of postmodern thought. These theories of knowledge:

> (i)n claiming that inquiry from the standpoint of women (or the feminist standpoint) can overcome the partiality and distortion of the dominant androcentric/ bourgeois/Western sciences, ... directly undermine the point-of-viewlessness of objectivism while refusing the relativism of interpretationism.[137]

Given, however, the complexity of all knowledge claims, and the need for some criterion of validity, these theories employ a standard of rationality which is sufficient to demonstrate the ways in which the traditional methods of doing science were "unscientific"; to demonstrate, in other words, that they were premised on androcentric conceptions of the nature of inquiry (what it should be) and on the nature of women ("what is best for them").

By allowing, however, for this standard of rationality, feminist epistemologists display the tension that characterizes all attempts to formulate alternative theories of knowledge and subjectivity. The project is, on one hand,

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than a "natural inclination" that involved no choice or volition and was therefore meaningless.

[137] Ibid., pp. 96-97.

to protest the self-proclaimed universality of traditional theories and conceptions of reason and to expose their partiality. On the other hand, the project includes appeal to evidence for the exclusion of women and assessment of that evidence according to some rational norm; thus feminists find themselves postulating that which they seek to protest. The task then becomes to expand the available definitions of reason and subjectivity in order to construct more inclusive[148] and accurate descriptions of the world, definitions that will draw closer to an objective ideal:

> The eradication of misogynist bias is compatible with, indeed, is a necessary precondition for, the achievement of objective knowledge, for it promotes the acquisition of an unmediated truth about the world; it frees substantive knowledge about reality from the distorting lenses of particular observers.[149]

Agency

As thinkers who do not separate understanding of the world from the possibility of changing it, feminists seek to articulate non-traditional definitions of subjectivity that will avoid the pitfalls of both the Cartesian transcendental subject and the postmodern subject that evaporates under the forces that shape it.

The question of the subject is central in any discussion

[148] For similar critiques but from a different perspective see Leonard Harris, ed., Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1983.

[149] M. Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known," p. 535.

that does not exhaust itself in the theoretical plane but has also important politics to tend to. The ability to retain agency is of pivotal consequence to feminist theorists, since agency entails the ability to construct oneself. The postmodern deconstruction made the subject totally determined by discursive formations. Feminism, being the concrete emancipatory movement that it is, needs a subject (a gender-specific subject) that is not only a social construct but also an agent who raises her voice in opposition to the discrimination she has endured and is capable of resisting.

One of the theorists who is grappling with the problems that arise out of the effort to avoid both available alternatives regarding the subject is Linda Alcoff. In a recent article[140] she proposes a conception of the subject whose identity is neither ahistorical and abstracted from its particular social attachments, nor is it totally determined by discursive practices. Alcoff is actually addressing a certain dichotomy that characterizes most feminist debate. The issue here is to reconcile these two opposing definitions: subjectivity as determined by discursive practices and subjectivity as a fixed feminine category that is not influenced by social forces[141]- what she terms "cultural feminism." Her solution consists in the formulation of a

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[140] Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs*, Vol., 13. No.3 (Winter 1988): 405-436.

[141] This is the essentialist position.

dialectic concept, that is, a concept of subjectivity that admits both the contextuality of identity (the female identity is not constructed in a vacuum but is relational) and agency, in the sense that the female subject creates herself.[142]

In a similar vein, Teresa de Lauretis considers the possibility of merging the two alternative conceptions of subjectivity.[143] Subjects, she argues, are neither wholly determined by the "outer world" nor are they entirely autonomous and self-constituted (the Cartesian "inner world"), but both; identity is a category in process, shaped by the interplay of inner and outer world:

> (i)t is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, affect) to the events of the world.[144]

Feminism as Critique

After the initial phase of directing their critique to patriarchy, its institutions and the ensuing subordination of

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[142] Alcoff, p. 434. Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972) where the argument for the inclusion of women in the domain of subjectivity takes a different form. Beauvoir's thesis is that the category "woman" is con- stituted by a host of societal forces responsible for her subjugation and for her to partake in subjectivity, she has to embrace the existing category - masculine, autonomous etc.

[143] Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[144] Ibid., p. 159.

women, feminist thinkers turned their attention to the dynamics of feminism itself. The reason for this reflexive turn is largely attributed to the rethinking of identity and difference. Many non-white, non-Western, non-middle-class women raised their voice of opposition to the "authority" of white, middle-class, Western feminists because they believed that their own "particular" experience was left out.[145] Since that confrontation feminists have been incorporating criticism and self-criticism into their theories[146] which accordingly have become theories of multiplicity.

Recognition of the many voices and sensitivity toward the different needs of different women has given feminism the ability to open up new spaces for difference without succumbing to the temptation of structuring it in terms of hierarchy. For this reason certain feminist anthropologists[147] propose feminist theory rather than postmodernism as the model for the new ways of conceiving and portraying the "other" within the context of ethnography.

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[145] See Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice,'" in *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, No. 6 (1983): 573-581.

[146] See Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, ed., *Feminism as Critique* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987) for a collection of insightful essays on the re-working of feminist theory.

[147] Frances E. Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe and Colleen Ballerino Cohen, "The Postmodern Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective," *Signs* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Autumn 1989): 7-33.

Feminism, these anthropologists claim, is a paradigmatic intellectual system because not only does it have a clear understanding of the dominant and the "other" but it also

> knows its politics, a politics directed toward securing recognition that the feminine is as crucial an element of the human as the masculine, and thus a politics sceptical and critical of traditional 'universal truths' concerning human behavior.[148]

Mascia-Lees et al. contest the new trend in etnography which has turned to postmodernism for inspiration while dismissing feminist theory "as little more than the expression of women's dissatisfactions with a sinister patriarchy."[149] They argue that this turn to postmodernism is anything but innocent since ethnographers are still the dominant group of authoritative speakers that speak on behalf of the oppressed:

> the postmodern focus on style and form, regardless of its sophistication, directs our attention away from the fact that ethnography is more than "writing it up." Politically sensitive anthropologists should not be satisfied with exposing power relations in the ethnographic text ... but should rather work to overcome these relations.[150]

Deciding to explore new ways of writing ethnography (in which the juxtaposition of the voice of the ethnographer and the voice of the "other" is not an uncommon practice) is only the reflection of a problematized relationship - that of the

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[148] Ibid., p.8.

[149] Ibid., p.13.

[150] Ibid., p.33.

writer, the reader and the subject matter.[151] Mascia -Lee et al., regard these new trends that are informed by postmodernism as the outcome of the:

> experience of tremendous loss of mastery in traditionally dominant groups ... in a period where theorists "stave off" their anxiety by questioning the basis of the truths that they are losing the privilege to define.[152]

The idea that the advancement of postmodernism in numerous theories and practices should be received with a portion of scepticism is shared by thinkers from different quarters. Nancy Hartsock, for example, finds it curious that the "incredulity" toward subjectivity and claims to truth coincides with the emergence of those who had been silenced as speaking subjects.

> Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in "nationalisms" which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the "subject," about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical "progress." Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty

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[151] Ibid., p. 9. Today, as the authors put it, the native can read and contest the characterizations of the ethnographer (p.9). See also Edward W. Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors"(*Critical Inquiry* 15 [Winter 1989]: 205-225) for an engaging discussion of the status of anthropology in the post-colonial era and Geertz's, "Being There, Writing Here" (pp. 58-63) for the changing role of anthropology: from describing distant societies to promoting communication among different cultures.

[152] Ibid., p.15.

emerges about whether the world can be theorized ... Why
is it only now that critiques are made of the will to
power inherent in the effort to create theory? [153]

In a similar vein, Andreas Huyssen (who considers him-
self a postmodern thinker) raises questions about the
postmodern insistence on "the death of the subject" and
considers it with a, comparable to Hartsock's, suspicion:

> Isn't the "death of the subject/author" position tied by
> mere reversal to the very ideology that invariably
> glorifies the artist as genius, whether for marketing
> purposes or out of conviction and habit? Hasn't
> capitalist modernization itself fragmented and
> dissolved bourgeois subjectivity and authorship ...
> [doesn't the denial of the subject] jettison the chance
> of challenging the *ideology of the subject* (as male,
> white, and middle-class) by developing alternative and
> different notions of subjectivity?[154]

Trying to unravel the conditions surrounding the
emergence of new ways of thinking or doing things is never an
easy task. Yet what many of the thinkers[155] who ponder these
questions show is a shared concern regarding the timing and

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[153] Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power" in Nicholson,
ed., Feminism /Postmodernism, pp. 163-64. See also by the same
author, "Rethinking Modernism," (*Cultural Critique* 7 [Fall
1987]: 187-206), for a similar observation.

[154] Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern" in
Nicholson, ed., Feminism/Postmodernism, p.264.

[155] Besides N.Hartsock and A. Huyssen, see for a similar
line of questioning the obliteration of subjectivity and
knowledge: Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist
Method?" in Feminism and Methodology, ed., Sandra Harding
(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987)
and Christine Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism,
Modernity, and Postmodernism," in Nicholson ed., Feminism/
Postmodernism.

the intentions of postmodernism. The liquidation of the subject, the "textualization" of reality, the proliferation of perspectives with equal (or no) claim to legitimation come at a time when not only women but also non-Western and non-white people started expanding the horizon of subjectivity. In view of this, the claim that postmodernism is the latest male hegemonic strategy gains considerable weight. Postmodernism might be the new stage or the conclusion of modernism as it has been variably argued. Yet this is the discourse and the game of Western white males and, Enlightenment or not, that discourse still occupies a position of power and tends to universalize from the local, i.e., developed, predominantly white and male Western world.

Moreover, it seems to me that the systematic ambi- valence that postmodernism promotes is an undesirable ally for those whose experience of pain, humiliation, oppression and powerlessness is being reduced to a viewpoint amongst many. Feminism, I believe, is not another "totalizing fiction" but a theory and a practice that honors the social aspect of our being-in-the-world; a theory and practice that has matured enough to distinguish the significant from the insignificant, and the liberating from the subversive. Perhaps, finally, postmodern thinkers should consider joining in and learning from feminism. It doesn't have to be the other way around.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that an increasing number of feminist thinkers are drawn to postmodern discourses in hope of finding a potent ally in the deconstruction of the universalist notions associated with modernity. The attraction of feminists to postmodern deconstruction is largely due to the latter's emphasis on the artificial nature of subjectivity as it was articulated within the tradition of the Enlightenment.

Feminists have been trying to unmask the partiality and hidden practices of exclusion that instituted norms of self-hood, reason, transcendental concepts and universal criteria of validity. They have been arguing for decades that the grand theories of society, history and subjectivity have been written at the expense of women's subordination to the patriarchal horizon. The construction of subjectivity, for example, is an exemplary case of the subtle mechanisms that occluded the female experience.

The emergence of postmodernism marks a rigorous critique of the Enlightenment ideals. Thinkers like Foucault trace the appearance of the "subject" and the modern forms of knowledge back to particular systems of practices - those of the Enlightenment. The definitions of subjectivity and rationality - far from expressing a universal and transhistorical truth that "applies" to humanity at large - are the definitions of a historical period and represent the

voice of a particular group of people. All knowledge is situated and reflects the power arrangements of its surroundings. "Each society has its regime of truth."

For this reason feminists considered postmodernism an invigorating partner in their project of criticizing the modern forms of domination. Decentering experience and identity, as these were traditionally conceived, would prepare the ground for less partial and more accurate articulations of the human experience.

The thesis I am defending is that the conjunction of feminism and postmodernism is detrimental to feminism. I believe that the feminists who pursue this affiliation with postmodernism do so at the expense of subverting feminism's own methods and practices which are based upon the assumption of women's oppression. Feminism is committed to something more than the understanding of society or the interplay of signifiers. It also envisions a change, and this practical aspect cannot afford relativity. The proliferation of perspectives and the multiple self that postmodernism offers as the alternative to the abstract subjectivity and the ideals of modernity are only superficially similar to the demand of those who have been excluded and silenced, to reconstruct notions that are more accurate in their representation of actuality.

On the more philosophical side, the challenge feminists are faced with is the epistemological position of their

assertions. The feminist cognitive claims can be associated with antifoundationalisn in the sense that it holds all knowledge to be situated in social practices, i.e., in social processes informed by rules that organize and structure the acquisition of knowledge. What counts as real or normal or true is the product of the theoretical assumptions of the community in which the cognitive project is taking place. Insofar as feminists point to the androcentric bias of the dominant discourses of the Enlightenment which excluded women, they are anti- foundationalists.

The turn, however, to postmodernism to further the critique of monolithic reason and subjectivity is a treacherous one for feminism. Postmodernism, by multiplying voices and perspectives and ascribing to each one "a place in the sun", leads to a radical relativism which negates the possibility of confronting the world and contesting its limitations. If all accounts from all perspectives are equally valid and if there is no criterion of truth or falsity, then the belief that women have been left out becomes just one more claim which can be countered by the claim that they have not. Of course this is not to say that feminism has the final word on everything. It does, however, direct our attention to the fact that not every belief is as justifiable as any other; not every opinion is as good as any other; not every picture of the world is as accurate as any other. The relativism of postmodernism leaves the world and the injustice

it contains intact; it actually reinforces the status quo.

Finally, I believe that feminism strikes a balance between foundationalism and relativism and to that extent it is a paradigm of theory and politics.

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