

## **Dawns, Twilights, and Transitions: Postmodern Theories, Politics, and Challenges**

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**Abstract:** The postmodern turn which has so marked social and cultural theory also involves conflicts between modern and postmodern politics. In this essay, we articulate the differences between modern and postmodern politics and argue against one-sided positions which dogmatically reject one tradition or the other in favor of partisanship for either the modern or the postmodern. Arguing for a politics of alliance and solidarity, we claim that this project is best served by drawing on the most progressive elements of both the modern and postmodern traditions. Developing a new politics involves overcoming the limitations of certain versions of modern politics and postmodern identity politics in order to develop a politics of alliance and solidarity equal to the challenges of the coming millennium.

"What's going on just now? What's happening to us? What is this world, this period, this precise moment in which we are living?" Michel Foucault

In the past two decades, the foundational claims of modern politics have been challenged by postmodern perspectives. The grand visions of emancipation in liberalism, Marxism, and other political perspectives of the modern era have been deemed excessively grandiose and totalizing, occluding differences and neglecting more specific oppressions of individuals and disparate groups. The liberal project of providing universal rights and freedoms for all has been challenged by specific groups struggling for their own rights, advancing their own specific interests, and championing the construction of their unique cultures and identities. The Marxian project of revolution, worldwide and global in scope, has been replaced in some quarters by more localized struggles and more modest and reformist goals. The result is a variety of new forms of postmodern politics whose discourses, practices, and effects are beginning to register and come under critical scrutiny.

The contemporary world is undergoing major transformations in science, technology, economics, culture, and everyday life. This "great transformation" (Polyani), comparable in scope to the changes produced by the industrial revolution, is moving toward a postindustrial, infotainment, and biotech mode of global capitalism, organized around new information, computer, communications, and genetic technologies. Scientific and technological revolution are key elements of the global restructuring of capitalism, which includes the growth of far-reaching transnational corporations; intensified competition on a planetary scale; moving industry and manufacturing to the developing world, while investment flows into the overdeveloped world; heightened exploitation; corporate downsizing; and greater levels of unemployment, inequality, and insecurity. Yet the scientific-technological-economic revolutions of our time also involve the advent of novel forms of labor, politics, culture, and everyday life which contain new economic opportunities, openings for political transformation, and a wealth of innovative products and technologies which might improve the human condition.

Within politics today, one observes a broad expanse of phenomena, many novel, ranging from local struggles over power and identity to new forms of global politics. The latter respond to powerful new forces such as transnational corporations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and formations such as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Alliance. The global economy and polity thus exhibits new structures and alliances which in many cases surpass the power of the nation-state that emerged as the key institution of the modern political order -- although the state continues to be a stronger political force than some theories of globalization indicate. In addition, violence and political fragmentation in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, Asia, Africa, and numerous other regions such as the Middle East have created a new world disorder based on intense ethnic and territorial rivalries.

In the United States, the "New Deal" of the 1930s and the "Great Society" of the 1960s have devolved into a dysfunctional welfare state, which in the 1990s degenerated further into a disciplinary workfare camp, as millions continue to fall through tears in the "social safety net." Throughout the globe, neo-liberalism has replaced Social Democracy and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, global capitalism and its hypercommodified McCulture are now hegemonic, confronted with no alternative historical bloc. Yet novel forms of spectacle and technopolitics in the spheres of culture and new media are creating nascent public spheres and altering the locus and substance of communication and contestation. For decades, politics has been played out significantly in broadcast media, and now with the Internet and cyberculture, new public spheres and domains of political information, debate, and struggle are arising.

Hence, the present conjuncture is highly ambiguous, positioning those in the overdeveloped Western and Northern areas between the era of modernity and a new epoch for which the term postmodernity has been coined. At the same time, people in other parts of the world are still living in premodern social and cultural forms, and on the whole the developing world exists in a contradictory matrix of premodern, modern, and postmodern forms. The rapid transformation of the world generates new dangers such as the potential loss of the modern traditions of humanism, the Enlightenment, and radical social movements, as well as innovative possibilities, such as emerge from new technologies, new identities, and new political struggles. The old theories, concepts, modes of thought and analysis, will only go so far in theorizing, analyzing, and mapping the emerging constellations, thus requiring novel modes of thought, strategies, discourses, and practices.[i]

Indeed, the contemporary terrain shows a mutation in political thought and practice that parallels and is informed by changes in theory. For us, the concept of the "postmodern" serves as a marker to highlight the new, to call attention to discontinuities and ruptures, and to signal that an extensive range of novelties are appearing which require fresh analyses, theories, and practices. But for the postmodern to have theoretical and political gravity, it must be linked with the tumultuous metamorphoses of the day and given concrete substance and force.[ii]

### **From Modern to Postmodern Politics**

Today the revolutionary project stands accused before the tribunal of history -- accused of having failed, of having engendered a new alienation. This amounts to recognizing that the ruling society has proved capable of defending itself, on all

levels of reality, much better than revolutionaries expected. Not that it has become more tolerable. Revolution has to be reinvented, that's all.

Internationale situationniste #6 (August 1991)

As capitalism was undergoing dramatic socio-economic, scientific, and technological changes, a paradigm shift was underway in the realms of theory, the arts, science, and culture at large. By the 1980s, there were intense polemics over the importance of the postmodern turn, with some celebrating postmodern discourse and culture as an advance over moribund modern forms, while others attacked postmodern theory and artifacts as degenerate and regressive. Many, especially the older generation, went on with business as usual, ignoring the massive changes taking place and the controversies over their significance.

In the realm of theory, the postmodern turn consists of a movement away from the mechanistic and positivistic worldview of modern science, along with a repudiation of Enlightenment optimism, faith in reason, and emphasis on transcultural values and human nature. Postmodernists typically reject foundationalism and transcendental subjectivities within theory, mechanism and positivism in science, the modernist emphases on innovation and originality in art. With the belief that modern theories and politics have become reductive, illusory, and arrogant, various postmodern theorists, artists, and activists emphasize counter-values of multiplicity and difference, anti-realism, aesthetic irony and appropriation, ecological perspectives, and a proliferation of competing forms of politics.

As with postmodern theory, there is no one "postmodern politics," but rather a conflicting set of positions that emerges from the ambiguities of social change and multiple postmodern theoretical perspectives. Yet the different categories of postmodern politics are not merely conceptual distinctions, but are actual political tendencies played out in the public sphere, in the universities, in the workplace, and in everyday life. Thus, as new technologies transform every aspect of life, as culture plays a more crucial role in domains from the economy to personal identity, and as capital creates a new global economy and new syntheses of the global and the local abound, politics too takes on new forms and content.

Generally characterized, the project of modern politics was to define and implement universal goals like freedom, equality, and justice, in an attempt to transform institutional structures of domination. Modern politics emerged from the Enlightenment project of subjecting to critique by the new norms of reason all forms of authority and all existing institutions. Modern politics presupposed a democratic public sphere where individuals and social groups could discuss political problems and choices, and intervene practically in public affairs. The modern political project involved attempts to discern basic human rights, the common good and universal values, and to provide institutional guarantees that allow democratic rights, discussion, and consensus.

Thus, the American Revolution declared the universal rights of "all people" to be "self-evident truths" as revealed by the light of Reason. The French Revolution championed the universal "Rights of Man" on the basis of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and shortly thereafter Mary Wollstonecraft published a treatise *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.<sup>[iii]</sup> Attempting to realize these universal appeals beyond the limiting context of bourgeois class relations, Marx

urged that the "Workers of the World Unite!" to create an international politics of solidarity designed to overthrow bourgeois property forms. In the Americas and then in Africa, Asia, and throughout the non-Western world, national liberation movements emerged which challenged colonialism and sought to bring the promises of modern democracy and liberty to areas of the world sunk in oppression. Simon Bolivar's struggles for Latin American freedom, the slave revolts of the Caribbean, and Jose Marti's vision of Nuestra America, free of colonial domination, articulated the yearnings unleashed by the modern project and attempts to realize its promises, where later liberation movements claimed that only socialism can redeem the sufferings of the "wretched of the earth" and realize the promises of modernity.

Yet the promises and yearnings of modernity and modern politics were seldom realized. Workers were exploited throughout the modern epoch by rapacious capital; women were only able to gain full democratic rights by the early decades of the 20th century and continued to suffer patriarchal domination; people of color were systematically discriminated against by the forces of racism; and the developing countries continued to be oppressed by the imperialist powers. Despite war, poverty, hunger, economic depression, and fierce forms of subjugation and suffering, modern politics was optimistic in its outlook; indeed, it was often religious in its teleological faith that the progressive logic of history would soon be realized. Enlightenment faith in a better future inspired liberalism and Marxism alike. Thus, modern politics was informed by strong normative values and utopian visions of a world of universal freedom, equality, and harmony.

A postmodern politics began to take shape during the 1960s with the appearance of numerous new political groups and struggles. The development of a postmodern politics is strongly informed by the vicissitudes of social movements in France, the United States, and elsewhere, as well as by emerging postmodern theories. The utopian visions of modern politics proved, in this context, difficult to sustain and were either rejected in favor of cynicism, nihilism, and, in some cases, a turn to the right, or were dramatically recast and scaled down to more "modest" (non-systemic, non-revolutionary) proportions. The modern emphasis on collective struggle, solidarity, and alliance politics gave way to extreme fragmentation, as the "movement" of the 1960s splintered into various competing struggles for rights and liberties. The previous emphasis on transforming the public sphere and institutions of domination gave way to new emphases on culture, personal identity, and everyday life, as macropolitics were replaced by the micropolitics of local transformation and changes in subjectivity.

In the aftermath of the 1960s, novel and conflicting conceptions of postmodern politics emerged. Postmodern politics thus take a variety of forms and would include the anti-politics of Baudrillard and his followers, who exhibit a cynical, despairing rejection of the belief in emancipatory social transformation, as well as a variety of efforts to create a new or reconstructed politics. On the extreme and apolitical position of a Baudrillard, we are stranded at the end of history, paralyzed and frozen, as the masses collapse into inertia and indifference, and media simulations and technology triumph over agency. Thus, from Baudrillard's perspective, all we can do is "accommodate ourselves to the time left to us." [iv]

The flip-side of a negative and nihilistic postmodern politics is an affirmative postmodern politics. Such positive postmodern positions range from an apolitical New Age life-style

postmodernism to a self-conscious oppositional postmodernism, a postmodernism of resistance.[v] New Age postmodernism is largely a form of apolitical individualism that emphasizes transformation of life-style and values, while eschewing traditional politics. New Age spirituality is a kind of pop postmodernism that envisions a "new age" of spirituality that overcomes the excesses of capitalist materialism and consumerism in favor of God, the soul, and the body, while blending together numerous philosophies and traditions in a potpourri marketable to all tastes.

Another form of affirmative postmodern politics also rejects traditional modern politics and attempts at large-scale social transformation in favor of piecemeal reforms and local strategies. This is the position of Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty, all of whom reject a global politics of systemic change in favor of modifications at the local level designed to enhance individual freedom and progressive change. Foucault and Lyotard reject utopian thought and the category of "totality" as terroristic, while searching for new "styles" of life "as different as possible from each other" (Foucault) and a proliferation of "language games" in "agonistic" opposition to one another (Lyotard). Rorty merely -- and meekly -- seeks "new descriptions" of reality that pluralize the voices in the social "conversation," as he replaces normative critique with "irony" and retires philosophy to a limited role in private life. This form of postmodern politics, consequently, is but a refurbished liberal reformism that fails to break with the logic of bourgeois individualism and undermines attempts to construct bold visions of a new reality to be shaped by a more radical and ambitious politics of alliance and solidarity.

Reconstructive postmodernism attempts to combine modern and postmodern politics. More extreme negative and affirmative postmodern approaches involve a decisive break and rejection of modern politics, calling for a radical discontinuity and dramatically different politics. This ranges from negative and cynical postmodernism that rejects all politics and action for a stance of negativism, defeatism, and nihilism, to New Age emphasis on lifestyle and the transformation of subjectivity, to a postmodern politics rooted in the struggles of new social movements and developments in postmodern theory. Such a form of reconstructive postmodern politics, however, advanced by Laclau and Mouffe, among others, stakes out a position between the modern and postmodern, in order to use postmodern critiques of essentialism, reductionism, and foundationalism to reconstruct Enlightenment values and socialist politics through a logic of contingency and plurality.[vi] Rejecting the Marxist reduction of emancipatory politics to class struggle that privileges the working class, Laclau and Mouffe embrace the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s as multiple sources of progressive change which can bring about "radical democracy."

Finally, there is another mode of affirmative postmodern politics, perhaps the dominant form of politics today, known as "identity politics" that often has emancipatory aspirations but which usually falls short of advancing systemic change and new forms of radical struggle. "Identity politics" refers to a politics in which individuals construct their cultural and political consciousness through engaging in struggles or associations that advance the interests of the groups with which they associate. Sometimes identification is concrete, based on participatory involvement in specific groups, while sometimes it is more imaginary and abstract in nature, as one identifies, for example, with the black, gay and lesbian, or with whatever community from which one gains their identity and sense of self and belonging.

Identity politics has its origins in the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s and, ultimately, the struggles of the 1960s. Yet the "movement" of the '60s both pursued a coalition and alliance politics and challenged the dominant powers on multiple levels -- gender, race, the hierarchical structure of the universities, colonial domination, U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, the alienated nature of work, sexual repression, and the oppressive organization of everyday life. In the 1970s, however, the "movement" fragmented into the "new social movements" which included feminist, black liberation, gay and lesbian, and peace and environmental groups, each fighting for their own interests (e.g., blacks saw the emerging environmental movement in the late 1960s as a bourgeois diversion from civil rights struggles, and environmentalists emphasized wilderness issues while ignoring problems of urban pollution). By the 1980s and 1990s, as the Balkanization process continued, the new social movements had become transformed into "identity politics," the very name suggesting a turn away from general social, political, and economic issues toward concerns with culture and subjectivity.

Identity politics bears the influence of postmodern theory, which is evident in the critique of modern reductionism, abstract universalism, and essentialism, as well as a use of multiperspectival strategies that legitimate multiple political voices. Foucault's genealogical politics, for example, is explicitly designed to liberate suppressed voices and struggles in history from the dominant narratives that reduce them to silence. In identity politics, individuals define themselves primarily as belonging to a given group, marked as "oppressed" and therefore as outside the dominant white male, heterosexual, capitalist culture. These identities revolve around a "subject position," a key identity marker defined by one's gender, race, class, sexual preference, and so on, through which an individual is made subordinate to the dominant culture. Although class is certainly a major form of identity, identity politics typically is defined in opposition to class politics.

But while postmodern theory usually attacks essentialism, there is a form of essentialism in many modes of identity politics which privilege gender, race, sexual preference, or some other marker as the constituent of identity. Moreover, through fetishizing a single all-defining personal identity (woman, black, chicano, gay, etc.), identity politics also departs from the insight of postmodern theory that identities are multiple and socially constructed, and that they need to be reconstructed in an emancipatory, autonomous, and self-affirming fashion. In other words, some versions of identity politics fetishize given constituents of identity, as if one of our multiple identity markers were our deep and true self, around which all of our life and politics revolve.

In some forms, identity politics dovetails with liberal interest group politics that seeks to advance the interests of a specific group, typically in opposition not only to the dominant groups, but also to other marginalized and oppressed groups. Thus, in contrast to the universal and collective emphases of modern politics, a postmodern identity politics tends to be insular and something of a special interest group, perhaps itself a postmodern phenomenon. Hence, whereas modern politics focused on universal goals like gaining civil liberties, reducing inequalities, or transforming structures and institutions of domination, postmodern identity politics singles out the specific interests of a group and constructs identities through identification with the group and its struggles.

Of course, critics of modern politics have indicated from the beginning that the universal claims of modern theorists and politicians were cloaks for advancing the particular interests of ruling groups, mainly white male property owners. The cardinal rights advanced by the bourgeois revolutions in the United States, France, and elsewhere were those of property rights which granted supreme economic and political power to white male capitalists in flagrant contradiction to their democratic rhetoric. Yet the new universal ideology of modern politics unleashed a power that the ruling classes could not restrain; it inspired and legitimated the struggles of the very groups it was used to suppress, including those advocating identity politics today, who denounce universal appeals as inherently ideological and oppressive.

Yet classical Marxism also advanced a reductionist and essentialist view of politics that is repudiated by postmodern politics. Marx theorized labor as a "universal class" which by emancipating itself will emancipate all other oppressed groups. On Marx's scheme, subjectivity is constituted as a class identity and all social antagonisms devolve around production as the essence of the social. Later Marxists continued with this policy, subsuming other key social issues to the "woman question," "race question," "national question," and so on, failing to see how race, gender, nationality, and other forms of identity were crucial and often more directly relevant for many different groups of people, just as nationalism proved a far more powerful identity than did international workers' solidarity for various European workers during the first World War.

Yet Marxist politics was not effectively displaced as the dominant radical political discourse and movement until the 1960s, with the explosion of new struggles and identities that fundamentally contested advanced capitalist society. Identity politics as it is defined today departs -- explicitly or implicitly -- from a critique of Marxist politics. The break from the essentialist and reductionist logic informing certain Marxist conceptions of class struggle has had liberating effects in the political field. It allowed for new conceptions of micropolitics, pluralist democracy, and a politicization of the multiple ways in which the subject is constituted across numerous institutional sites and in everyday life. Yet there are also problematic elements in extreme postmodern rejections of some classical positions within modern politics.

### **Contributions and Limitations of Postmodern Politics**

"Dialectical thought has meant the most advanced state of knowledge, and it is only from this, in the last analysis, that decisive action can come."

Max Horkheimer

One of the key insights of the postmodern turn, theorized by Foucault, was that power is everywhere, not only in the factories, but in the schools, prisons, hospitals, and all other institutions. This insight is both depressing, since it acknowledges that power saturates all social spaces and relations, and exhilarating, because it allows for and demands new forms of struggle. Hence, multiple forms of resistance open up along every line of identity that is controlled or normalized. The movements of the period challenged capitalism, state power and bureaucracy, the repressive organization of everyday life in the midst of consumer society, along with various modes of ideologically constituted identities.

Postmodern politics, following capital and state intervention processes themselves, represents a politicization of all spheres of social and personal existence, which were previously ignored or rejected by modern and Marxist approaches as proper political spaces. With postmodern politics, every sphere of social life becomes subject to questioning and contestation, and the sites of struggle multiply. With the pluralistic approach, power is more vulnerable to attack and hence Foucault emphasized the contingency and frailty of power relations. Where a Leninist would argue that pluralized struggle only dissipates the centralized forces needed to combat capital and the state, a politically radical postmodernist would respond that the new struggles attack the weak links of the system and spread resistance everywhere, thereby allowing for the general attack that Leninists rightly think is necessary for overthrowing capitalism.

Hence, the 1960s brought a shift from a macropolitics that focused on changing the structure of the economy and state to a micropolitics that aims to overturn power and hierarchy in specific institutions, and to liberate emotional, libidinal, and creative energies repressed by the reality principle of bourgeois society. An important aspect of micropolitics, as evident in the work of Lyotard, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, is a politics of subjectivity which theorizes the conditions under which the modern subject has emerged as both an effect of power, what Foucault calls the "subjectification" of individuals. This entails primarily a struggle against the "microfascism" latent in everyone, to be combatted by breaking out of, in the terms of Deleuze and Guattari, the "molar" pole of desire (such as informs all normalized subjectivities) and finding the "molecular" lines of escape. For Foucault, the politics of subjectivity involves a "politics as ethics" which creates new subjects on the Greek model of an "aesthetics of existence." [vii]

Postmodern models of politics attempt to redefine the "political" based on changes in society, technology, economics, and everyday life. A postmodern cultural politics, building on the insights of Gramsci, the surrealists, Lefebvre, and the situationists, thematizes culture as a crucial terrain of power and struggle. To the extent that social reproduction is now largely achieved at the levels of culture and everyday life, where the individual is a target of total administration, questions of subjectivity, ideology, culture, aesthetics, and utopian thought take on a new importance. The instrumentalist, pragmatic, or rationalist conception of political struggle, which attempts to shape "political consciousness," class or otherwise, and mobilize political insight into a political movement that transcends questions of culture, is insufficient because it begs the question of how a political movement will be possible in the first place, given the degree of subjective identification with dominant modes of thought and behavior throughout society. As thinkers like Reich and Adorno saw, fascism has roots not only in the crisis of monopoly capital, but also in the repression of the instinctual structure and the emergence of an "authoritarian personality."

Thus, if people live immersed in a culture colonized by capitalism, a culture of spectacles that binds affect and mobilizes pleasures to its sights, sound, and experiences, then the struggle for culture, subjectivity, and identity is no longer secondary to the struggle for society, and both cultural and identity politics are crucial for breaking from the dominant ideologies and creating new forms of life and consciousness. Given the need to produce new subjectivities, political education, rational persuasion, and moral appeals remain of the greatest importance, but

they can be very weak opponents of the seductive pleasures of MTV, blockbuster films, the Internet, fashion and advertising, and commodity consumption of all kinds. In Marcuse's words, "no persuasion, no theory, no reasoning can break this prison [of subjectivity], unless the fixed, petrified sensibility of the individuals is `dissolved,'opened to a new dimension in history, until the oppressive familiarity with the given object world is broken - broken in a second alienation: that from the alienated society." [viii]

It is culture that molds the sensibilities and thus a radical cultural politics attempts to undo the enculturation of the dominant culture by providing new ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, talking, and being. Progressives today must not simply fall back on the old valorization of critical realism and its narrow cognitive models, as valuable as didactic and pedagogical art might be. What is ultimately needed are new affective structures and modes of experience which can act as catalysts and the condition of the possibility of broader social and political transformations. Here, the political function of critical art becomes, negatively, a defamiliarization from the dominant mode of experiencing reality, what Marcuse has termed an alienation from alienation. Such has been the practice of Brecht's epic theater, Artaud's theater of cruelty, or Godard's anti-narrative films, all of which sought to question and displace the dominant mode of experiencing reality, rather than reproduce it through staid aesthetic conventions. Positively, a cultural politics has the task of "aesthetic education," the reshaping of human needs, desires, senses, and imagination through the construction of images, spectacles, and narratives that prefigure different ways of seeing and living.

Situationist art, for example, practiced both functions, the negative through its deconstruction of advertisements and other images (détournement), and the positive through experiences with the "constructed situation," a practice earlier advanced by the surrealists in their various exercises and games (such as "the exquisite corpse") designed to liberate creative forces. Paradoxically, today we find the atrophy of the senses in their hypertrophic extension throughout the sensorium of the spectacle and its images and commodity empires.[ix] Against Lukàcs, we emphasize the importance of formal innovation and avant-gardism in the arts, where such new techniques and modes of vision can help people break with repressive identifications with both the utilitarian (instrumental reason) and affective (sign value) modes of experience constituted by advanced capitalism. A new society will never be attainable until it is experienced as a need, as a desire for new modes of community, work, experience, social interaction, and relations to the natural world that could never be satisfied within capitalism and therefore cannot be coopted by economic reforms.

As Bahro saw, capitalism generates needs and desires it ultimately cannot satisfy for freedom, justice, self-realization, and a good life, and a radical cultural politics will depict both how the current mode of social organization restricts, limits, and deforms desire, freedom, and justice, while projecting visions of how these aspirations could be realized.[x] Both the radical negations of society by certain forms of critical modernism (i.e. Kafka, Beckett, German Expressionism, etc.) and the utopian dimension of art stressed by theorists such as Bloch and Marcuse is thus more relevant than ever today when radical critique is needed to free individuals from forms of oppression of which they are often unaware and when a better way of life is technically possible for all.

The emphasis on local struggles and micropower, cultural politics which redefine the political, and attempts to develop political forms relevant to the problems and developments of the contemporary age is extremely valuable, but there are also key limitations to the dominant forms of postmodern politics. While an emphasis on micropolitics and local struggles can be a healthy substitute for excessively utopian and ambitious political projects, one should not lose sight that core sources of political power and oppression are precisely the big targets aimed at by modern theory, including capital, the state, imperialism, racism, and patriarchy. Taking on such major targets involves coalitions and multifront struggle, often requiring a politics of alliance and solidarity that cuts across group identifications to mobilize sufficient power to struggle against, say, the evils of capitalism or the state.

Thus, while today we need the expansion of localized cultural practices, they attain their real significance only within the struggle for the transformation of society as a whole. Without this systemic emphasis, cultural and identity politics remain confined to the margins of society and are in danger of degenerating into narcissism, hedonism, aestheticism, or personal therapy, where they pose no danger and are immediately coopted by the culture industries. In such cases, the political is merely the personal, and the original intentions of the 1960s goal to broaden the political field are inverted and perverted. Just as economic and political demands have their referent in subjectivity in everyday life, so these cultural and existential issues find their ultimate meaning in the demand for a new society and mode of production.

Yet we would insist that it is not a question of micro vs macropolitics, as if it were an either/or proposition, but rather both dimensions are important for the struggles of the present and future.[xi] Likewise, we would argue that we need to combine the most affirmative and negative perspectives, embodying Marcuse's declaration that critical social theory should be both more negative and utopian in reference to the status quo.[xii] There are certainly many things to be depressed about in the negative and cynical postmodernism of a Baudrillard, yet without a positive political vision merely citing the negative might lead to apathy and depression that only benefits the existing order. For a dialectical politics, however, positive vision of what could be is articulated in conjunction with critical analysis of what is in a multiperspectivist approach that focuses on the forces of domination as well as possibilities of emancipation.

But it is also a mistake, we believe, to ground one's politics in either modern or postmodern theory alone. Against one-sided positions, we advocate a version of reconstructive postmodernism that we call a politics of alliance and solidarity that builds on both modern and postmodern traditions. Unlike Laclau and Mouffe who believe that postmodern theory basically provides a basis for a new politics, and who tend to reject the Enlightenment per se, we believe that the Enlightenment continues to provide resources for political struggle today and are skeptical whether postmodern theory alone can provide sufficient assets for an emancipatory new politics. Yet the Enlightenment has its blindspots and dark sides (such as its relentless pursuit of the domination of nature, and naive belief in "progress," so we believe that aspects of the postmodern critique of Enlightenment are valid and force us to rethink and reconstruct Enlightenment philosophy for the present age. And while we agree with Habermas that a reconstruction of the Enlightenment and modernity are in order, unlike Habermas we believe that postmodern theory has important contributions to make to this project.

Various forms of postmodern politics have been liberatory in breaking away from the abstract and ideological universalism of the Enlightenment and the reductionist class politics of Marxism, but they tend to be insular and fragmenting, focusing solely on the experiences and political issues of a given group, even splintering further into distinct subgroups such as divide the feminist community. Identity politics are often structured around simplistic binary oppositions such as Us vs. Them and Good vs. Bad that pit people against one another, making alliances, consensus, and compromise difficult or impossible. This has been the case, for example, with tendencies within radical feminism and ecofeminism which reproduce essentialism by stigmatizing men and "male rationality" while exalting women as the bearers of peaceful and loving value and as being "closer to nature." [xiii] Elements in the black nationalist liberation movement in the 1960s and the early politics of Malcolm X were exclusionist and racist, literally demonizing white people as an evil and inferior race. Similarly, the sexual politics of some gay and lesbian groups tend to exclusively focus on their own interests, while the mainstream environmental movement is notorious for resisting alliances with people of color and grass roots movements. [xiv]

Even though each group needs to assert their identity as aggressively as possible, postmodern identity politics should avoid falling into seriality and sheer fragmentation. These struggles, though independent of one another, should be articulated within counterhegemonic alliances, and attack power formations on both the micro- and macro-levels. Not all universal appeals are ideological in the sense criticized by Marx; there are common grounds of experience, common concerns, and common forms of oppression that different groups share which should be articulated -- concerns such as the degradation of the environment and common forms of oppression that stem from capitalist exploitation and alienated labor.

### **The New Political Terrain**

"Thought in contradiction must become more negative and more utopian in opposition to the status quo."

Herbert Marcuse.

To overcome alienation and oppression, the implementation of radical democracy is proposed by a variety of tendencies within postmodern theory. In modern democratic theory, the notion of representative democracy superseded in liberal capitalist societies the stronger forms of participatory democracy advocated by the Greeks and modern theorists like Rousseau, Bakunin, and Marx. The postmodern political turn, then, involves a radicalization of the theme of participatory democracy which is advocated in a variety of fields and domains of social life. Within the mode of theory, the democratic turn involves a shift toward more multiperspectival theorizing that respects a variety of sometimes conflicting perspectives rather than, as in modern theory, seeking the one perspective of objective truth or absolute knowledge. In opposition to discourses of the unity of absolute truth, postmodern micropolitics stresses difference, plurality, conflict, and respect for the other.

Yet it would be a mistake to draw too sharp a distinction between the modern and postmodern paradigms and to vilify the modern as the site of all that is repressive and retrograde,

and the postmodern as the mode of progressiveness and emancipation. There are regressive and progressive aspects in both the modern and postmodern traditions and we are claiming that we are currently suspended between two historical epochs -- the modern and the postmodern -- each of which has its own theoretical articulations and discourses, narratives, forms of art and cultural expression, scientific paradigms, politics, and modes of everyday life. The problem for those of us trying to theorize this great transformation, this rapid move into a new space, is to think together the modern and the postmodern, to see the interaction of both in the contemporary moment and to deploy the resources of both modern and postmodern theory to illuminate, analyze, and critique this space.

We thus eschew a totalizing and essentializing assault on postmodern theory and politics as inherently "regressive," "reactionary," or an "ideology of late-capitalism," and support an approach that overcomes a radical disjunction between modern and postmodern approaches to theory and politics.[xv] This project requires a reconstruction of politics drawing on the traditions of modern politics and the new discourses and trends of a postmodern politics. Such a politics would overcome the one-sided and non-dialectical squabbles between advocates of modern and postmodern politics and would provide a more viable and inclusive politics for the future. Whereas there are obvious problems with a modern politics that attempts to develop a universal model for all times and all places irrespective of differences and specificities, there is still the need for a normative vision and political principles and norms that respect the rights and discourses of others, that support a politics of alliance and solidarity which seeks the common and public interests of individuals in a given society, and that aspires to a higher ground above the special interests of particular groups.

Thus, modern theories such as Marxism remain a crucial form of criticism today, providing indispensable categories to analyze and criticize exploitation, alienation, class struggle, and capitalist economic and cultural hegemony, none of which have disappeared in the postmodern world. Indeed, what we are witnessing today on a global level is the intensification and perfection of capitalist domination in the form of the mushrooming of transnational corporations which resist regulation and control, growing levels of economic inequality, increased monopoly control of key resources and technologies, the revival of child labor and sweatshops, the privatization of state functions, and major upheavals due to capitalist reorganization and restructuring. Yet Marxism can no longer rely on the hopes that the struggles of the industrial proletariat and construction of socialism will automatically provide liberation or that this scenario is guaranteed by history. The events of the past decade have shown that certain versions of orthodox Marxism are flawed and that the Marxian tradition must be rethought and invented anew to make it relevant to the challenges of the future.[xvi]

Thus, we should avoid both the characteristic deficiencies of a modern politics that is grounded in an excessively universalizing political discourse that occludes differences and imposes a general dogmatic political schema which is held to be a foundational and not-to-be questioned arbitrator of political values and decisions. In addition, we should reject a postmodern identity politics that renounces the normative project of modern politics, that refuses common and general interests as intrinsically repressive, and that thus abandons a politics of alliance and solidarity in favor of the advocacy of one's own special interest group. Instead, a new politics would mediate the differences between the traditions, creating new syntheses that would strive

for a higher ground based on common interests, general philosophical principles, and a renunciation of dogmatism and authoritarianism of whatever sort.

A new postmodern politics would also overcome the Eurocentrism of modern politics and valorize a diversity of local political projects and struggles. Although globalization is creating a more homogenized and shared world, it is doing so unevenly, thus proliferating difference and heterogeneity at the same time it produces resemblance and homogeneity. New syntheses of the global and the local, new hybridities, and an increased diaspora of many peoples and cultures is creating a novel situation in which modernization processes are reaching the far corners of the world and a postmodern global culture is found everywhere at the same time that new syntheses of the modern, postmodern, and premodern are generating differences and heterogeneity.[xvii] Thus, to the extent that modernization processes now include postmodernization processes, such that NAFTA, GATT, and the World Bank are bringing the cultures and technologies of developed postindustrial societies to developing societies, these societies must confront not only rapacious capital, repressive state control, and the exploitation of labor, but also mass media, cultural spectacles, computer technologies, new cultural identities, and so on.

In this situation, a postmodern politics must learn to be at once local, national, and global, depending on specific territorial conditions and problems. While sometimes only local struggles are viable, a new politics must also learn how to go beyond the local to the national and even global levels, requiring new forms of struggle and alliance against the growing power of transnational capitalism, the superstates that remain the dominant political forces, and the rapidly expanding culture industries of contemporary technocapitalism. Such new struggles and alliances are emerging already, as evident in the dramatic Seattle upheavals in December, 1999.

Rethinking politics in the present conflicted and complex configurations of both novel and established relations of power and domination thus requires thinking through the complex ways in which the global and the local are interconnected. Theorizing the configurations of the global and the local also requires developing new multidimensional strategies ranging from the macro to the micro, the national to the local, in order to intervene in a wide range of contemporary and emerging problems and struggles. To the slogan, "Think globally, act locally," we may thus add the slogan, "Think locally, act globally." From this perspective, problems concerning global environmental problems, the development of a global information superhighway, and the need for new global forums for discussing and resolving the seemingly intransigent problems of war and peace, poverty and inequality, and overcoming divisions between the haves and the have-nots may produce new conceptions of global citizenship and new challenges for global intellectuals and activists.

Yet it is impossible to predict what forms a future postmodern politics will take. Such a politics is open and evolving, and will itself develop in response to changing and perhaps surprising conditions. Thus, it is impossible to sketch out the full parameters of a postmodern politics as the project is relatively new and open to further and unpredictable developments. In this novel and challenging conjuncture, the old modern and new postmodern politics both seem one-sided. Power resides in macro and micro institutions; it is more complex than ever with new configurations of global, national, regional, and more properly local forces and relations of power, generating new conflicts and sites of struggle, ranging from debates over "the new world

order" -- or disorder as it may appear to many -- to struggles over local control of schools or the environment. This situation thus requires fresh thinking and politics as we move into the new millennium.

### **Which Road Ahead?**

"Our tragedy lies in the richness of the available alternatives, and in the fact that so few of them are ever seriously explored.

Tom Athanasiou

"Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

H.G. Wells

Our contemporary situation thus finds us between the modern and the postmodern, the old and the new, tradition and the contemporary, the global and the local, the universal and the particular, and any number of other competing matrixes. Such a complex situation produces feelings of vertigo, anxiety, and panic, and contemporary theory, art, politics and everyday life exhibit signs of all of these symptoms. To deal with these tensions, we need to develop new syntheses of modern and postmodern theory and politics to negotiate the novelties and intricacies of our current era.

Indeed, both modern and postmodern positions have strengths and limitations, and we should seek a creative combination of the best elements of each. Thus, we should combine modern notions of solidarity, alliances, consensus, universal rights, macropolitics and institutional struggle with postmodern notions of difference, plurality, multiperspectivalism, identity, and micropolitics. The task today is to construct what Hegel called a "differentiated unity," where the various threads of historical development come together in a rich and mediated way. The abstract unity of the Enlightenment, as expressed in the discourse of rights or human nature, produced a false unity that masked and suppressed differences and privileged certain groups at the expense of others. The postmodern turn, conversely, has produced in its extreme forms warring fragments of difference, exploding any possible context for human community. This was perhaps a necessary development in order to construct needed differences, but it is now equally necessary to reconstruct a new social whole, a progressive community in consensus over basic values and goals, a solidarity that is richly mediated with differences that are articulated without being annulled.

Thus, one of the main dramas of our time will be which road we choose to travel into the future, the road that leads, in Martin Luther King's phrasing, to community, or the one that verges toward chaos. Similarly, will we take the course that leads to war or the one that brings peace? The one that establishes social justice, or ever grosser forms of inequality and poverty? Will we stay on the same modern path of irrational growth and development, of the further expansion of a global capitalist economy (the world of NAFTA and GATT) that has generated seeming permanent economic, of social, and environmental crisis, or will we create a sustainable

society that lives in balance with the natural world? Will we chart a whole new postmodern path, blind to the progressive heritage of the past, with all its attendant snares and dangers? Or will we stake out an alternative route, radicalizing the traditions of modern Enlightenment and democracy, guided by the vision of a future that is just, egalitarian, participatory, ecological, healthy, happy, and sane? The future will depend on what choices we make, hence we must intelligently and decisively develop a new politics for the future. In this way, we can begin to develop a politics of alliance and solidarity equal to the challenges of the coming millennium.

Hence, critical reflection on the pathologies and illusions of the modern adventure and their continuation in the present is an important part of the postmodern adventure. A shift in mindset consequently should be informed by a new awareness of limits, contingency, and unpredictability, along with nonhierarchical thinking. This shift also requires repudiation of the modern will to power over society and nature, revulsion toward arrogant Westerncentric humanism, disenchantment with a solely disenchanting worldview, and renunciation of the fantasy of control and the belief in the technofix for critical social and ecological problems. Where the modern adventure was predicated on the values of control, endless growth, mastery of nature, and a cornucopian world of limitless resources, a key aspect of the postmodern adventure is the systematic dismantling of this worldview and the reconstruction of the best aspects of modernity -- humanism, individuality, enlightened reason, democracy, rights, and solidarities, tempered by reverence for nature, respect for all life, sustainability, and ecological balance.

### Notes

[i] For analysis of transformations in theory, politics, culture, science, and technology, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1991) *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*. London and New York: MacMillan and Guilford Press, and (1997) *The Postmodern Turn*. New York: Guilford Press.

[ii] Few discussions link the transformations to both wide-ranging scientific and technological revolutions and the global restructuring of capitalism. Many discourses of the postmodern largely make shifts in technology responsible for the rupture with modernity, as in Baudrillard (1983a and 1993) who neglects the significance of the reorganization of the economy. While Jameson (1984 and 1991), Harvey (1989), and others relate postmodern culture to transformations of capitalism, they tend to downplay the roles of scientific and technological revolution. Others, like Lyotard (1984), interpret the "postmodern condition" largely through mutations of discourse and culture. We argue that if notions of postmodernity, or a postmodern condition, are to have any force, they must receive a socio-historical grounding in analysis of the conjuncture of scientific and technological revolution and the global restructuring of capitalism.

[iii] Mary Wollstonecraft (175 [1792]) *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.

[iv] Jean Baudrillard, (1988) "The Year 2000 Has Already Happened," in Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (eds), *Body Invaders: Panic Sex in America*. Montreal: The New World Perspectives: 44.

[v] Teresa Ebert, (1996) *Ludic Feminism and After*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, and Hal Foster (1983) "Introduction" to *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Washington: Bay Press.

[vi] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso Books.

[vii] Best and Kellner 1991, op. cit. and Steven Best, *The Politics of Historical Vision*. New York: Guilford, 1995.

[viii] Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972: 71-72.

[ix] See Best and Kellner 1997, op.cit, Chapter 3.

[x] Rudolph Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. London: New Left Books, 1978.

[xi] See Best and Kellner 1991 for our discussion of the need to overcome the antitheses between modern macro politics and postmodern micropolitics and how both perspectives can be deployed in a more inclusive politics of the future. In Chapter 8 of *Postmodern Theory*, we suggest how a combination of micro and macropolitics were combined in the struggles against state communism in 1989, thus putting in question theories that would

privilege one dimension to the neglect of the other.

[xii] Herbert Marcuse, *Negations*. Boston Beacon Press, 1968.

[xiii] Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1991.

[xiv] Mark Dowie *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 1995.

[xv] Best and Kellner 1991, op. cit., Chapter Eight.

[xvi] Best, op. cit. and Douglas Kellner, "The Obsolescence of Marxism?" in *Whither Marxism?*, edited by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg. London and New York: Routledge, 1995: 3-30.

[xvii] Ann Cvetovitch and Douglas Kellner, editors, *Articulating the Global and the Local. Globalization and Cultural Studies*. Boulder: Westview, 1997.