

Modernity, Modern Social Theory, and the Postmodern Critique*

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Over a century ago, Nietzsche (1887, 1967: 151) berated the modern scientist's narrow "factualism" and "renunciation of all interpretation," and a few decades later Weber (1919, 1958) declared the age of the generalist to be over. Extreme specialization, self-enclosed disciplinary jargons, and narrowly focused technical work have since transformed these prescient visions into observable realities. Responding to the dominant forms of atheoretical empirical work and ahistorical "general theory" in post-World War II American social thought, C. Wright Mills (1961: 183-4) asked: "Where is the intelligentsia that is carrying on the big discourse of the Western world and whose work as intellectuals is influential among parties and publics and relevant to the great decisions of our time?" In his view, professional social science was guilty of "pretentious triviality" and incapable of grasping the growing threats to freedom and reason. About the same time, Raymond Aron (1970b: vi, 332) argued that classical social theorists shared "a certain solidarity" deriving from their "global historical interpretations of the modern age": a broad vision which has been regrettably lost (Aron, 1969: v-xviii; 1970a: 7-9, 332-3; 1970b: v-ix, 331-2).

From this perspective, classical social theory provided comprehensive analyses of the core features, central processes, and imminent threats and possibilities of modernity and in this paper we argue that such broad and wide-ranging discourse is still useful and needed today. In our forthcoming book Theorizing Modernity (Antonio/Kellner 1991), we attempt to map the nature of the discursive field in classical social thought, pointing to shared metatheoretical problematics and substantive concerns, as well as to points of methodological and substantive disagreement. We argue that classical social theory is primarily a theory of modernity and that the classical tradition of modern social theory raised fundamental questions concerning the nature, structure, and historical trajectories of modern societies. By putting modern societies in broad historical perspective, by emphasizing the linkages between their differentiated social institutions, and by expressing the potentialities for normatively guided social change, classical theorists such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Dewey developed a discourse that facilitated comprehension and discussion of, and posed responses to, the rise of modernity and its problematic social conditions.

In recent years, however, there have been a series of attacks on the allegedly foundationalist, essentialist, reductionist, totalizing, and positivist features of classical social theory; these critiques have challenged contemporary theorists to probe their metatheoretical assumptions and to articulate and defend the project of social theory against often strong and compelling criticisms by postmodernists, poststructuralists, post-Marxists, feminists, historical sociologists, and others who have called attention to overgeneralized and hyper-rational features of modern philosophy and classical social theory. But comprehensive theories of big historical trends and structures are too often rejected en toto on the grounds that they liquidate the local and particular and have affinity for totalitarian social movements and political regimes that do the same (e.g. Lyotard 1984). Indeed, these critics themselves frequently rely on undertheorized global notions about the complex and fragmentary nature of new transnational structures and the dynamics of so-called "late modernity," "postmodernity," or the end of history.

In particular, postmodernist and poststructuralist critics have implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, attacked the metatheoretical foundations of classical theory, scuttling its presuppositions concerning representation, the coherence of the social, and the subject. As part of their broadside against the totalizing features of Enlightenment rationalism, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and others deny social theory's capacity to articulate modernity's complex contours and to contribute to progressive social change. Postmodernists contend that critical perspectives on contemporary society require the demolition of the grand narratives and totalizing theories of the modern tradition.

In this paper, we shall argue that the postmodern critique of modern social theory is excessive and throws out the valuable aspects of classical theories, along with their problematical features. We claim that the substantive analyses of postmodern theory culminate in a one-sided emphasis on cultural and social fragmentation that ignores societal interdependencies and that devalues social solidarities. Against postmodern theory, we argue that while positivist and hyperrationalist elements abound in classical theory, contrary themes suggest much more modest assumptions and metatheoretical positions that anticipated the postmodern critique. Moreover, classical theorists conceptualized the interdependent and integrative features of modernity, as well as the forms of disintegration and fragmentation, providing illuminating and broad perspectives on contemporary social formations. Thus, although postmodernists point correctly to dogmatic features of classical social theory that should be abandoned, their caricature of the tradition and call for a radical break with all modern social theory ignores the extent to which classical theories continue to provide resources for the projects of social theory and social reconstruction. Our argument is that the critical aspects of classical social theory must be reappropriated to provide adequate theoretical perspectives on contemporary society and constructive responses to the postmodern critique.

THE POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY

Postmodernists attack classical social theorists' claims about mapping the social totality, detecting social conditions that guarantee "historical progress," and facilitating progressive social change. Since many postmodern critics are former Marxists who now reject radical politics, socialism, and even welfare state reformism, they advance especially scathing criticism of Marxism's claims concerning history and universal emancipation. The postmodern critique holds that virtually all modern social theory springs from Enlightenment faith in science and reason and leads to "grand narratives" that legitimate political repression and cultural homogenization. Postmodernists argue that the totalizing features of social theory have affinity for centralized systems of power and social planning that liquidate particularity and block the creative forces of language and desire.

Rejecting classical social theory's meta-assumptions about representation, social coherence, and the subject, postmodernists argue that radical cultural criticism must depart from new bases outside the Enlightenment tradition. Postmodern theorists adopt the poststructuralist strategy of severing the connection between signs and their referents, abandoning modern theory's efforts to represent the "real." For example, Derrida (1976) views language as a form of "free play," independent of a "transcendental signified," and rejects claims about the capacity of language to objectively represent extralinguistic realities. And an extreme postmodernist like Baudrillard

(1983a) evaporates "reality" into a contingent play of simulacra. While modern epistemology focuses on the correspondence of representations to external objects, Baudrillard argues that signs and images have recently replaced "the real." Speaking explicitly of a new postmodern age, Baudrillard states: "We are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons" (1983a: 31-32). In his view, the proliferation of contradictory images and messages "implodes" the boundaries between signs and referents, as well as between reality and fiction, dissolving truth and meaning.

Postmodernists also emphasize pervasive cultural fragmentation and social disintegration, rejecting social theory's metatheoretical assumptions concerning the coherence of society and, in extreme cases, the very concept of the social (Baudrillard 1983b). They conceive of postmodernity as an exceedingly complex matrix of discontinuous processes involving ubiquitous, instantaneous, and disjunctive changes; dispersed and overwhelming space; multiple spectacles and discordant voices; contradictory images and messages; and an overall schizophrenic fragmentation of experience (Jameson 1984). The extreme cultural incoherence of postmodernity supposedly renders obsolete modern theory's discourses about obdurate social structures (e.g., class hierarchy, gender structure, complex organization) and patterned social processes (e.g., integration, domination, exploitation).

In addition, postmodernists contend that the philosophic subject which undergirded the conceptions of representation and social coherence in modern philosophy and social theory is in eclipse. In the Cartesian tradition of modern epistemology, Enlightenment thinkers implied that people were capable of being rational subjects who, after grasping the "foundations" of knowledge, could achieve a relatively unambiguous understanding of the external world and could use this to transform the social conditions of their existence. Postmodern theorists, by contrast, present the subject as a fictive construct, arguing that the myth of subjectivity serves a control function that represses human spontaneity and difference. In this regard, Foucault interprets the subject as a construct of power and discipline (1977), and Baudrillard has declared that in the postmodern era the "drama of the subject at odds with his objects and with his image" is over (Baudrillard 1988: 16).

Postmodern theory thus rejects the basic meta-assumptions of modern social theory, putting its entire project into question. While taking this postmodern challenge seriously, we argue that classical social theorists anticipated some of the recent attacks on modern theoretical practices without renouncing altogether the vocation of depicting social reality and serving as an instrument of social change. In the following discussion, we argue that the tradition of modern social theory contained "dogmatic" as well as "critical" features, and that there are thus themes in classical theory which provide both critical perspectives on Enlightenment rationalism and positivistic scientism, as well as resources to help develop a critical theory of the present age. Consequently, since nearly all classical theories contained both dogmatic and critical features (both originating in the Enlightenment heritage), any effort to reappropriate this tradition must itself be critical and reconstructive and not celebratory.

CRITICAL VS. DOGMATIC THEMES IN CLASSICAL THEORY

Classical theorists initiated the tradition of modern social theory by attempting to grasp the

long-term movement from traditional society to modernity. They usually created polar ideal types (e.g., *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft*, mechanical/organic solidarity, feudalism/capitalism, agricultural/commercial society, military/industrial society) to describe the dominant social structures of the old and new societies and to specify the primary developmental processes that were transforming social life from the local to the international level. Classical theory was centrally concerned with developing broad and comprehensive perspectives on modernity, focusing on the nascent forms of economy, polity, society, and culture. The new social order was shaped by social differentiation, rationalization, individuation, class structuration, democratic state formation, urbanization, and industrial revolution. Classical social theory attempted to theorize the trajectories of change, producing the new institutions, practices, ideas, and everyday life, that together constitute modernity.

Classical theorists presumed that they could represent macroscopic social realities, portray coherently the linkages between new forms of social organization, interdependence, and fragmentation. They also believed that their approaches would guide the efforts of historical subjects to actively regulate or to transform their social worlds. These meta-assumptions were sometimes employed narrowly and dogmatically and, at other times, reflexively and self-critically. In effect, classical social theorists reproduced the contradictory ethos of the Enlightenment, sometimes mechanistically reproducing its excessive faith in science and reason and, at others, employing its critical rationality and self-reflexivity to their own theories and to the social world.

Dogmatic positivistic themes treated science as if it were a new religion with the power to conjure up a magnificent order behind the chaos and to provide guaranteed solutions to the new social disjunctions. Theorists like Comte and Spencer combined this excessive faith in science with a belief that reason could precisely represent the broadest features and trends of social development. They implied that social theory could unproblematically grasp reality, provide an exact system of knowledge, and serve as an instrument of enlightenment and social change. All the gaps in knowledge about the social world were, in their view, merely a product of the level of the newness of their science and would be mechanically overcome by further technical development. The dogmatic arguments of these theorists grossly exaggerated theory's powers of representation, overstated the integration of society, and attributed too much rationality to the subject. In addition, they often spoke deterministically about homogeneous paths of development, ignoring regional and national differences. Their implicit idea of modernity was too general, lacking sufficient sensitivity to particularity and differences within national and regional cultures.

Although their approaches were not wholly free of these problematic features, some classical theorists acknowledged the limits of representation, while expressing a dialectical vision of society as an unstable unity of integrating and fragmenting conditions. Critical moments within classical theory articulated a socially differentiated subject whose limited rationality and partial integration depends on its always problematic adjustments to changing historical conditions, and whose thought and action is mediated by material/organizational resources, power, and communication. Yet contrary to the postmodernists, classical theorists believed that their approaches could be rationally justified and critically compared on empirical-historical grounds. Moreover, they concurred that systematic conceptualization based on careful empirical inquiry would represent with reasonable accuracy the salient attributes of extralinguistic as well as linguistic social realities. Especially in regard to macroscopic issues concerning large institutions or

entire societies, many classical theorists understood that their theories could never capture social reality in all its richness, particularity, and complexity. In their critical moments classical theorists understood that their approaches were tentative arguments subject to revision or disconfirmation. Despite his positivistic proclivities, even Durkheim contended that "collective representations" have a "relative independence" from their "substructures" (Durkheim 1953: 23-24; Lukes 1977: 231-236).

Yet classical social theorists seldom addressed the limits of representation and the inherent uncertainties that characterize all judgments about the relationship of theory to social reality. Their tendency to see social science as a perfectable and cumulative enterprise understated the complexity, emergent features, and historicity of social phenomena. While defending the validity of their substantive positions, they often spoke too boldly about the powers of their new science, perpetuating the uncritical Enlightenment faith in science and reason. Classical theory's dogmatic currents often implied an absolute divide between subject and object, treating "facts" as if they were unaffected by interpretation. The Cartesian emphasis on the capacities and clarity of the impartial scientific observer resulted in an uncritical one-sidedness being granted an objectivity and universality that shielded them from genuine empirical inquiry, discussion, and criticism. Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of the state and of the German "ideologists" raised this issue early in the classical tradition (Marx and Engels 1964; Easton and Guddat 1967: 151-202). But Marx himself made essentialist errors (e.g., his belief in historical materialism's capacity to represent unerringly the class interests of the proletariat and the direction of history) that derived partly from his overweening confidence in the representational powers of historical materialism {Antonio 1990}. Moreover, other thinkers, such as Max Weber and John Dewey, were more sensitive to the inherently perspectival, interpretive, and uncertain nature of all theoretical practices.

Most classical theorists emphasized some sensitivity to the limits of knowledge, emphasizing that all representations of society are imperfect and ought to be subject to continual inquiries that could lead to their disconfirmation. Indeed, Marx's repeated emphasis on the "historical" nature of social phenomena referred primarily to the need for continuing empirical investigations and not to Hegelian stages of history. This empirical translation of Cartesian doubt contributed to the overthrow of the fixed ideals of foundationalism, substituting an open-ended discourse that viewed social theories as incomplete and necessarily changing expressions of social conditions. Although Hegelian and Spencerian teleology had a great impact on late 19th and early 20th century social theory, a countervailing Darwinian emphasis on the specific, particular, and nonlinear nature of history and social development broke radically with the idea of progress. When they operated within this lens, social theorists' claims about complicated social phenomena (e.g., classes, status orders, complex organizations, social movements, and long-term social change) as inherently complicated and uncertain. Moreover, some theorists also recognized that their practices were mediated by linguistic frameworks and were inextricably entwined with social interests and ideological presuppositions. This critical side of the classical theory approach contradicted positivist themes about "exact" and "objective" representation of an unproblematic social world. Still none of these theorists rejected representation entirely; they understood that if portrayals of social reality were treated merely as narratives, the nonarbitrary, intersubjective bases for discussing, evaluating, comparing, and disconfirming social theories would be eliminated.

Classical theorists viewed society as a differentiated structural whole. Countering the

unmediated idea of social totality as an organic whole, as well as the utilitarian individualism of the market, was the Darwinian idea of individuals and subgroups being linked by determinate relations and specific historical conditions to interdependent material and social contexts. Despite strong disagreement about the level of interdependence and types of connectedness, many classical theorists still attempted to address the complex interrelations between individuals and their multileveled and diverse social and environmental contexts, as well as between major institutions and macro developmental processes that linked smaller groupings into networks of regional, societal, and even trans-societal interdependence. In contrast to postmodernists, classical theorists believed that the social world has a coherence that could be expressed theoretically. But they sometimes spoke as if the individual and subgroup were completely absorbed in the totality, and then were not always mindful of the problematic boundaries and unevenly differentiated features of large social structure. For example, the organic metaphor, employed by many theorists, reified "society" and social "development" or evolution and underplayed their discontinuities and reliance on coercion and domination. From the start, many theorists framed their arguments too broadly without historical specificity; nearly all classical theorists spoke about traditional societies in too homogeneous a fashion and about the rise of modernity as if it spread (with some lag) uniformly throughout Europe and North America.

This tendency was especially manifested in the many different theories of social evolution that treated modern societies as if they had identical developmental patterns and institutions. But some classical theorists, such as Weber, anticipated the postmodern analysis of fragmentation and destruction of meaning (1958: 357). Broad societal or trans-societal theorizing cannot avoid a precarious balancing of the general and the specific. Nor can it ever solve completely the problems of understating particularity and overstating coherence. To seek perfection in this regard would mean being silent about collective life. Instead, modern social theorists attempted to recognize these limits and inherent difficulties, and thus condition their claims accordingly.

The classical theorists' assumptions about representation and coherence go hand in hand with their implicit view of individuals, or "subjects," as being capable of instrumentally and normatively comprehending, representing, and transforming their worlds. But classical theorists often privileged the homogenizing features of socialization, equating social consciousness with the passive reception of social norms and values. Conformist ideas of socialization exaggerated societal integration and consensus, while understating the particularity and differences of individuals and subgroups -- themes that remain central to much contemporary social theory.

Debates over the subject and over the individual-society relationship have been a particularly controversial issue among neo-Marxists, post-structuralists, and feminists because of the assumption in Marxism and other theories of social change that "emancipation" requires rational human agency. Orthodox Marxists spoke confidently about overcoming "false consciousness" and about the fragmented working class inevitably awakening as a unified revolutionary proletariat. Class fragmentation and political, ethnic, religious, and gender segmentation were at first dismissed as epiphenomena that merely postponed the revolutionary proletariat's unification and triumph. But when it became obvious that capital's homogenizing power was not sufficient to eradicate these obdurate social distinctions and modes of association and identification, some Western Marxists searched for a substitute emancipatory subject, or a plurality of subjects, and, more recently, debated whether the conception ought to be dispensed with entirely.

Other modern social theorists had already developed a more critical conception of the social self contradicting conformist and homogeneous portrayals of the subject. For example Simmel and Mead held that socialization is an individuating as well as a homogenizing force (Mead 1967; Simmel 1964). In their view, modernity's highly differentiated social structure produces a highly articulated individuality capable of increasingly self-conscious self-assertion and voluntaristic patterns of association. Mead's view of the subject stands out from the sometimes simplistic, hyper-rationalist, and conformist version implied by many other classical theorists. Here the postmodernist criticism points to serious deficiencies. However, they go too far in rejecting the individual's capacity for autonomy and rational action, substituting schizophrenically fragmented or robotized experience and behavior. Postmodernists seem to be amnesiac about the Counter-Enlightenment reactionaries who used the alleged irrationality of the subject to justify the need for authoritarian moralism and social control. Despite its shortcomings, some current of classical theory suggested a more balanced view of the self, abandoning the imperious vision of rationality and maintaining a conditioned idea of autonomy. Approaches that speak of the disappearance of, or radical fragmentation of, the subject cannot account for uncoerced collective action. Such extreme views are not only empirically misguided, but can easily be turned around to support the types of repression that postmodernists themselves oppose.

Classical theorists saw the new types of mass social organization and consequent interdependences to be dialectically related with opposing forces producing social and cultural fragmentation. They produced standpoints for criticizing society and suggesting social changes from the interplay of these integrating and fragmenting conditions. In particular, the "immanent" criticism of social theorists emphasized the contradictions between emergent democratic ideals and possibilities of modernity and the new types of oppression, inequality, and polarization. As with their central metatheoretical assumptions, this historical method of social criticism sometimes resulted in dogmatic pseudosociological pronouncements (e.g. about the "inevitable" direction of history), and, at others, expressed critical sensitivity pointing to concrete resources and possibilities at the heart of nascent social struggles, as well as growing aspirations for a freer and more pacified social life.

In sum, classical social theorists provided languages for discussing societal development, the primary social structures and institutions of modern society, and the most significant possibilities for progressive social change. Such theories provided a basis for cognitively mapping the social order which helps individuals situate themselves meaningfully in their emergent social order. They also encouraged an attitude that society can be understood and transformed through collective action and planning. Classical social theorists such as Marx, Durkheim, and Dewey exhibited a balanced concern for interdependence and fragmentation and argued that modern social arrangements contain their own historical bases for social criticism. It is true that these theorists sometimes spoke dogmatically about the path of societal development and its significance for realizing freedom and justice. Although they claimed to abandon philosophical "grounds," classical theorists often treated the "progressive" features of modernity too optimistically, transforming them into transcendent warranties about a more democratic future. But postmodernists, overreacting to this tendency of classical theory, speak of overwhelming social and cultural fragmentation destroying the historical bases of immanent critique and the possibility of progressive social transformation. By dismissing the metatheoretical underpinnings and historical

social criticism of modern social theory, postmodernists rule out the strong sociology needed to support their own extremely sweeping claims about a postmodern era, and the exhaustion of theory, collective action, and radical social transformation. They thus give up the analytic means for clarifying and elaborating the historical bases of their normative criticisms of modernity. In the end, postmodernists' totalizing claims continue in the tracks of classical social theory, but without the conceptual tools and analytic methods to provide a satisfactory account of the alleged postmodern condition.

CONCLUSION

We thus conclude that the postmodern critique of contemporary critical social theory undertheorizes the current historical conjuncture, overstates its discontinuities with the recent past, and foregoes responsibility for explaining why their views ought to be privileged or even entertained as serious cultural criticism. Still these approaches do raise important critical questions about the classical tradition and about its complicity in cultural domination. But their claims that the creative and emancipatory potentials of modernity have already been exhausted and that an entirely new epoch has dawned are highly questionable speculations lacking systematic empirical and theoretical argumentation.

Even if an epochal transformation has not yet occurred, the multiplication of heterodox approaches proclaiming the need for radically new theories, new normative languages, and new politics themselves suggest the possibility of important cultural crises and major social changes. But theories of broad scope are needed for discussing and assessing recent claims by postmodernists and others about totalizing social and cultural change. Thus the type of social mapping characteristic of classical social theory is necessary again today. Increasingly large publics across the earth sense that a fundamental restructuring of the world order may already be under way. For example, accelerated internationalization of the economy and the pressing threat of world environmental despoliation highlight increased global interdependence and the need for planning while the political restructuring of Eastern Europe, the tensions in the Arab world manifested in the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the "postmodern" cultural fragmentation in the West suggest trends toward decentralization and disintegration. As we have argued, classical social theory was constructed precisely for making sense out of this type of dialectic of societal integration and fragmentation, and theories of similar scope are needed to do the same for the current macroscopic dynamics.

Furthermore, we believe that the modern emphasis on theorizing society as a whole and of defining its most pressing crises and problems is desperately needed in an era dominated by specialized, disciplinary "middle range" theories and even narrower forms of specialized research. We believe that the orientation of competing theories of society in the classical style could contribute significantly to producing discourse over comprehensive social structure and challenging social problems. But we are not recommending that social theory of the classical type serve as a substitute for specialized social analysis, criticism, and research. Rather, we would hope that specialized sciences be informed by comprehensive and critical theoretical perspectives, and that critical social theory in turn be informed by empirical research and results in the special sciences, as well as the experiences of new social movements.

Thus, we believe that contemporary social developments require broad new social theories to help chart out the contours and trajectories of societies at the present moment, much as classical theory provided conceptual delineations of the developmental tendencies and structures of modern societies. Both the capitalist and communist systems are currently undergoing restructuring, relations between the two Cold War enemies have dramatically improved, and new complexities are emerging due to dramatic changes in Europe and turmoil in the Middle East. In such a volatile and complex historical conjuncture, comprehensive social theories with a historical vision are needed to make sense of the changes taking place in the contemporary era. Such critical theories of society would incorporate the findings of specialized science into broader perspectives and, at the same time, encourage both social theory and science to engage in increased ethical responsibility and critical awareness of the direction and relevance of its specialized practices.

Such critical theories of society would therefore incorporate systematic understanding of national and global social structures and processes and would utilize the technical resources of specialized science to help in this task. It would also attempt to repoliticize critical theory and to orient its theory toward political practice aimed at confronting and dealing with the problems of the present age (economic chaos in the financial and banking system, homeless and growing poverty in an era of intensifying class division, health epidemics in a conjuncture of deteriorating public health, and so on). We believe that our dangerous historical conjuncture requires a more affirmative (yet still critical) attitude toward science and planning than is suggested by strands of either Frankfurt school critical theory (especially the "dialectic of Enlightenment" tendency) and postmodern theory and that critical social theories of the future should be more open to science and concrete proposals for the restructuring of society than has been the case in the past decades.

Postmodern theory, by contrast, exhibits an exhaustion of theoretical resources and political hope that cavalierly throws away the best of modern theory, especially Marxist and neo-Marxist theories. Reproducing the theoretical despair of Adorno and Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment in the face of the triumph of fascism (1972; orig. 1947), postmodern theory replicates left melancholy after the defeats of the movements of the 1960s and the triumph of conservatism in the 1980s. We believe, however, that the rapidly accelerating crises arising from the breakdown of the postwar structure of accumulation and of the threat of deep recession, environmental destruction, and war demand a reengagement of classical theory and particularly the critical tradition that affirm efforts to rationally grasp large structures and problems and to seek modes of collective resistance, cooperation, and social transformation.

*In this article, we draw on a critique of postmodern theory that will appear in Dickens//Fontana 1991 and on a forthcoming book Theorizing Modernity.