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MODERNITY AND SOCIAL THEORY: THE LIMITS OF THE POSTMODERN CRITIQUE*

By Robert J. Antonio and Douglas Kellner

Postmodernists have launched a radical assault on modern social theory. As part of their broadside against the totalizing features of Enlightenment rationalism, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and others reject claims about social theory's capacity to articulate modernity's complex contours and to contribute to progressive social change. Extreme postmodernists like Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b) make claims concerning "the end of the social" and "the end of history," which suggest that any form social theory is obsolete. Others, such as Lyotard (1984), contend that "the postmodern condition" calls for a new type of theory that demolishes the bases of modern social theory's assumptions and systematic project.¹

More specifically, postmodernists contend that modern theory's core meta-assumptions concerning "representation," "social coherence," and the "rational subject" result in foundationalist, essentialist, reductionist, overly totalized, and homogenized thought. In this article, we argue that the postmodernist's assault on modern social theory and historical modes of social criticism undermines their own sweeping claims about epochal change, and culminates in a one-sided emphasis on cultural and social fragmentation that ignores societal interdependencies and devalues social solidarities. Moreover, we contend that the postmodernists have treated the modern tradition too one-sidedly and monovocally, focusing almost entirely on its excesses and errors. For while positivist and hyperrationalist elements abound in their works, modern social theorists also developed themes pointing to the limits of their assumptions that anticipated the postmodern critique. They also had a much more balanced approach to the play of integrating and disintegrating forces than does postmodern theory today. Consequently, while postmodernists address some problematic features of modern theory, their caricature of the tradition and radical break with the approach ignores the extent to which it continues to provide resources for the projects of understanding social reality and promoting social reconstruction.

THE POSTMODERN CRITIQUE OF MODERN SOCIAL THEORY

Postmodernists attack classical theory's claims about mapping the social totality, detecting social progress, and facilitating beneficial social change. Since many postmodern critics are former Marxists who now reject socialism and even welfare state reformism, they advance especially scathing criticism of Marxism's global claims concerning history and universal emancipation. The postmodern critique holds that virtually all modern social theory springs from an uncritical Enlightenment faith in science and reason and leads to "grand narratives" that legitimate political repression and distinctively modern forms of social and cultural oppression. Postmodernists argue that social theory contributes to legitimating centralized systems of power and planning that destroy individuality and block the creative forces of language and desire. In order to avert these problems, postmodernists maintain that social and cultural critics must make a clean break with Enlightenment rationalism by rejecting classical theory's meta-assumptions about representation,

social coherence, and the subject.

Postmodern theorists adopt the poststructuralist strategy of severing the connection between signs and their referents, thus abandoning modern theorists' efforts to represent the "real." For example, Derrida (1976) treats language as a form of "free play," independent of a "transcendental signified," and rejects claims about its capacity to objectively represent extralinguistic realities. He also believes that the modern propensity to center on "the" meaning or central proposition of a text blurs differences and diminishes the richness of linguistic creativity. His deconstructive attack on modern epistemology aims to free heterogeneous desires and signifiers from linguistic constraints.

Baudrillard goes much further, evaporating social reality into a contingent play of "simulacra." While modern epistemology focuses on the correspondence of representations to external objects, Baudrillard claims that signs and images have replaced "the real" in the contemporary era. Speaking explicitly of a new postmodern age, he states: "We are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons" (Baudrillard 1983a: 31-32). The proliferation of contradictory images and messages "implodes" the boundaries between signs and referents, and between reality and fiction, ultimately, dissolving the concepts of truth and meaning.

The experience of the postmodern homo significans is constituted by language, texts, codes, and images without connection to an external world. Postmodernists treat different social theories merely as conflicting narratives, or incommensurable perspectives, rather than as portrayals of factual realities that can be judged in accordance with intersubjective standards and procedures for determining valid knowledge. Although postmodernists do not attempt to justify their views methodologically, they privilege their own positions or narratives over competing accounts of the historical conjuncture and are especially dismissive of modernist perspectives.

Secondly, postmodernists emphasize pervasive cultural fragmentation and social disintegration, rejecting the very concept of a coherent social order. They conceive of postmodernity as an exceedingly complex matrix of discontinuous processes; of ubiquitous, instantaneous, and nonlinear changes; of fractured and overwhelming space; of cacophonous voices; and of divergent images and messages, all of which produce a schizophrenic fragmentation of experience (Jameson 1984). Baudrillard (1983b) speaks of "the end" of the social, of meaning, and of history, claiming that events lack consequences beyond the moment because they shift so rapidly and so radically that their impact is lost and because the saturation of "messages" reduces them to mere "noise." Due to mass indifference following from the continuous novelty, routinization of spectacle, and excess of information, all interest in the past and concern about the future is lost.

The obliteration of standards for interpreting the meaning of events and for discerning between different pieces of information produces a nihilistic relativization of experience; postmodern life is reduced to one-dimensional presence and indeterminacy that can only be felt and experienced, but not coherently interpreted. Comprehension of the social is demolished by the "eclipse of distance" (Bell 1978: pp. 99-119; reworked by Jameson 1984, pp. 85-88), by implosive dedifferentiation of boundaries, and by the consequent incorporation of spectators into a world of media and consumerist fantasy. Social classes and other structured social relations are decomposed

into a multiplicity of indeterminate and disconnected experiences and events. The extreme cultural fragmentation and incoherence of postmodern experience supposedly puts an end to modern theory's global discourses about obdurate social structures (e.g., class, gender, and racial hierarchies, bureaucracies, markets) and patterned social processes (e.g., integration, differentiation, domination, exploitation).²

Thirdly, postmodernists herald the demise of the philosophic subject that formerly undergirded the conceptions of representation and social coherence in modern philosophy and social theory. Following Descartes and modern epistemology, classical theorists treated humanity as rational subjects who are capable of achieving an unambiguous understanding of the external world and of applying this knowledge to improve the human condition. By contrast, Friedrich Nietzsche, the most important forerunner of postmodernist thought, characterized the modern philosophic subject as a "little changeling" who should be disposed of; he argued that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; the 'doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed..." (1969: 45). In Nietzsche's view, the fictive subject is a byproduct of cultural homogenization and conflicting desires and strivings. However, by turning them inward to internalized norms, self control, and guilt, the myth of subjectivity transforms modern subjects into a tame and conformist shadow of what an individual could be.³

Like Nietzsche, postmodernists reject the concept of a rational and autonomous subject because it allegedly represses human spontaneity, difference, desire, and power. Foucault contends that the modern subject is a product of Enlightenment efforts to make "man" an object of scientific knowledge and of social manipulation by new disciplinary and therapeutic institutions. According to his genealogical studies of the interplay of knowledge and power, the subject's highly refined capacities for self-observation and self-regulation harden modernity's "panoptical" regime of discipline and domination by elevating social control and cultural homogenization to unimagined heights. But Foucault implies that the modern "episteme" of thought is crumbling as others have done in the past and that the subject will disappear "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault 1973: 387).⁴

Baudrillard claims that the advent of postmodernity has already completely erased the subject and that the "drama of the subject at odds with his objects and with his image" is over. He declares that "we" are now "terminals of multiple networks" not creators of the script (Baudrillard 1988: 16). Baudrillard (1983a: 55-56) states:

"YOU are news, you are the social, the event is you, you are involved, you use your voice, etc." A turnabout of affairs by which it becomes impossible to locate an instance of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, since you are always already on the other side. No more subject, focal point, center or periphery: but pure flexion or circular inflection.

Given the fractal and multiple nature of the postmodern self, Baudrillard declares that the reign of the "rational" subject is over.

By rejecting its core meta-assumptions about representation, social coherence, and subjectivity, postmodernists undermine the very possibility of modern social theory. Yet, contrary to the postmodern caricature, most classical theorists recognized the limits of their own theoretical practices. Because they envision the classical tradition in a monovocal fashion as if it were nothing more than a replication of the worst aspects of Enlightenment thought, postmodernists ignore the fact that the classical theorists developed epistemologically critical as well as dogmatic themes. Overreacting to its positivist features and blind to the fact that modern theorists began a critique of Enlightenment thought, postmodernists abandon altogether the vocation of classical social theory to depict and to change social reality.

CRITICAL VS. DOGMATIC THEMES IN CLASSICAL THEORY

Classical social theory addressed several types of "global" questions: "What is the structure of this particular society as a whole?"; "Where does this society stand in human history?"; and "What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period?" (Mills 1961: 6-7). 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 developed discourses that facilitated comprehension and discussion of, and posed responses to, the rise of modernity and its ambiguous constellation of progressive and oppressive features.

Classical theorists initiated the tradition of modern social theory by conceptually delineating the historical transition from traditional society to modern society. They created polar ideal types (e.g., *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft*, mechanical/organic solidarity, feudalism/capitalism, agricultural/commercial society, military/industrial society) to systematically articulate the dominant social structures of the old and new societies and to specify the primary developmental processes that were radically transforming social life from the local to the international level. Classical theorists provided comprehensive perspectives to make sense out of the processes (e.g., differentiation, centralization, rationalization, individuation, urbanization) that were generating new modes of individuality, economy, polity, society, and culture constituting the new social order of modernity.

Classical theorists presumed that they could represent these macroscopic social realities, coherently portray their complex modes of interdependence and fragmentation, and help historical subjects transform their social worlds and actively control their fates. These meta-assumptions were sometimes employed narrowly and dogmatically and, at other times, reflexively and self-critically. Although they initiated a revision of the tradition, classical social theorists reproduced the contradictory themes of Enlightenment thought, sometimes mechanistically replicating its excessive faith in science and reason and, at others, employing its critical rationality and epistemological self-reflexivity to their own theories and to the social world.

The positivistic side of classical theory treated science as if it was a new religion with the

power to detect a lawful order behind the chaos and to provide guaranteed solutions to the new social problems. Positivists 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. Such dogmatic arguments grossly exaggerated theory's powers of representation, overstated the integration of society, and attributed far too much rationality to the subject. In addition, they sometimes spoke deterministically about homogeneous paths of development that operated mechanistically, ignoring regional and national differences (e.g., Comte's law of three stages) and lacking sensitivity to particularity and differences. Theories of broad scope always depend on a precarious balancing of the general and particular, and always risk overgeneralization. However, classical theorists framed their arguments too broadly without sufficient historical specificity; nearly all of them spoke about traditional and modern societies too uniformly.

By contrast, classical theorists sometimes articulated a critical reflexivity that acknowledged the limits of representation, that treated social coherence as a precarious and unstable outcome of integrating and fragmenting forces, and that envisaged socially differentiated subjects as having limited rationality and partial integration depending on always problematic adjustments to changing historical conditions. Yet contrary to the postmodernists, classical theorists attempted to develop intersubjective standards to rationally justify their practices on empirical-historical and theoretical grounds from which they could criticize their own and other theories. Thus, they concurred that careful conceptualization based on empirical inquiry could represent with reasonable accuracy the salient attributes of extralinguistic features of social life as well as their discursive aspects. But especially in regard to macroscopic issues (ranging from the level of large institutions to transnational conditions), most classical theorists understood that their theories could not possibly capture social reality in all its richness, particularity, and complexity. In their critical moments, classical theorists treated their approaches as tentative arguments subject to revision or disconfirmation. Indeed, even their conception of science emphasized the need for continual revision of theory on the basis of new empirical information and arguments.

Yet classical social theorists seldom addressed the hermeneutic complexities of representational thinking, nor did they closely probe the inherent uncertainties that characterize all judgments about the relationship of theory to social reality. But especially while defending the validity of their substantive positions, they often spoke with too much certainty. In their dogmatic positivist moments, classical theorists implied a great divide between subject and object, treating the investigator as a mere spectator and "facts" as if they were unaffected by the interpretive process. Their Cartesian emphasis on the power and clarity of the impartial scientific observer resulted in extremely one-sided interpretations of social reality being granted an irrefutable objectivity and universality that blocked genuine empirical inquiry, discussion, and criticism. Marx's critique of Hegel's theory of the state and of the German "ideologists" raised the problem of this dogmatic type of theorizing early in the classical tradition (Marx and Engels 1964; Easton and Guddat 1967: 151-202). But Marx himself made essentialist errors (e.g., his certainty about the direction of history and about the "real" interests of the proletariat) that derived partly from his

overweening confidence in the representational powers of historical materialism (Antonio 1990). Other thinkers, such as Max Weber and John Dewey, were more sensitive to the inherently perspectival, interpretive, and uncertain nature of all theoretical practices.

Still, classical theorists usually recognized that all representations of society are imperfect and must be subjected to potentially disconfirming inquiries. This maxim of Newtonian experimentalism was earlier a centerpiece of Enlightenment thinking that had already smashed the fixed ideals of foundationalism. The critical side of classical social theory thus encouraged open-ended discourse because it viewed social theories as incomplete expressions of changing social conditions. And since it treated complex social phenomena (e.g., classes, status orders, large organizations, social movements, and macroscopic social change) as being always mediated by linguistic frameworks and inextricably entwined with social interests and ideological presuppositions, the critical approach contradicted positivist claims about exact representation of an "objective" social world. Moreover, none of the classical social theorists rejected representation entirely because they believed 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. Despite strong disagreement about the level of interdependence and types of connectedness, they still attempted to address the organizational properties and developmental processes that linked smaller groupings into larger interdependent societal or trans-societal units. In contrast to postmodernists, classical theorists believed that the social world has a complex coherence that could be expressed theoretically. But they were not always mindful of the fact that social organizations and groups are not clearly bounded, unproblematic totalities. For example, the organic metaphor, employed by many theorists, reified social structure and processes, exaggerating their stability and coherence and understating their discontinuities and particularities.

Yet some classical theorists anticipated the postmodern themes of social discontinuity, fragmented meaning, and the eclipse of totality. Addressing the consequences of disenchantment, Weber asserted that: "culture's every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness. The advancement of cultural values, however, seems to become a senseless hustle in the service of worthless, moreover self-contradictory, and mutually antagonistic ends" (Weber 1958: 357). Weber's commentaries on increasing cultural fragmentation, his methodological broadsides against foundationalism and essentialism, his scathing attacks on secular theodicies of historical progress, his penetrating analyses of the connections between rationalization and domination, and his ardent defense of pluralism against the forces of cultural homogenization all anticipated key postmodern positions. But despite his somber vision of "unbrotherly" modernity and the "iron cage," Weber still upheld the rational bases of modern social theory, arguing that the empirical uncertainties and ethical ambiguities arising from the conflicting values, multivocal discourses, and clashing interests of modernity must be faced with "intellectual integrity" (Weber 1958: 129-156). A complete rejection of rationalism, in his view, would simply give license to the unreflective, uncritical, and cynical pursuit of vulgar material and ideal interests that already

dominated the politics and culture of his day. Therefore, while attempting to theorize the extraordinarily complex, differentiated, and pluralistic features of modernity, Weber defended a critical rationalism based on as clear as possible awareness of the limits and the uncertainty of knowledge.⁵

Classical theory's views of representation and coherence go hand in hand with their assumptions about the individual subject's capacities for instrumentally and normatively comprehending and transforming his or her world. But they often dwelled on the homogenizing features of socialization, equating subjectivity with the passive reception of social norms and values. This conformist conception of subjectivity anchored broader theories that exaggerated societal integration and consensus and that understated the differences between individuals and subgroups. Such essentialist conceptions have frequently appeared and remain central to much social theory. For example, structural-functional theory, which dominated American sociology in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized the unproblematic internalization of norms and implied a highly integrated vision of postwar society based on alleged "value consensus" and sweeping institutional legitimacy (cf. Parsons 1971).

Debates over the social subject have been a particularly controversial issue among neo-Marxists, post-structuralists, and feminists because of the assumption that emancipatory change 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.⁶ Class fragmentation and political, ethnic, religious, and gender segmentation were at first dismissed as epiphenomena that merely postponed the revolutionary proletariat's arrival. But when it became obvious that capital's homogenizing power was not sufficient to eradicate these social distinctions, 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.

But other classical theorists (e.g., Mead 1967; Simmel 1964) had already developed a more critical conception of the "social-self" contradicting conformist and homogeneous portrayals of subjectivity. Mead argued that determinate individuality arises from a person's responses to his or her unique pattern of associations (although biology and biography also contribute).⁷ In his view, socialization is a differentiating rather than a homogenizing force. Even simple societies are sufficiently complex to insure human diversity, but the individuating conditions are multiplied by modernity's diverse, increasingly voluntaristic, and rapidly changing associations. In this setting, all persons tend to develop their own unique social network within the larger society. In responding to this complexly differentiated environment, every individual develops a multiplicity of selves, each fitted to the specialized niches of her or his contrasting social contexts. Moreover, Mead did not privilege rational or cognitive capacities of the self at the expense of sense, emotion, and other feelings. And from his pragmatist position, thought often followed practices rather than autocratically leading them. However, Mead's decentered conception of subjectivity still presumes a "complete self" (reflecting the "unity and structure of the social process") that provides sufficient self-integration to maintain continuity and identity between different social settings, to facilitate

new associations, and to make possible critical or rebellious selves (Mead 1967: 142-144).

Mead contended that, by having to respond to highly diverse types of persons in complex social structures, individuals expand their capacities for interpretation, sympathetic identification, and, in particular, "communication." These capacities facilitate integration of the self and society under conditions of social differentiation, and, at the same time, make possible new forms of ethical criticism, social conflict, and rebellious solidarity (e.g., of women, workers) that increase individual and societal differentiation. According to Mead's theory of the self, voluntaristic social arrangements never emerge smoothly from collective subjectivity and normative consensus. Instead, uncoerced social relationships must be achieved on the basis of sometimes conflictual communicative processes between differentiated individuals with divergent interests and perspectives. Moreover, these relationships are continuously negotiated in response to changing historical conditions.

Mead argued that increased social differentiation produces more diversity, openness, and flexibility and not merely fragmentation and disintegration of the self as postmodernists claim. Yet his view of the subject stands out from the often simplistic, hyperrationalist, and conformist version implied by many other classical theorists. Here the postmodern critique points to serious deficiencies. However, postmodernists still seem to be amnesic about the Counter-Enlightenment reactionaries who used the alleged irrationality of the subject to justify the need for authoritarian modes of thought and institutions to maintain social order. Mead's thought exemplifies that a more balanced view of the self is possible which abandons the imperious vision of the rational subject, yet without undermining the idea of selfhood and autonomy. Approaches that speak of the disappearance or radical fragmentation of the subject cannot account for uncoerced social action. Such views are not only empirically misguided, but can easily be turned around to support the types of repression that the postmodernists themselves oppose.

Classical theorists saw modernity's new types of mass social organization and consequent interdependencies to be dialectically related to opposing forces producing social and cultural fragmentation. They generated standpoints for criticizing society and proposals for social change from the interplay of these integrating and fragmenting conditions. In particular, their "immanent" criticism emphasized the tensions and contradictions between emergent democratic ideals and possibilities of modernity with the new types of domination, oppression, inequality, and polarization. As with their central metatheoretical assumptions, the classical theorists' historical method of social criticism sometimes resulted in dogmatic, pseudosociological pronouncements (e.g., about the "inevitable" direction of history), and, at others, expressed a critical sensitivity to concrete resources and possibilities for new forms of social solidarity and struggle. At their best, classical theorists expressed the growing aspirations for a freer and more democratic social life in light of the actual historical constraints and opportunities for their realization.

Durkheim (1964) relentlessly attacked the reckless pursuit of private interest in modernity, but still insisted that the new division of labor produces a state of mutual "dependence" and patterns of "co-operation" that generate their own "intrinsic morality" stressing equality and freedom.

Despite the prevailing state of inequality and unfreedom, he argued that traditional forms of ascription were being eroded and that growing social conflicts would eventually result in more highly developed democratic ideals favoring a more just and egalitarian social order. In a similar fashion, Marx addressed the contradictions between capitalism's democratic ideology and its increasing poverty and class divisions. He hoped to translate this historical contradiction into an instrument of working class struggle to foster revolutionary social change. In his view, expansionary capitalism produces increased repression as well as new forms of resistance that radicalize the bourgeois conceptions of freedom, equality, and affluence and that forge new social bonds of revolutionary solidarity (cf. Marx 1973; Marx and Engels 1964).

Thus, Durkheim and Marx's arguments exhibit a historical sensitivity to democratic possibilities arising from the social structure and emergent social movements of modernity. However, they sometimes spoke dogmatically about the path of societal development and possibilities 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, as we will explain below, postmodernists, overreacting to this tendency of classical theory, speak of overwhelming social and cultural fragmentation destroying the historical bases of immanent critique and completely eliminating the possibility of progressive change. By dismissing the metatheoretical underpinnings of classical theory's empirical methodology and historical method of social criticism, postmodernists rule out the strong sociology needed to support their assertions about the rise of a postmodern era and give up the analytic means for clarifying and elaborating the historical bases of their critique of modernity. In the end, the 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.

THE POSTMODERNIST WAR AGAINST TOTALITY: CULTURAL FRAGMENTATION AND AESTHETIC INDIVIDUALISM

We enter a different theoretical universe when we encounter postmodern theory. Lyotard's battle cry (1984: 82) to "wage a war on totality" and his claims about the affinity of "grand narratives" for totalitarianism are aimed generally at Enlightenment social thought, but Marxist theory is an especially important target. Postmodernists argue that past efforts to transform bourgeois values into a revolutionary ideology, or even into welfare state reformism, have had culturally repressive consequences and that, today, cultural fragmentation nullifies all "moralizing" criticism. Since they believe that critical social theory no longer has any historical bases or any interested publics, postmodernists execute their deconstructive critique of modern theory with the intent of establishing an entirely new basis for cultural criticism.

Because of their strong normative inclination toward aesthetic individualism, postmodernists equate collectivism, consensual social values, and practically all social solidarities with repression. Following Nietzsche, they want to free modernity's new forms of desire, experience, expression, and creativity from what they believe to be repressive social regulation.

Therefore, postmodern theorists have little to say about societal interdependence and social cooperation, and tend to be dismissive of theories, organizations, and movements seeking collective action or mobilization to institute progressive social change.

Concurring with the Nietzschean scenario concerning the decline of individuality, Foucault's genealogy (1979) of "disciplinary" society describes the ordering and reduction of "human multiplicities" by a new secular morality that utilizes the therapeutic ideology of helping others to justify overarching social control based on moral surveillance and accounting. While "panoptical" regimes emerged in the form of prisons, mental hospitals, and other asylums of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the modern method of discipline and surveillance institutions spread rapidly to new sites. Consequently, the emergent professions of "medicine, psychology, education, public assistance, {and} `social work'" produced a "universal reign of the normative" based on omnipresent self-surveillance and self-discipline. The modern system of control everywhere "differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes....{and} normalizes." "Normalization," here, refers to the processes by which individuals are produced as subjects to become useful and docile, adjusting comfortably to social domination.

But Baudrillard (1983a) declares that the modern disciplinary order described by Foucault, has been superseded by postmodern "simulation," "deterrence," "fascination," and "discontinuous indeterminism." Instead of social control based on a mixture of direct coercion and self-regulation, the semiotic control system operates by "programming" and "indefinite reproduction" of disjunctive models. Change occurs randomly through mutations in sign production rather than being the creation of rational subjects. Moralizing events, like the Watergate hearings, are merely simulations of scandal that deter people from recognizing the fundamental corruption of the bourgeois system as a whole. Since Baudrillard's postmodern "hyperreality" lacks animate critical values and social movements, the normative and societal bases for immanent criticism are demolished.

Although Baudrillard's position is admittedly extreme, other postmodernists agree that the traditional Left's historical method of critique is moribund. Even Jameson (1984), who remains in the Marxist camp, speaks of "a linguistic fragmentation of social life" that impoverishes normative languages and paralyzes immanent critique. A "stupendous proliferation of social codes" and the transformation of language into a melange of contentious "jargons" and "badges" (of diverse professional groups, status orders, and class-fractions) puts an end to public discourse. Thus, the discursive field lacks any trace of a "great collective project" or, even, of living national ideals. These postmodern cultural conditions end the Enlightenment dialectic of mass emancipatory movements arising from the immanent contradictions between democratic ideology and capitalism.

Frankfurt School critical theorists, during their "dialectic of Enlightenment" phase, came to similar pessimistic conclusions about immanent critique.⁸ Since the progressive side of bourgeois values seemed to be exhausted, they contended (like the postmodernists) that a fundamental critique of rationalism is required to recover oppositional thought. Their search for an alternative metatheoretic basis for their cultural criticism led these theorists to Nietzsche's (1969) argument that art, in direct contrast to science and morality, is "fundamentally opposed" to the ascetic ideal.

Although postmodernists forego critical theory's strong emphasis on "redemption" through artistic transcendence, their employment of the values of pluralism, difference, and the proliferation of meaning presumes an individualistic aesthetic standpoint (cf. Carroll 1987; Shusterman 1988). Their implicit normative position upholds the quest for experience and for individual development in opposition to the forces of cultural homogenization. Since they reject foundationalism and essentialism as well as historicism, postmodernists avoid evoking any specific historical developmental scenario or universal morality in order to affirm the spontaneously arising freeplay of diverse desires and tastes. Although most postmodernists do not directly articulate a broader political vision, their aesthetic individualism requires an institutional network that favors pluralism and provides social space for the development of heterogeneous individuality.

Moreover, aesthetic individualism combined with a cynical attitude about emancipatory values and movements provides a very thin basis for social criticism or political action. While Foucault's analyses of the dialectic of domination and resistance establish the matrix for a critical micropolitics, his arguments suggest that domination, flowing from the imposition of power/knowledge, seeps from virtually all features of modern society.⁹ The system of control is so monolithic and overpowering that it is hard to envisage how any meaningful social change might take place from within. Moreover, his rejection of macropolitics undermines efforts to develop theoretical languages to address regional, national, or international publics about global social issues (e.g., class divergence, gender discrimination, environmental degradation) and to facilitate large-scale collective actions or interventions.

Lyotard argues that critical social theories which emphasize revolution or totalizing structural transformation contribute directly to totalitarian political domination. He rejects consensus as intrinsically repressive and all schemes of macro-theory and politics as "terroristic." Instead, he wants to replace their global discourses with pluralistic theoretical practices that stress playful participation in a wide variety of language games and the creation of diverse microscopic approaches and critiques (Lyotard and Thebaud 1985). But it is hard to imagine how these heterogeneous microtheories will escape hermetic particularism and irrelevancy. In this regard, mainstream sociology is already a "postmodern" discipline; its extreme subdisciplinary differentiation, intellectual fragmentation, and multiplicity of specialized voices have put an end to grand narratives. But the absence of broader languages to foster communication between the hyperspecialized subareas and to draw out the public significance of sociological knowledge has simply generated cynicism about professional practices within the discipline and indifference to them on the outside. Extreme pluralism and the eclipse of broader and critical theorizing has also blocked the translation of social theory into publicly understandable discourses that could promote social change.

Furthermore, if one accepts Baudrillard's claims about confused and apathetic masses capable of nothing more than mindless consumption of mass produced images and spectacles, then the formation of publics is impossible and critical theorizing is a wasted effort. No oppositional politics are possible in Baudrillard's postmodern nightmare. Even aesthetic revolt is futile, because, when "art is everywhere," the avant-garde becomes another variant of conformist simulation. Under

these conditions theorists themselves must play the simulation game, combating indifference with greater indifference and, hopefully, contributing to the simulation machine's inevitable "implosion" from overproduction and ennui (Baudrillard 1983a; 1983b; 1988).

In attempting to save cultural criticism from Marxism, postmodernists generally abandon the language of large publics and transformational politics. Those who retain a micropolitical discourse (e.g., Foucault, Lyotard) do not explain how their own criticism will somehow break through the political fragmentation and media white-out of surplus information and mass cynicism. And even if the micropolitical messages somehow get through, it is entirely unclear whether they would have much effect on the centralized organizational sites of social control, planning, and distribution that have formative impact on the macroscopic patterns of well-being and suffering. In this regard, Fraser and Nicholson (1988: 377-8) argue that the postmodernist war against totality forbids the global perspectives necessary for critical social theory:

one familiar, and arguably essential, genre of normative political theory: identification and critique of macrostructures of inequality and injustice which cut across the boundaries separating relatively discrete practices and institutions. There is no place in Lyotard's universe for critique of pervasive axes of stratification, for critique of broad based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race, and class.

Postmodernists have not demonstrated why their postpolitical aesthetic of individual development opposes rather than affirms technocracy and consumer capitalism (cf. Shusterman 1988). Because they treat social theories aimed at larger publics and at big social problems as part of the process of repressive cultural homogenization, postmodernists, in the end, break with the politically engaged theorizing of the critical tradition of social theory. Despite their attacks on totalizing theory, postmodernists themselves speak of an epochal break with modernity and claim to map the new postmodern terrain in a culturally critical fashion. But their fetishism of particularity and difference releases them from the responsibility to theorize these global structures and processes systematically, to defend the implicit normative standpoints that guide their cultural criticism, and to reflect critically on its possible political consequences of their approaches. Consequently, postmodern theories do not elaborate new possibilities for overcoming repression or point to concrete directions for democratic societal reconstruction. And when these conditions become too obvious to be ignored, they can still be trivialized as mere "simulacra," as "deterrents," or as indirect expressions of "cooptive" power.

CONCLUSION: CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY AND THE DISCOURSE ON POSTMODERNITY

Post-WW II critical theorists feared that their war-time pessimism about "total administration," "the culture industry," and "instrumental rationality" had come true in the affluent "one-dimensional society" of the 1950s. In their view, the consequences of postwar affluence and the capital-labor compromise -- suburbs, shopping centers, and TV -- translated bourgeois values

into the culture of mass consumption and integrated the working class into the system. At the same time, liberals heralded trends toward educational expansion, increased meritocracy, new informational technologies, service sector growth, social and political pluralism, consumerism, state welfare provisioning, Keynesian economic policy, and reduced class conflict as the "end of ideology" and the coming of "postindustrial society." Regardless of their political differences, radicals and liberals alike agreed that the United States seemingly had unlocked the secrets of permanent economic growth and of effective technocratic management of social problems. Since these changes supposedly constituted a qualitative rupture from modern industrial capitalism, postwar society required a new theory that broke sharply with previous models of capitalism and socialism.

But postwar thinkers overestimated the degree and duration of the socio-economic reorganization and middle-class expansion. In the early 1970s, the highly competitive international economic climate eroded the capital-labor accord, while racial violence, urban decline, Vietnam protests, Watergate, resource dependency, deindustrialization, increasing class inequality and poverty, and other severe social dislocations and political conflicts ended the dream of postindustrial consensus. And by the late 1970s, free-market thinking returned with a vengeance in the ruins of welfare state politics. Aggressive claims were made about the virtues of a new service economy driven by informational technologies and by debureaucratized business organizations free of government and union interference. Responding to these developments, to the perceived bankruptcy of the Left, and to resurgent Right-wing hegemony, postmodernists spoke again of a hypertechnocratic society lacking potential for emancipatory change and demanding new theories and politics. However, the question should be posed whether they, like their postwar counterparts, have been too general and premature in their claims about a fundamental social transition. Is postmodern theory merely a reaction to the ending of the postwar conjuncture (rather than to an epochal transformation) or is it even a fleeting response to the conservative regimes that dominated Western superpowers in the 1980s? Will a sharp change in the political economy and consequent new socio-political dynamics suddenly make the approach obsolete? As the recent events in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East make evident, sharp turnabouts are certainly possible even under the most controlled conditions.

Postmodernists cannot provide a strong retort to the above questions because they are uncritical about the historical context of their own ideas. Although they postulate major historical ruptures, the postmodernists overly general vision of history can easily inflate the significance of short-term, conjunctural changes, or passing events. They also lack the theoretical resources to theorize the very notion of a postmodern rupture because they renounce all global theories along with the objectionable types of grand narratives. Moreover, "modern" and "postmodern" are not empirically self-evident concepts; generally, the terms are sorely undertheorized in the vast literature on the topics. Because postmodernists have jettisoned classical theory's meta-assumptions and historical mode of social criticism, they are not bound by methodological strictures stressing the need to consider countertendencies and socio-historical data that could falsify their claims about culture and politics. Analogous to their own critique of classical Marxism's homogeneous proletarian subject, postmodernists can be accused of an essentialist reduction of discontinuous and

discrete cultural phenomena into a single "dedifferentiated" whole. Given the extreme social and cultural segmentation of contemporary society, even Jameson's (1984) characterization of postmodernism as a "cultural dominant" is merely a hypothesis that demands systematic historical inquiry and support. The point is that the lack of a strong sociology makes the postmodernists vulnerable to the same type of errors made earlier by postindustrial theorists. Postmodern theory may express a new historical conjuncture or it may be nothing more than a reaction, by playful cultural critics, to a narrow range of transitory conditions. But such judgments require a mode of discourse where arguments are open to evidential inquiry and disconfirmation.

Theorizing the postmodern demands a periodization and geographical localization of an extremely broad and complex set of phenomena constituting postmodernity. The project calls for: elaboration of the societal network of interdependent institutions (e.g., economy, polity, forms of association, and systems of belief); analysis of the key developmental processes and features that produce institutional and socio-political changes, or "postmodernization"; description of the ensemble of artistic, musical, architectural, and other postmodern cultural forms; and inquiry into the complex of socio-cultural conditions (e.g., dedifferentiation, flatness, indifference, loss of distance) producing the postmodern structure of experience. Also by definition, postmodern implies an understanding of the modern that is of similar scope and complexity to the above claims about a postmodern epochal, which presumes the capacity to systematically delineate the differences between the new and the old epochs.

A comprehensive postmodern social theory therefore would synchronically map society's core social structures (i.e., the pattern of institutional connections between the economy, associational life, the polity, expressive culture, and the forms of social experience) and diachronically elaborate its central developmental patterns and processes (e.g., hyperrationalization, dedifferentiation). Properly executed, this type of global theoretic project would provide a language and concepts that raise culturally significant questions to guide inquiries about specific features of particular nations, regions, and communities; that provide models for comparative analyses of individual cases; and that offers conceptual languages inviting translation of disciplinary matters into broader public discourses. Trends toward increased internationalization of the economy, despoliation of the world's natural environment, and radical restructuring of the international political order all call for broad theorizing in the tradition of classical social theory.

Even in Marx's time, capitalism's complexity, rapid change, and differentiated structure were difficult to map with precision. However, the task is even harder today with corporate capitalism's exceedingly complex connections and multiplex macroscopic structures and processes, its mix of bureaucratic and "post-Fordist" organizational forms (characterized by highly centralized financial control and widely dispersed organizational loci), and its vast diversity of information production and management (with their selective secrecy, rampant propaganda, and overall surplus of messages), all of which contribute to obscuring capitalism's huge networks of interdependence (cf. Heydebrand 1985; Foster and Woolfson 1989; Rustin 1989). Because cultural fragmentation and pluralism cannot be understood separately from the highly internationalized flows of capital and information or from the machinations of hyper-rationalized private and public sector

organizations, "the postmodern condition" increases rather than decreases the need for critical global analyses of big structures. National and transnational interdependencies have never been broader than they are today, and the discordant mix of decentralizing and centralizing tendencies require new systematic theorization and mapping.

Most postmodernists want to preserve cultural criticism in the face of homogenizing forces and imposing threats to the individual. In this regard, they have not broken completely with the critical variants of classical social theory nor with more recent theorists who have continually attempted to renew the project. However, postmodernists excuse themselves from clarifying their own implicit normative claims and political intentions. The totalizing negativity of the postmodernist stance is a product of their weak sociology and one-sided theoretical emphasis on fragmentation. Giving up the historical basis for cultural criticism without a careful reckoning of the prospects for social change merely opens the door to resignation, irrationalism, and even to revival of essentialism. Against postmodern nihilism, the method of seeking critical standpoints historically rooted in existing or, at least, emergent social structures and movements is still a valuable legacy of modern theory. Even the postmodernists' own attacks on the excesses of Enlightenment rationalism point toward freeing this radical historicist method from the fundamentalist and essentialist elements that have hitherto limited its effectiveness.

Shorn of its dogmatic features, social theory of broad scope in the classical style still provides the best resources for carrying out the postmodernists' implicit holistic problematic. Renewed efforts to globally theorize contemporary society and to anchor normative criticism in its structural attributes and emergent political movements could benefit from the recent postmodern critiques as well as from the findings of the specialized sciences. Properly constructed, new global social theories would augment rather than undermine theories and politics of the local and particular. Social and cultural fragmentation is a reality even if has not been adequately theorized by the postmodernists. Simple affirmation of the emancipatory tradition does not rebut the postmodernists' contentions about the contemporary era or about the exhaustion of critical theory. Instead, their claims and challenges have to be taken seriously as objects of theoretical discourse and historical inquiry. But much postmodern thought, itself, is characterized by nihilistic pessimism deriving from its ahistorical methodology and its treatment of humanity as automata rather than as critical subjects participating in "communities of memory" (Bellah et. al. 1985) and struggle.

In addition, critical social theories of the contemporary era must be anchored normatively in the historical process of differentiated subjects forming themselves into publics (through their communicative capacities and self-organizing activities), rather than in the homogenous will of emancipatory subjectivity. To maintain political relevance, these theories should retain the themes of plurality, difference, and heterogeneity in the context of a reconstructed conception of collective emancipation. To avoid the errors of postwar and postmodernist thinkers, critical theorists must read the current historical conjuncture (with its characteristic patterns of fragmentation and interdependence) in the context of the "long-duration" of social and cultural development. This does not mean that conceptions of preceding social formations and long-term developmental processes should be attributed with determining force as in much classical theory. Instead, they

ought to be treated as analytic devices to prevent amnesia about tendencies of past societies that may recur again, to create distance from the immediacy of the present, and to assist in the always uncertain process of sorting narrow and transitory historical events from those that arise out of enduring conditions or structures with widespread, intergenerational impact.

Recent upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union prove that even four decades of authoritarian control did not destroy oppositional thought or the historical bonds of national, ethnic, and religious community. It should remain an open question, subject to critical inquiry, whether cultural and human resources exist within capitalist societies, especially the United States, for a reawakening, renewal, and extension of democracy. However superficial and contradictory the state of contemporary culture, it is doubtful that historical experience has been so obliterated that all traces of community have been eliminated. Normative ideals have a genealogy in the history of specific cultural communities. If critical theorists are serious about attaining a public, they must carry out "constructive" (as well as deconstructive) genealogies to uncover and reformulate the critical normative languages of their potential publics.

However, today, most sociological specialties do without general theory. And sociological theory itself has become a fragmented and hyperspecialized subdiscipline without integrating problematics or central paradigmatic debates. Postmodernists make an important contribution to contemporary social thought by dramatically addressing the exhaustion and irrelevance of professionally compartmentalized social theory. Furthermore, they have confronted some of the most novel and potentially important social conditions ignored by sociological theorists. However, the outright rejection of global theorizing by Lyotard and others prevents them from conceptualizing the epochal changes that their theories presuppose. In the same way, Baudrillard's dismissal of "history" and the "social" contradict the application of his conception of "simulation" in critical theories of contemporary culture and society.

Still, taken seriously, the postmodern critique forces social theorists to rethink their presuppositions, the meaning of their practices, and the relationship of theory, history, and politics. In particular, it challenges social theorists to incorporate into their own work postmodern questions about new technologies, new configurations of mass culture, new social experiences, new forms of cultural fragmentation, and new social movements. If this challenge is taken up, the hostile and aggressive metatheoretical parries of the postmodernists might ultimately lead to a renewal of critical social theory and even revive its progressive political project.

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NOTES

1. This article builds on ideas in our forthcoming book Discourses of Modernity (Antonio and Kellner 1992). Following the conventional meaning, we use "classical social theory" to refer to

theorists writing from the time of Saint-Simon, Comte, and the young Marx through the period of Weber, Durkheim, and Mead. Since these thinkers worked in a preprofessional era, they are a loosely defined group characterized more by their sweeping perspectives on modernity than by adherence to a common set of specialized, disciplinary methods and concepts. Postmodern theorists focus their attack on "modern theory," ranging from Descartes through Marx to contemporary positivism or phenomenology. We use "modern social theory" to refer to classical social theorists and those who followed in their tracks. For more on postmodern social theory and its critique of modern theory, see Best and Kellner 1991.

2. We employ the term "global" to refer to the macroscopic sweep of classical theory, especially to its emphasis on addressing societal or trans-societal macrostructures and processes. Although this broad scope provided a language for articulating the big social changes and interdependencies of modernity and is a valuable resource of the classical tradition, it was sometimes developed in dogmatic transhistorical arguments about metatheoretical foundations and/or in pseudosociological (ahistorical) claims that reified social traits, conditions, or processes. These foundationalist and essentialist errors undermined the classical theorists' mission to foster the understanding and agency of historical individuals and communities. Our use of "global" does not refer, however, to those contemporary theories that employ the term exclusively in reference to transnational or universal social and economic structures (e.g. Robertson 1990).

3. Nietzsche also stated that "The subject...has perhaps been believed in hitherto more firmly than anything else on earth because it makes possible to the majority of mortals, the weak and oppressed of every kind, the sublime self-deception that interprets weakness as freedom, and their being thus-and-thus as a merit" (1969: 46).

4. Although Foucault is critical of representational thought and implies that a new (postmodern) episteme began emerging in the 1950s (1989: 30), he focuses on the emergence of modernity, and his work emphasizes rationalization rather than postmodern fragmentation.

5. This perspective has been expressed by other theorists who advocated a more progressive politics than that of Weber. For example, see Dewey 1988. For a broad discussion of critical epistemologists of the progressive era (including Weber and Dewey), see Kloppenberg 1988.

6. Marx's own discussion of the subject was contradictory. Throughout his work, he implied both a proletarian philosophy of the subject and a much more differentiated individuality (emergent from capitalism's material wealth, cultural richness, and social complexity).

7. The premiere theorist of the social self, Mead was particularly emphatic about this point. He states that: "The fact that all selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process, and are individual reflections of it...is not in the least compatible with...the fact that every individual self has its own peculiar individuality, its own unique pattern...since, that is, each is differently or uniquely related to that whole process, and occupies its own essentially unique focus of relations therein -- the structure of each is differently constituted by this pattern from the way in which the

structure of any other is so constituted" (Mead 1967: 201-202). But the idea that modern social complexity generates a richer individuality than that of traditional societies was stressed by many classical theorists. For example, Marx (1963:122-123) argued that peasant society has "no diversity of development, no variety of talent, no wealth of social relationships..." and that social connections and communications are limited to very small and local social circles. On the other hand, he believed that modern social complexity and its larger networks of social cooperation generate enriching intellectual and communicative activities that result in a more autonomous and articulated individuality.

8. Although their ideas had affinity for the later postmodernist critique of rationalism, Frankfurt School critical theorists, even during their "dialectic of Enlightenment" stage, stayed closer to Marxist theory by retaining conceptions of material substructure and the subject and by preserving modest elements of rationalism's identity logic (cf. Dews 1986; Kellner 1988).

9. It should be noted that near the end of his life, Foucault reappraised the Enlightenment and increasingly focused on ethics and "technologies of the self." Likewise, in the 1980s, Lyotard took a more positive stance to the Enlightenment and Kantian philosophy, moving away from the aesthetic individualism that informed some of his earlier works. For more on these developments, see Best and Kellner 1991.

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