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## Postmodernism as pseudohistory

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**POSTMODERNISM AS PSEUDOHISTORY:  
CONTINUITIES IN THE COMPLEXITIES OF SOCIAL ACTION**

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Problems of historical and cultural specificity have recently returned to the foreground of sociological discussion, propelled in large part by debate over "modernity" and "postmodernity," "modernism" and "postmodernism." Though in recent years it came to sociology largely from outside, this debate is a worthy renewal of some of the key concerns of the classical social theorists who struggled to identify the core feature distinguishing modern Western society from other epochs and sociocultural formations.

As it has been cast so far, the debate has often been regrettably vague about both cultural and historical specificity, and relatedly problematic for practical social action. On the postmodernist side, in particular, a kind of pseudo-specificity is introduced by the use of the prefix "post" and the proliferation of contrasts to putative modernity or modernism. Such contrasts sometimes point to significant variables differentiating social practices. They are seldom developed as very precise categories, however, or concretized in serious historical or cross-cultural analyses. Rather, the Enlightenment is evoked as though it were the archetype of a unidimensional and uncontested modernity. Or the non-Western world or Third World is posed as a critical vantage point on the West in an ironic new Orientalism, without consideration of the enormous internal heterogeneity of those constructs. In each case, a crucial question is how a social change has shifted the conditions and capacities for human action. The broad postmodernist discourse obscures this issue, however, by positing an end to subjectivity or rendering it universally problematic rather than addressing the ways in which agency and subjectivity are constructed in specific historical and cultural situations.

In the present paper, I want to question how much the genuinely dramatic cultural changes that are going on around us are a real departure from previous trends, and to the extent that they are, whether this is part of a social transformation sufficiently basic to warrant an argument that modernity is dead or dying. I will argue

generally against the postmodernist view. Though changes are real and major, they do not yet amount to an epochal break. Indeed, many of them reflect continuing tensions and pressures which have characterized the whole modern era.<sup>1</sup> Underlying my account of the problems of the claim that postmodernity is upon us, are two counter claims: First, the two basic organizing forces in modernity--capitalism and bureaucratic power--have hardly begun to dissolve. Second, the problems of self and agency are neither new to a postmodern era nor obsolete because has been superceded either historically or theoretically; these problems are continue to shape our lives and thought as they have shaped them throughout modernity. Rather than narrowing our notion of the modern in order to justify the use of the prefix "post," I will argue that we need to incorporate the insights of postmodernist thinkers into a richer sociological approach to the entire modern era.

In the first part of the paper, I will very briefly and sketchily introduce the notion of a postmodern condition. Since this is a position argued by a variety of thinkers on somewhat different grounds, and since some scholars--like Foucault--are claimed as part of the movement though they never proclaimed themselves postmodernists, my sketch will inevitably conceal a good deal of complexity. I will also ignore a number of crucial topics in the debate over postmodernism. Two key issues, for example, are the difficulty postmodernist theories have in accounting for the genesis of novel forms of cultural productivity--in other words, an absence of dynamism; and their difficulty in finding a vantage point for comparative analysis (as distinct from mere celebration of difference and/or syncretism). Closely linked to the last is the difficulty of reconciling the normative positions of postmodernism (e.g. extolling the virtues of difference and condemning the vice of repressive normalization) with its generally relativist theoretical orientation. Performative contradictions abound as postmodernists issue authoritative pronouncements on the basis of theoretical positions that deny any non-arbitrary basis to authority.<sup>2</sup>

Constrained by space not to go into all the ramifications of the postmodernist argument or its implications for sociology, in the second part of this paper I will take up one particular instance. This is the conceptualization of "new social movements." It is an advantageous one for discussion because it links nearly all the different discourses contributing to the postmodernist potpourri, and has been a topic of discussion outside of the postmodernist debate as well. As in my more general treatment of postmodernism, I want to argue here that novelty is being overstated, and the modern era itself being poorly conceptualized by a picture which flattens out its own internal diversity. The "new" social movements appear to be quite new, in other words, only because they are understood through a contrast to a one-sided, hypostatized account of the "old" labor movement.

### **THE POSTMODERN CONDITION?**

What then are we to make of the frequent declarations that we have entered a postmodern age? Is this something that has happened to architecture, but not to society? Or have cultural analysts noticed something that has eluded the attention of sociologists? A little belatedly, a self-declared postmodernist sociology is being forged, absorbing previous arguments--e.g. about new social movements, postindustrial society, and claims to the autonomy of cultural change (see, e.g., Lash, 1990; Rosenau, 1992).<sup>3</sup> This postmodernism is widely dismissed or attacked with vitriolic ill-humor and a curious anxiety. I will suggest, however, that there is much of value in various of the specific arguments and interpretations grouped together as postmodernism, even while I challenge its overall conceptualization. Indeed, I will claim that thinking of these specific points in terms of the general claim that we are entering a postmodern age obscures and detracts from their value. We need to free the insights of postmodernist thought from their embeddedness in a pseudohistorical conceptual framework. Where the insights are sound, they call for a changed sort of attention to many historical and cross-cultural topics, not only to the most recent changes in advanced societies.

Postmodernism is a confluence of several partially distinct trends: (1) Perhaps with clearest meaning, postmodernism is a rejection of artistic modernism (e.g. the international style in architecture) in favor of freeing the aesthetic from the functional, putting signification, intertextual reference and self-reflexivity forward as independent goods. While architects like Venturi and Jencks have played a primary role in promoting the conceptualization of postmodernism, related changes are current and self-identified throughout at least the visual and dramatic arts (including cinema) and literature. (2) Postmodernism as a theoretical and/or critical position derives substantially from poststructuralism. This is a largely retrospective label for a series of French-led shifts in cultural (and psychological and social) theory, notably the critique of subject-centered reason, monological texts or readings, grand narratives, general truth claims, and the normalization of Enlightenment rationality. Central players include Derrida, Foucault (a little ambiguously), Lyotard, Baudrillard, and various American epigones. (3) Closely related to poststructuralism in many accounts is the postmodernist critique of "foundationalism" in philosophy and theory. At a minimum, this is an extension of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian critique of metaphysics into an attack on all claims to an external standpoint for judging truth. In the work of Rorty (1979, 1982, 1989), for example, a level of necessary theoretical indeterminacy is made the basis for a call to abandon repressive demands for certainty in favor of a "liberal" toleration of diversity on even the most basic epistemological and ethical points. In other hands, antifoundationalism becomes an attack on theoretical systematicity itself.<sup>4</sup> (4) Finally, postmodernism includes sociological and political economic claims to identify a basic transition from 'modernity' to a new stage of (or beyond) history. These variously emphasize 'postindustrial,' information or knowledge society as the new societal formation. A new centrality is posited for media, information technology, and the production of signification (e.g. culture industry) as an end in itself. Key figures in this line of argument (notably Bell and Touraine, and popularizers like Toffler and Naisbitt) are not

directly a part of the postmodernist movement, but their arguments have influenced it substantially. The four lines of influence are not strictly commensurate. In particular, the "post" prefix may oppose modernism as an artistic movement of the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, foundationalism as a feature of early modern science and Enlightenment discourse, modernity as an epoch of much longer duration, or the very construction of a progressive historical narrative such as those used to identify "modernity" in the first place (primarily during the 18th and 19th centuries). Nonetheless, the various strands of the phenomenon draw strength and significance from being intertwined (see discussion in Harvey, 1989; Kellner, 1990; Rosenau, 1992).

Postmodernism is a recognizable artistic and more generally cultural trend that can be distinguished from and indeed reacts against modernism. But this is not the same as saying that modernity has given way to postmodernity. Even in the cultural realm, it is hard to place postmodernism. Surely we can recognize it in recent video and performance art, in the architecture of pastiche and in novels whose weight cannot be borne by the narrative of any subject. But are these extensions of early trends or something dramatically new? The period from the 1890s to the 1920s must be reckoned the glory days of high modernism. Bauhaus architecture, Russian formalist painters, the French and German novelists and English poets of the day seem unquestionably modern. Brecht and Simmel, Joyce and Woolf are paradigmatically modern. Yet they also seem very close to the so-called postmodern. The themes of fragmentation of consciousness, the distance between the intentions and ends of action, the severing of symbol from referent are all felt in the art and social thought of this high modernist era. Robert Musil's (1965) *The Man Without Qualities*, written mainly in the 1920s, is strikingly "postmodern," an anticipation of Kundera, in its account of the insufficiency of the self as bearer of the weight of "modernist" subjectivity. If these are all to be embraced as part of the postmodern, then (a) the postmodern must be understood

as part and parcel of the modern, and (b) the label must be seen as essentially misleading, perhaps willfully so, perhaps simply conditioned by the general modern sensibility that the new is always better than the established.

It is hard, in this connection, to distinguish the postmodern from the merely antimodern--that is, from the various sorts of oppositions to dominant themes in modernity which have accompanied modernization from its beginning. In this sense what is new is only the highly modernist stylization of conservatism, on the one hand, and the production of sometimes very unconservative antimodernisms on the other. But the issue goes one step deeper. Not just the antimodernism of Catholic conservatives and country squires, or of the scholastic defenders of artistic classicism and traditional iconic languages of representation, accompanied modernism from its inception. So did very modern, but in many ways anti-modernist, figures like Nietzsche. Modernism, and modernity, have always been internally complex.

The postmodernist critique [and the defense of modernity mounted by figures like Habermas (e.g., 1988b)] tends to equate modernity with the rationalist Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> But the Romantics were as modern and as new as the rationalists. Characters crucial to modernity--most notably Rousseau but also Goethe and some of the English Romantic poets--combined elements of both rationalism and romanticism in their writing and their lives. The individualism we identify as so central to the modern experience and modern society and culture was shaped by both romantic and rationalist notions, by Enlightenment modernism and the other side of modernism represented paradigmatically by Rousseau, Goethe, and Nietzsche, but also, only somewhat more ambiguously, by Freud and Simmel.<sup>6</sup> The complexity of interplay across rationalist and romantic lines is important to grasp. Shelley is certainly a paradigmatic Romantic, yet we might recall that Shelley was drawn to Godwin for the very rationalism of his anarchist political theory even before he eloped with his daughter. The late 18th Century in many parts of Europe and America saw versions of the circle



of connections which knit the Godwins, Wolstonecraft, Shelley and Byron together. There may be an important battle between rationalist universalism and attention to the irrational, between the value of the particular and the repressive, disempowering and deceptive side of individualism. But to equate that with a battle between modernity and its putative successor is to fail to recognize how deeply a part of modernity that whole battle, that whole frame of reference is. And this is only to speak of Western modernity.

The broad themes of postmodernism, then, are not new and do not mark any sharp break with modernity or modernism. What of the more specific claims postmodernism, most notably poststructuralism, makes within the realm of social theory? Perhaps Derrida heralded this turn as much as anyone, publishing three important books in the year 1967.<sup>7</sup> But the poststructuralist turn was much broader than deconstructionism, and includes a number of figures--including Bourdieu--who are not amenable to the label postmodernist. This poststructuralism was not really announced at its birth; it appears only retrospectively in the careers of structuralists who decided that decentering the subject--a central structuralist move--did not require them to abandon critical reflection on the categories of thought. Structuralism had in a sense denied epistemology on the grounds that it could only be pursued in terms of a philosophy of the subject. The poststructuralists sought ways to do a sort of epistemology, an inquiry into knowledge, without basing themselves on such a theory of subjectivity.

The contributions of the poststructuralist tributary into the postmodernist current were first and foremost (a) the absorption of structuralism's critique of subject-centered thought, and (b) the argument that monological statements of truth--originary speech, in Derrida's term--were in some combination misleading, false and/or repressive. In varying ways, then, the poststructuralists showed the tensions within seeming

truths, the difficulties involved even in seemingly ordinary understandings, the constant effort of construction involved in accepted truths, as well as the constant tendency of those truths to break down and reveal their internal inconsistencies and aporias.<sup>8</sup> Some, like Bourdieu, made this crucially a social argument; the tensions involved in understanding derived not simply from textuality, but from interpersonal struggles and fields of power. For many others, materiality, physical embodiment, and social relations were lost in treating all aspects of culture and human action as texts. In all versions, the poststructuralist move was for the most part an essentially theoretical shift, not a claim that anything in the external world had changed to necessitate a new theory.

Another sort of argument has been incorporated into the postmodernist position, however, which stems much more from claims about changes in the empirical world. This is the claim that we need a postmodernist theory because we live in a postmodern age. The proliferation of such labels was a particular feature of the 1970s and 1980s. Daniel Bell's and Alain Touraine's different accounts of post-industrial society marked early versions. The postmodernists posed much more radical claims about the implications of computerization, new communications media and related socio-technical changes. Bell (1973) had already joined Habermas and other thinkers in suggesting that the advance of information processing and automating technologies meant that labor should no longer be privileged (in the Marxist sense) as the basic source of value.<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1975, 1977, 1981), among others, has argued that the whole form of social organization based on production relations and power has given way to a society and economy organized on the bases of consumption and seduction, for example by advertising. In such a postmodern society, the sign becomes the autonomous source and form of value, the signifier is detached from the signified. The structure of relations which now matters is not that by which capital dominates labor, or centers of power grow and eliminate the territorial organization of power. Rather,

the structure of relations which now matters is among signs. The representations are more real than the things represented. People are 'exteriorized' into a techno-culture of 'hyperreality' where significance replaces reification and we know only the simulacra of mass existence. Or as Guy Debord put it in *Society of the Spectacle* (1983), the alienation of the commodity form is experienced to such a degree of abstraction that the commodity becomes a mere image detached from its previous ground in human labor or concrete use value. As a result, the critiques based on use value and concrete labor are rendered impotent.<sup>10</sup>

But the positing of an epochal change is problematic. There has undoubtedly been an increase in the role of advertising and the media generally (and not only in the economic sphere, but also in politics and efforts to influence personal decisions--e.g. about abortion). Consumption has indeed been thrust to the foreground of practical concerns, both for those who attempt to manage it in the business world and for everyone in the organization of everyday life. These genuine changes, however, do not add up to a very conclusive case either that production has lost its basic importance or that signification has gained the status of self-production free from any need for creative subjects or material referents.<sup>11</sup> This postmodernist argument against Marx depends on a rather rigid reading of *Capital* in which, among other things, Marx is treated as having underappreciated his own argument as to the importance of abstraction in the commodity form through which labor is rendered into capital, in favor of a naturalistic (and therefore transhistorical) understanding of labor.<sup>12</sup> This issue, however, goes beyond a fight about marxism. The claim that material production is no longer central to the organization of economic and social life is meant to reveal the postmodern age to be free from a whole series of constraints discussed in nearly every version of economic theory; it is meant to have liberated culture from material social determinations. Yet even on the face of things it appears false, mistaking the rising importance of information technology *within* capitalism for a basic transformation of

capitalism, not just into a new phase but into something altogether different. No evidence is presented that capital accumulation is not basic to economic activity and social power today (though it may never have been as exclusively fundamental as some marxists have claimed). And though industry employs a declining percentage of the population, this does not mean a decline in all measures of its importance. The very implementation of labor saving technology requires an *increasing* capital investment, and the distributive (consumption, financial, etc.) orientation of business (which has been widely criticized in recent years by supply-siders and more conventional economists and business analysts alike) can still be understood as a response to the problem of utilizing productive capacity. Our cultural orientation, moreover, seems still to be very productivist and very much focused on the acquisition of material goods. Last but not least, the insight gained from focusing on movement away from productive industry--whether basic or minor--seems hardly able to make sense of any entire economy; at most it may have purchase on that portion of the international economy which is located in the rich--e.g., OECD--countries.

Lyotard has more plausibly suggested that postmodernity "is undoubtedly a part of the modern" (1982: 79). Postmodernism in this view is a phase in modernism's constant push to negate the existent and produce the new. This makes sense (though it makes the label misleading). But Lyotard is not altogether consistent, for he also offers a suggestion of a different sort of basic historical change which provides a grounding for postmodernism's currency.

On this account, postmodernity suffers from a loss of meaning, or a meaningfulness which can only be repressively imposed, because the great legitimating narratives of modernity have been exploded. Lyotard is hardly the only figure to stress this sort of argument. He gives it one of its most prominent expositions, however, suggesting that this is not just a possible intellectual stance but a basic social transformation:

... the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction. And it does not look as though they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale. (1979: 14)

I have elsewhere tried to show the simple empirical falsity of this argument (Calhoun, 1991c), evident especially when one looks momentarily outside of the North Atlantic axis. Here it is enough to grasp that Lyotard is claiming that the world has changed such that a sociological analysis focused on these institutions or "poles of attraction" can no longer adequately grasp the state of social life.<sup>13</sup>

Lyotard and Baudrillard both distance themselves from Foucault, though he is claimed by other postmodernists (particularly in America, where postmodernism has taken on more of the status of a movement, allying itself not only with generational politics within academic disciplines but with broader public movements like feminism). Foucault was, first and foremost, an analyst of modernity, albeit one who set the stage for postmodernism with his discussion of historical ruptures and his thematic stresses on the repressive character of modernity, its arbitrary construction of the subject as a disciplinary ploy, and the inescapable mutual imbrication of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1965, 1977a, 1977b, 1978). Especially in his earlier work (notably 1966, 1969), Foucault lay great stress on the ways in which internally coherent modes of understanding lost their grip and were superseded, and by showing these breaks both situated modernity and implied criteria for judging what might constitute a fundamental intellectual transformation.

But Lyotard and Baudrillard want to go further. Baudrillard (1977) suggests forgetting Foucault as an account still caught in modernity's grasp, just as Marx was (on his view) caught in capitalism's. Elsewhere (esp. 1981, 1983), he declares the death of the social, the end of true social relations and their replacements by the simulacra of hyper-reality. Lyotard is much more directly concerned with social arrangements, but

he too wishes to break from Foucault. For him not only the claim that society is a functional, systemic unity is a spurious modern view, so is its main opposite, the view that society is a conflictual field of struggles held together by power. Both of these accounts, on his view, represent unacceptable "metanarratives":

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. ... Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. (1979: xxiii-xxiv).

It is first and foremost science which has challenged the hegemony of narrative, Lyotard suggests, because the pragmatics, the criteria of acceptance, are different for scientific and narrative knowledge (1979: 25-26). Yet, for a time it appeared that one might appeal to science itself to save a great legitimating narrative of modernity. But this is not so: since "science plays its own game it is incapable of legitimating the other language games;" in fact, "it is incapable of legitimating itself" (1979: 40). So, though it is powerful, science is ultimately just one more game in a world in which "all we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species. Lamenting the "loss of meaning" in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative" (1979: 26).<sup>14</sup> The postmodernist is called upon to "wage a war on totality" (1982: 82) because totality breeds terror. This much is reminiscent of Foucault. But where Foucault offered a historical account of this as a dimension of modernity, Lyotard's account is severed from any specific historical contextualization. Lyotard, moreover, tends to reduce the social almost entirely to the linguistic--"the observable social bond is com-

posed of language 'moves'" (1979: 11), but then fails to introduce any account of how participants in different discourses can ever be expected to reach agreements or even mutual understandings (Calhoun, 1991b).

This raises the final basic postmodernist point, the importance of difference. This point is associated most especially with Derrida (though he develops it primarily in contexts other than the sociological; see, e.g., 1978, 1982, esp. 1-27). Derrida's stress is on the ways in which the basic phenomena of distinction and contraposition produce identity, as opposed to essentialist attempts to locate identity in the inherent attributes of any entity--either a subject or an object. Derrida (see esp. 1967, 1972) positions his argument for the importance of difference (or *differance*) mainly within a dialogue with a Western philosophical tradition that approaches truth monologically, even often as substance. These assertions Derrida deconstructively shows to conceal the play of hidden dialogicality. In doing so he offers a defense of the very complexity of thought itself such that truth or knowledge becomes something much more difficult than we have thought though not therefore something to be dismissed.<sup>15</sup> *Differance*, for Derrida, is really a property of discourse, not subjects, and indeed (following on the structuralist tradition) subjects appear in his work mainly as creatures of discourse rather than speakers able to claim some primacy over it. It is important, though, that Derrida's approach draws attention to difference among subjects not just as multiplications of the same sort of identity, differently situated, but as radically singular.<sup>16</sup>

Difference is also crucial to Foucault. In the first place, he offers an account of the way modern subjects are constituted and disciplined as individuals who experience a simultaneous production of desire and its repressive normalization (see esp. 1977a). This suggests, thus, a certain special priority to human difference. Foucault is ambiguous, for on the one hand he can be read as asserting only that certain kinds of difference among people were subjected to normalizing discipline in the historically specific production of modernity. On the other hand, however, particularly in his later

work on sexuality, Foucault (1978-1988) appears to ascribe to all humans a kind of natural propensity for resistance to the normalizing tendencies of social life (which also appear as increasingly general rather than historically specific, present in ancient Greece and in China as well in modern France). Throughout, though it is never clearly articulated in his major works (as distinct from interviews), Foucault implies a normative defense of difference against normalization. If Foucault is ambiguous on this personal aspect of difference, he is clear at least in his early work, and his arguments are crucial on the issue of historical difference. Foucault (1966, 1969) explicates the radical ruptures that separate the epistemological understandings of different ages. Though he links these epistemic breaks somewhat to changes in social life, this is not his major theme and his argument does not rest on shifts in any underlying causal factors such as economy, military power or demography but rather on the transmutation of systems of knowledge such that they become incommensurable (to borrow Kuhn's 1970 term). In offering one of the most profound articulations of what it means for systems of knowledge to be radically different, and particularly of how such difference can occur historically within a "civilization," rather than only cross-culturally, Foucault augments an important discussion of incommensurability with roots in philosophy of science and hermeneutics.<sup>17</sup>

This emphasis on difference is the most valuable and defensible of postmodernist arguments, though it is not defensible on postmodernist terms. Both Derrida and Foucault (and many postmodernist followers) mobilize their arguments about difference as bases for rejection of all grand narratives without any search for a substitute ground for normative discourse. In doing so, they introduce a particularism so extreme that it ultimately, ironically, results in a decontextualization, an incapacity to place the particular in relation to other phenomena.<sup>18</sup> A particularism so extreme--which is not, I think, what most postmodernists want but what a hastily espoused theory offers--cannot justify even the very value on difference with which it starts. Lyotard thus joins



Derrida and Foucault in wishing to show the agonistic element in all culture, but is left with a more or less arbitrary assertion. But even Foucault and Derrida, let alone Lyotard, are left with a program of pure critique, showing the dragons which lie the way of modernism but offering no real analytic purchase on the problem of analyzing the transformation of power and social structure as it bears on practical action in the modern world.

Treating variations and disputes in artistic style, social consciousness and theory within the frame of epochal historical transformation produces a misunderstanding, even where the changes are of some significance. Postmodernism is a continuation of modernism in at least aspects of its style (e.g. the claim to be the latest avant garde, the self-legitimation of mere novelty). More basically, the crucial dimensions of variation are mostly long-standing, and postmodernism carries on basic themes of all modernity--which indeed produced an internal anti-modernity from the beginning, as well as splits of rationalists from romantics, realists from figuralists, etc.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of postmodernist *theory* is its denial of a basis for critical judgment and moral responsibility, except as the arbitrary reflection of a tradition. This poses basic problems for its own attempt to take cultural difference seriously, since it precludes genuine learning from the Other. It opens postmodernist theorists (and political activists) who attempt to persuade others to the charge that either they are committing a performative contradiction or they are simply exercising a will to power no more legitimate than any other.

In relation to both critical judgment and historical transformation, postmodernist theory at the very least crucially overstates its case. Accounts are needed of epistemic gain which does not imply a sharp opposition of truth and falsehood, and of historical change that does not mean epochal rupture (Taylor, 1989; Calhoun, 1991b).

### **How New Are the New Social Movements?**

I propose to try to make some of this a little more concrete in a discussion of one sort of phenomenon in which recent theory identifies noteworthy change but overstates its novelty. I refer to the so-called "new social movements." This purported transformation of the ways in which people try collectively to improve their lives and change society is linked to the broader postmodernist problematic by several joint themes: decentering of the subject, problematizing of identity, rejection of overarching telos or order, emphasis on experimentation and play.

The idea of new social movements has been brought into currency by a number of authors, both within and outside of the postmodernist movement (Melucci, Touraine, Habermas, Offe, Cohen). In all cases, the concept is defined through a crucial counterexample: the 19th and early twentieth century working class or labor movement. This is understood primarily in the singular (while new social movements are plural). The labor movement is reified, hypostatized. It is treated as having an implicit telos, and as having been putatively or potentially transformative for the whole society. The day when it held this potential, or could reasonably and widely have been thought to hold this potential, has however passed, according to the new social movement theorists.

Several key features are held to distinguish new social movements (NSMs).<sup>19</sup>

- (1) These movements focus on identity, autonomy and self-realization rather than material benefits, resources, and instrumental goals. It is in this sense, in part, that these movements are said to stay largely within the realm of civil society rather than addressing themselves primarily to state or economic actors.
- (2) Mobilization for the NSMs is as much defensive as offensive and hence less negotiable than more abstract utopian social projects.
- (3) Membership cuts across class lines because socioeconomic categories are losing their salience. This is one link to the postindustrial or information society argument.
- (4) Organizational forms are themselves 'work objects' of move-

ments, which aim to be non-hierarchical with direct democracy as an ideal. (5) Membership is generally only part-time, with potential multiple and overlapping commitments. (6) Activities are generally outside the official legislative system and often use unconventional means. (7) In the new social movements, an attempt is made to politicize aspects of everyday life formerly outside of the political. (8) Finally, in the NSMs, there is less tendency toward unification under some larger umbrella form or still less a master narrative of collective progress (though this is disputed, with Melucci suggesting that there is virtually no such tendency and Touraine suggesting that this is a temporary transition and such a tendency could yet emerge).

A variety of primary examples inform the conceptualization. Melucci (1988: 247) cites the women's movement, ecological movement ("greens"), youth movement (seen as a struggle over the use of time and alternative lifestyles), and the peace movement. One could reasonably add the gay and lesbian movements and other struggles for legitimation of personal identity or lifestyle, the animal rights movement and the anti-abortion and pro-choice movements.

Without question there has been a proliferation of social movements in the contemporary era, and the various key characteristics listed do give insight into them. But it is important to re-examine the historical claim of sharp novelty. The 19th and early 20th century working class movement (if it even can be described more than tentatively as a single movement) was multidimensional, only provisionally and partially unified and not univocal. It did not constitute just one collective actor in a single social drama. There was mobilization over wages, to be sure, but also over women and children working, community life, leisure activities, the status of immigrants, education, access to public services, and so forth. Relatedly, many different sorts of mobilizations have been claimed as part of class struggle, by organizers and analysts both. Thus not only wage laborers in industrial capitalist factories (the marxian ideal type) but tradi-

tional craft and agricultural workers struggling to defend their occupations and communities joined in the struggles which are described as unidimensional by comparison to NSMs.

In other words, the labor movement was itself a new social movement--and this in two senses. First, as Tarrow (1989) has suggested, many of the features of NSMs ascribed to epochal social change are in fact characteristics of new movements--those in the early stages of organization--in any era. Second, the early labor movement was itself engaged in identity politics, trying to promote and legitimate the political and economic claims of workers, trying to gain the commitment of workers to their class identity. Is this not part of what is suggested by the Marxian notion of class consciousness, let alone by the activities of labor organizers who argued for the primacy of class identity over craft, community, gender, ethnicity, religion and a host of other competing claims on individual and group self-understanding and loyalty? NSM theory sometimes suggests that the mobilization of workers was simply a reflection of underlying interests while the fragmentation of interests in the contemporary era is responsible for both the decline of labor and the rise of rival movements. This misses the extent to which those committed to class struggle had *make* class identities count, and the extent to which collective action always depends on struggles to forge the capacity for agency as a matter of redefining identity not merely mobilizing resources.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries (and indeed not only then), a wide variety of social movements flourished. There were, for example, ethnic and nationalist movements, which were never really suppressed by class as Melucci (1989: 89-92) suggests, but have ebbed and flowed throughout modernity. Religious awakening, revitalization, and proliferation was a major theme of the 19th century, as was anticlericalism and free-thinking. Anti-slavery or abolitionist movements were often closely linked to religion but were autonomous from any particular religious organizations. Communitarianism, temperance and various dietary and lifestyle movements at-

tracted hundreds of thousands of adherents in both Europe and America. Popular education was the object of struggle, especially in Britain, where free public schooling was not universal until very late. Last but not least, womens' movements are hardly a unique invention of the late twentieth century, though they have perhaps had more strength and more success in recent years.

All these 19th and early 20th century movements exhibit the key putative characteristics of new social movements. What better exemplifies making a "work-object" (in Melucci's phrase) of a social movements own organizational forms than the communal movement of the 1840s? Was identity not crucially at stake in nationalism as it spread throughout early 19th century Europe? And indeed, did (and does) nationalism not cut crucially across class lines (and derive at least some of its appeal from doing so)? Were the struggles of 18th and 19th century craft workers against industrialization not defensive? All manner of direct action outside the official legislative system characterized the struggle against slavery, and at least the saloon smashing wing of the temperance movement. Did temperance, popular education, and many others of these movements not attempt to politicize aspects of everyday life formerly outside of the political? Indeed, were the early labor movements not attempting to politicize aspects of everyday life formerly (and by their opponents) not considered properly political? Finally, was there really much tendency for temperance, nationalism, craft struggle, communitarianism, abolitionism, free-thinking, and camp-meeting religion to unify under some umbrella form?

We need, in short, to broaden, enrich and improve our theory and conceptualizations, without leaping to a claim of epochal historical transformation. The capacity for collective agency has always been sought on behalf of many claims to identity, moral righteousness, and political interest. Agency has always had to be won in a struggle to make movements work, and to make them appeal within a field--richer or poorer--of alternatives. Different periods have nurtured greater or lesser proliferations, but we

need to see a continuous generation of movements throughout the modern era. All respond to the weakness, and perhaps the loneliness, of individual action as well as to a mixed and overlapping series of changes in background conditions. In the case of late 20th century NSMs, at least much of what is novel is only a quantitative increase in number and scale of movements, and the introduction of certain new topics and tactics.<sup>20</sup>

### **Modernity Revisited**

Like the postmodernist literature, that on new social movements offers exaggerated claims of novelty. Also like the postmodernist literature it draws our attention to aspects of modern life which had been widely neglected under the predominance of prevailing--largely but not exclusively Enlightenment-based--theoretical tendencies. Analysts--and not only marxists and other supporters--thus ascribed to the social democratic labor movement a unity and a capacity to organize divergent interests and identities that it never really achieved. Analysts also commonly neglected the extent to which religion formed the basis of social movement participation (often seeing it as inherently retrograde, perhaps, and thus both amenable to explanation of the basis of mere endurance from the past and unlikely to hold much of any key to understanding the future). The same could be said of nationalism, arguably more important than any other ideological factor in the major conflicts of the twentieth century and yet recurrently relegated to the dustbin of history by social theorists.

The greatest gain offered by postmodernism, in short, is a refocusing of our understanding of modernity, not the analysis of any epochal historical change. There are some qualitative novelties in recent history, but so far these have not been sufficient to overturn basic organizational tendencies of the epoch. Capital accumulation and centralization of power, thus, both continue on a world scale. Efforts to gain effective agency through collective action (including the reformulation of claims to identity and loyalty) must still confront the constraints imposed by the greater power of corporate

and state organizations, for example. In the early 19th century the attempt of workers to reach beyond community to class organizations at the level of the nation-state and its domestic market was in part an attempt to catch up to the level at which economic and political power were already coordinated against them (Calhoun 1987). By the late 20th century capital was becoming increasingly globalized, and while the state remained both powerful and the crucial arena in which social movements could mobilize to pursue their collective agency, the internationalization of capital and new political forms like the European community were putting a great deal of power once again out of the grasp of popular agency mediated through social movements.

To reverse the trends towards capital accumulation and centralization of power would indeed be to bring on a postmodern condition. But we need to be careful not to confuse more superficial, if still important, changes for these basic ones. Consider for example the claim that information technology has fundamentally altered, or even brought an end to the modern era. One argument for this claim is the evident dispersal of production relations and other important activities which coordination through telecommunications and computers makes possible. But note the importance of coordination; dispersal of activities serves centralization of power in many cases. When capital flows across borders this demonstrates rather than reverses centralization of power; it hardly puts an end to the basic drive of capital accumulation. Information technology facilitates further changes of other sorts as well, many of them momentous. But we need to recognize that power was based substantially on knowledge long before microelectronics, and the capacity to control others through organizations run through regularized information flows hardly waited for computers or constitutes a break with modernity (compare Calhoun 1992 with Melucci, 1988: 249; Keane, 1988: 8, n.6).

All this is not to say that nothing has changed, but that changes have been overstated and poorly conceptualized. The expansion of an organizational and technological infrastructure throughout the modern era has, for example, both enhanced state

power and transformed it. Revolutionary potential, for example, is diminished in the West, largely because of the spatial deconcentration of power. Whether one wants to call the recent transformations of communist societies revolutions or not, it is important to see the extent to which they depended on the concentration of the institutions of power in capital cities and the underdevelopment of the infrastructures which have dispersed its application in "more modern" societies. But the displacement of power from readily visible individuals into market systems and bureaucratic organizations does not mean that there cease to be social relations of domination, that they no longer involve active subjects, or that power is not centralized.

Habermas's (Habermas, 1984, 1988a) conceptualization of a split between system and lifeworld suggests something of why these problems are hard to recognize and disempowering of collective agency. Social organization is undertaken simultaneously through directly interpersonal relationships, impersonal or systemic steering media, and large-scale (generally corporate) social organizations which appear from the point of view of everyday social life as autonomous and distant (Calhoun 1991b).<sup>21</sup> Both impersonal, notably market systems and corporate organizations have grown in importance throughout the modern era. While they organize more of social life--exerting more causal influence over the lives of individuals--they remain inaccessible to most forms of everyday (lifeworld) social knowledge. Markets can only be understood on the basis of statistical reasoning foreign to the conduct of everyday interpersonal relationships.

The omnipresence of "system"--that is of large scale market and bureaucratic-corporate influences on our immediate lives--shapes some of the cultural responses problematically identified as postmodern. In relation to problems of collective agency specifically, it encourages two equally disempowering visions. One is of a world out of control, one which doesn't make sense. The other is of a world all too controlled, but only by distant, hidden actors. Modern consciousness vacillates, I think, between the



first--a schizoid chaos of radical and widespread incommensurability (evoked, for example, by Deleuze and Guattari, 1983) and the second, a paranoid world view in which understandability is one only by belief in omnipresent conspiracy. Both have roots in the basic split between the lifeworld experiences which give life its basic meaning and the systemic steering and bureaucratic-corporate power which upset the order of the lifeworld but are poorly grasped--indeed necessarily obscured--by the conceptual framework of the lifeworld. It is in this context, for example, that we can see the source of postmodernist critiques of "intentionalist illusions"--putatively spurious belief in the capacity of human subjects to organize significant aspects of their own lives in response to conscious decision. Given the antiuniversalism of postmodernism, however, it is ironic that instead of locating the source of commonly exaggerated faith in intention, and its problems, many postmodernists universalize a critique of intention as fundamentally illusory.

The vision that reality does not make sense, indeed intrinsically cannot make sense, is a widespread postmodernist theme. Those who pose claims to demonstrate an order to life and culture must either be paranoid or repressive, or both. Our only legitimate options are to simply accept disorder and uninterpretability or to make highly contingent, local and ultimately only weakly defensible efforts to bring order to a small part of the world.

This vision of the chaotic, fragmented world is often traced to the break-up of a (implicitly once unified) modern economic and/or political structure. Yet even here, we should be cautious about seeing this as totally new rather than newly prominent. David Harvey (1989) thus has provocatively analyzed the culture of postmodernism as a response to a systemic crisis (but not supersession) of capitalism. Fordist production methods have brought on a crisis of overaccumulation; this has called forth a search for new regimes of accumulation (as well as new, post-Fordist production relations). This search fosters new aesthetic movements. Harvey's argument is schematic and some-

what reductionist on the relationship of aesthetics to economics, but powerful in its account of a variety of recent phenomena not as evidence of the end of the modern era but as aspects of a shift--not the first--in the internal organization of capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

Postmodernist reasoning makes it hard to justify any collective response, any attempt at agency, in the face of centralization of power and global capital accumulation accomplished through exploitation. Most postmodernist discourse is normatively incapacitating, even where it is profoundly normative in tone or motivation. Because processes of power and exploitation are increasingly systemic and removed from the everyday discursive grasp of the lifeworld, however, it is all the more important that a critical *theory* be developed through which to understand them. It is not enough to rely on play, intuition and ordinary experience.

Postmodernist thought has generally been presented in a radical, challenging mode and rhetoric, as though it were a critical theory with clear implications for collective struggle. Indeed, the postmodernist movement has without question informed and in some cases invigorated popular struggles. But it is not equally clear that postmodernist thought can stand very clearly the tests which must be demanded of a critical *theory*.

Ideally, a critical theory ought to provide for an account of the historical and cultural conditions of its own production, to offer an address to competing theories which explains (not just identifies) their weaknesses and appropriates their achievements, to engage in a continuing critical reflection on the categories used in its own construction, and to develop a critical account of existing social conditions with positive implications for social action. Postmodernism contributes to some of these desiderata, but also falls short of them in varying degree.

The postmodernist attention to difference raises the issue of cultural particularity, but difference is often made so absolutely prior to commonality that no basis for mutual engagement or even respect is provided. The theory thus undercuts by overstatement one of its own greatest contributions.

The postmodernist 'decentering' of the subject poses a challenge for a theory desiring to address agency and moral responsibility. Though postmodernist accounts here offer a needed counterpoint to typical individualism, they too often become nearly as much its mirror image as Durkheim. If a critical theory is to hold meaningful implications for action, it must grant actors and action a more significant place.

The postmodernist rejection of "grand narratives" and other overarching sources of meaning challenges the possibility of a standpoint from which to develop a critical theory (or more generally to defend critical judgments across significant lines of difference). Relatedly, the postmodernist notion of the insularity and incommensurability of traditions of thought suggests that there is inherently no basis other than power or mere persuasion for resolving conflicts among theories.

Finally, the postmodernist claim to represent a historical transformation raises the issue of historical specificity. As I tried to show above, however, it does so largely in pseudohistorical manner, dependent on oversimplifying notions of modernity to justify premature claims for its supercession.

Among other tasks, any good critical theory must offer a plausible account of the specificity and variation of historical cultural settings for human action. At least superficially, this involves one of the strengths of postmodernist thought. Conversely, failure to attend to this has been one of the central weaknesses of mainstream, especially U.S. dominated, sociology. Even followers of more historically oriented traditions than the largely functionalist and/or empiricist mainstream have sometimes been tempted to seek universal reach by dehistoricizing and deculturalizing key concepts. Many marxists, thus, treat labor as a transhistorical, universal category rather than one

specific to capitalism. This undermines the strength of marxism's own core analysis of capitalism. Similarly, other theorists, recognizing cultural and historical diversity, have attempted to overcome its more serious implications by subsuming it into a common, often teleological, evolutionary framework. Unlike biological evolutionary theories, which stress the enormous qualitative diversity within the common processes of speciation, inheritance, mutation, selection and so forth, sociological theories have generally relied on claimed universal features of all societies--like technology, held by Lenski, Lenski and Nolan (1990) to be the prime mover of evolutionary change--to act as basic, transhistorical variables.

Sociology has been impoverished by its relative neglect of the work of Foucault, Derrida and others of the major thinkers who have contributed to postmodernism. Their work offers both specific insights and important general emphasis on themes of difference and the problems of subject-centered thought. But even these valuable contributions are undermined by overstatement. And in postmodernist thought (for which amalgam neither Foucault nor Derrida can be held responsible) they come with a great deal of problematic baggage. The apparent historicity of the opposition of modern to postmodern obscures the extent to which this debate is the latest working out of tensions basic to the whole modern era. We need richer, more complex understandings of actual history.

Similarly, I have tried briefly to suggest the advantages to recognizing some of the historical continuities in patterns of social action as well as of intellectual debate. The production of "new social movements" thus needs to be seen as a continuous feature of modernity, not a sign of postmodernity. More generally, the basic tendencies which have characterized the modern era have not been reversed. Capital accumulation, the centralization of power, and the split between system and lifeworld all proceed apace. Shifts in the specific workings of "time-space distancing", to follow Harvey (1989) and Giddens (1990) in using this common but inelegant phrase, are very

important. Rearrangement of spatial relations of production, extension and intensification of market relations, and severing of place from space all are having powerful impacts on the contemporary world. They are not, however, reversals of the most basic tendencies of modern social organization. It is important that we reserve sociological claims for the end of modernity to transformations which do involve such basic changes.

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1. See Calhoun (1991a). In this respect, my argument resembles those of Jameson (1984) and Harvey (1989) to the effect that postmodernism is really a reflection of late capitalism. Their accounts, however, seem to me to border on the reductionist, making the stages and logic of capital too directly determining of cultural forms. Moreover, they neglect many of the similarities of the current era to earlier periods which I want to point up.

2. This paper builds on discussion of these points in Calhoun (1989, 1991a).

3. For the most part, "postmodernist sociology" is still in the business of assimilating arguments developed outside of sociology, especially in French poststructuralism. These are linked to already existing sociological arguments, which are then recast in postmodernist terms.

4. Especially in his more recent works, Rorty's pragmatism is extended beyond a critique of foundationalist philosophy to a series of claims about the virtues of bourgeois, liberal democracy, which are found to adhere not so much in universalistic rationality as in liberal-pluralist openness. Valuable critical discussions of Rorty's extension of his philosophical position to social practice (each of them questioning whether it can be so free of "universalism" as Rorty implies) are offered by McCarthy (1992, ch. 1) and Bernstein (1992, chs. 1 and 9).

5. Conversely, much postmodernist and antipostmodernist discourse also overstates the conservatism of hermeneutic thinkers like Gadamer, and accepts too much at face value the claims of Derrida, Rorty and others not to be children of the Enlightenment. In fact, Gadamer (1975) is not hostile to reason or a discourse about truth; as Bernstein (1983) has suggested, his hermeneutic arguments operate against claims to ahistorical, methodological certainty (and thus coincide with postKuhnian philosophy of science and a theme raised in a very different way by some poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida). Conversely, despite their attacks on "logocentrism," foundationalism and universalism, both Derrida and Rorty pose arguments that depend on capacities for generalization and appeal to reason that they share with much Enlightenment discourse and for which they are largely unable to provide alternative theoretical grounds.

6. Frisby's (1985a) account of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin brings out this aspect of Simmel rather well.

7. Those of us in the English speaking world, especially in sociology, have been a bit behind the Parisian fashions in this regard. Just as we were assimilating structuralism, especially beyond the dominant influence of Levi-Strauss in anthropology, and therefore including Althusser, Poulantzas, etc.--there was a new turn in dominant intellec-

tual fashion. This was the move beyond structuralism by some of its leading, mostly younger, figures. Lacan and Derrida are perhaps the most paradigmatic thinkers; in different ways both Foucault and Bourdieu made the same sort of move in relation to structuralism.

8. In this, the poststructuralist work resonates very closely with the substantially contemporary work of the ethnomethodologists in English-language sociology.

9. I have criticized such a view in Calhoun (forthcoming a). It is particularly disturbing coming from Habermas, where it marks a willingness to accept systems-theoretical accounts of economic activity without attempting to dereify them to see the role of human action behind production even where self-regulating systems coordinate it, and to see the production of knowledge as itself a form of creativity activity--labor, if you will, though perhaps in a way posing problems for many orthodox marxist accounts of the labor theory of value.

10. Baudrillard's early work (cited above), like that of Debord, is written as part of a critical social analysis that attempts to theorize the standpoint and conditions of its critique. Baudrillard's later work (e.g. 1989) increasingly abandoning this attempt at critical theory, though he never entirely joins that part of the postmodern current that adopts a fully celebratory style. Much of the best in Baudrillard was in fact anticipated by Debord, whose work is helpfully discussed and situated both in relation to the "Situationalist International" and postmodernism by Plant (1992).

11. In addition, it is not clear that attention to consumption and efforts to influence it through advertising have undergone a qualitative change rather than a quantitative expansion in the post-war years. It may be that a better theoretical revision would focus

more of our attention on the prominence of consumption issues from the beginning of the capitalist (or modern) era.

12. See not only Baudrillard, but also, following his lead, Kroker and Cook (1986: 185). For a sophisticated reading of *Capital* treating labor as a historically specific category and properly stressing the role of the dialectic of abstract and concrete labor and time, see Postone (forthcoming).

13. As Giddens (1990) has suggested, though, this is more plausibly read as the completion or radicalization of modernity than as the coming of postmodernity. On this point too, the very fragmentation claimed as distinctive of postmodernity has often been claimed as equally distinctive of modernity.

14. At one level, this talk of "loss of meaning" echoes rather obviously an key theme of earlier modernists. In the terms of my argument below, however, it does perhaps reflect extensions in the severing of the world of practical knowledge and tradition in direct relationships from the coordination of large scale systems of action through indirect relationships.

15. Here again, the similarities between Derrida and Gadamer are worth noting, despite their very different overall approaches; they are due in part, it appears, to their common indebtedness to Heidegger.

16. Derrida does tend to absolutize the notion of difference, and thus to remove the human actor and the concrete social relationship from the discourse. Nonetheless, unlike many other traditions of "alterity" and "other-centered" or "dialogical" understanding, such as that of Levinas, Derrida rejects the idea that this radical otherness

precludes treatment of the other as *alter ego*. While it may not be possible in strong senses to have real knowledge of the other, it is nonetheless crucial for Derrida--and in his view the starting point of all ethics--to approach interaction and discourse with "*respect for the other as what it is*" (1978: 138). There is a good discussion of this in Bernstein (1992, ch. 3).

17. See the helpful review--not, however, including Foucault--in Bernstein 1983, 1992, ch. 3). I have addressed aspects of these issues in Calhoun, 1989 and especially 1991a).

18. This is related to deconstructionism's arguments against attempts to discipline the reading of texts by imposition of contextualizing explanations. Yet surely the issue must be not simply to free text from context, but to understand processes of entextualization (Silverstein and Urban, 1992) and especially to establish and understand the variable extent to which different discourses attain independence of the contexts of their initial production or of any later deployment.

19. This account is based most especially on Melucci (1988, 1989), Touraine (1977, 1981, 1988), Cohen (1985) and Cohen and Arato (1992, ch. 10). See also Klander-mans, Kriesi, and Tarrow, eds. (1988), Tarrow (1989), Scott (1990), Offe (1985), Eder (1985), and Habermas (1984). The last three, along with Cohen and Arato, present views closer to critical theory (and to the present paper) than to the postmodernist assimilation of the idea of new social movements, with its exaggerated notion of a historical break. Just as the present article was going to press, Kenneth Tucker (1991) published a useful examination of the claims of new social movement theory (primarily in its 'critical theory' versions) which makes similar points with reference to late 19th century French examples.

20. Indeed, what is most novel may be the relative bureaucratization and professionalization of the social movement field. This was not altogether absent in the 19th century, when a figure like the journalist-agitator William Cobbett or his sometime friend Orator Henry Hunt could appear as champions of a variety of causes and earn a living primarily from their movement activity (see Thompson, 1968). Nonetheless, the extent to which formal organizations and professional movement organizers predominate does seem to be a linear (if only ambiguously progressive) trend in the social movement field (see Zald and McCarthy, 1979).

21. Neither Habermas nor Parsons (on whom he draws) makes clear why power should be considered an impersonal systemic steering medium comparable to money; I accordingly treat corporate bureaucracies as distinct from markets. I would also suggest that it is important to see system and lifeworld as different analytic aspects of social life, not as different realms since it is virtually impossible to give a meaningful account of a lifeworld in modern society that is not deeply influenced by systemic factors. What we can see are directly interpersonal social relations that are understandable on bases distinct from the impersonal conceptualizations required by markets and corporations.

22. Jameson (1991) reaches somewhat similar conclusions. Of course, to see capitalism as still a powerful causal factor--and thus a basis for making the world interpretable--need not be to suggest that capitalism explains every aspect of modern social and cultural transformations.