



---

Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories

Author(s): Nancy Hartsock

Source: *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (Autumn, 1987), pp. 187-206

Published by: University of Minnesota Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354155>

Accessed: 26/04/2010 18:16

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=umnpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



University of Minnesota Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cultural Critique*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories

---

*Nancy Hartsock*

Women's studies is in many ways a curious academic field. With the exception of ethnic studies, we owe a great deal more than other academic disciplines to social movements off campus. The large exception here, of course, is ethnic studies. Indeed, we owe much of our very existence in academia to the struggles of those who did not have as their goal the creation of a new scholarly field; rather, they were interested in a much more general social transformation. Moreover, many of us in women's studies remain committed to doing academic work—both research and teaching—in ways that are indebted to the politics and organizational forms of the activist women's movement. The issue of the relation of academics to activists is, in consequence, a more critical one for women's studies than for the other academic disciplines in which many of us also take part.

What has been the relation of academics and activists? It is not too harsh to say that there has been a history of misunderstandings, failed expectations, and bitterness. I doubt that either side has much real sense of what the other does. Activists have often been very critical of academics. Activists tend to see themselves as doing more than they

---

I would like to thank Donna Haraway and Ric Olguin for their detailed comments.

© 1987 by *Cultural Critique*. 0882-4371 (Fall 1987). All rights reserved.

can, with less money and resources than they need, often living on subsistence wages, and working very long hours. Activists are likely to see academics as very privileged: not only do many of the university women make several times the wages that many activists work for, but the university also gives them access to all sorts of other privileges—including insurance, space, duplicating facilities, having their way paid to conferences, teaching only a few hours a week, working only for nine months a year. Moreover, activists have questions about the research academics do: academics involve themselves in the oddest and often most irrelevant-sounding concerns. As one activist put it, the academy's predisposition is to regard anything dead as good and anything living as suspect.

The view from within the academy is, of course, quite different. Our programs are often underfunded; the faculty have had to teach women's studies courses as an overload; and the problems of time and money within the university seem very similar to those outside—being asked, and trying, to do too much with too little. As academics involved in women's studies we often see ourselves as occupying a very tenuous ground within the university. Despite the appearance of teaching only a few hours a week and having (many of us) summers "off," we see ourselves as putting in very long hours. The institutions at which we work have their requirements. From within the university, academics often perceive activists as having much more freedom—as being without institutional constraints and responsibilities and as asking for resources the women's studies faculty either don't have or cannot spare.

Both these views have some truth, but both sides of these accusations point to the issue I want to raise here—namely that where we are located in the social structure as a whole and which institutions we are in and not in have effects on how we understand the world. We need close collaboration between academics and activists outside the university—we need it in order to do both better scholarship and better organizing. Activism needs to be informed by theory. Theory can help us understand which issues are shared by all women and which issues affect different women differently. In addition, theory can give us some perspective on the significance of any particular effort. One of the dangers of political activity in the absence of a more theoretical understanding of women's situation is that such activity can lead to a submersion in the day to day struggle, and to a consequent failure to

address the hard questions of what real difference these struggles will make for women. Thus, for example, one can be led to argue for the need for abortion rights without recognizing that reproductive rights have other important dimensions, especially for women of color; or one become absorbed in single issue, dead-end work, as NOW did on the ERA.

But if theory is an important resource for activists, what is the situation of academics? We face our own set of problems—one of the most important is that, if we become cut off from the political perspectives provided by links with activists, we are more likely to be caught up in the questions that move other academics who have never shared our political commitments. We need to inquire of our research and teaching: Who is it for? To whom are we ultimately accountable? How can we recognize and assess the political stakes involved in seemingly irrelevant academic distinctions. What are the political issues on the agenda for feminist academics?

Most important, I would argue, are questions about difference, especially differences among women. We need to develop our understanding of difference by creating a situation in which hitherto marginalized groups can name themselves, speak for themselves, and participate in defining the terms of interaction, a situation in which we can construct an understanding of the world that is sensitive to difference. Clearly, this is a task for academics and activists alike. Here, however, I want to concentrate on the academic side.

What might such a theory look like? Can we develop a general theory, or should we abandon the search for such a theory in favor of making space for a number of heterogeneous voices to be heard? What kinds of common claims can be made about those of white women and women and men of color? About the situations of Western peoples and those they have colonized? For example, is it ever legitimate to say “women” without qualification? These kinds of questions make it apparent that the theoretical crisis we face not only involves substantive claims about the world but also raises questions about how we come to know the world, about what we can claim for our theories—questions of epistemology. I want to ask, what kinds of knowledge claims are required for grounding political action by different groups? Should theories produced by “minorities” rest on different epistemologies than those of the “majority”? Given the fact that the search for theory has been called

into question in majority discourse, do we want to ask similar questions of minority proposals?

In our efforts to find ways to include the voices of marginalized groups, we might expect helpful guidance from those who have argued against totalizing and universalistic theories such as those of the Enlightenment. Many radical intellectuals have been attracted to an amalgam of diverse writings, ranging from literary criticism to the social sciences, generally termed “postmodernism.” These postmodernist writers, among them figures such as Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, and Lyotard, argue against the faith in a universal reason we have inherited from Enlightenment European philosophy. They reject accounts that claim to encompass all of human history: as Lyotard puts it, “Let us wage a war on totality.”<sup>1</sup> In its place they propose a social criticism that is ad hoc, contextual, plural, and limited. A number of feminist theorists have joined in the criticism of modernity put forward by these writers. They have endorsed their claims about what can and cannot be known or said or read into/from texts.

Despite their apparent congruence with the project I am proposing, these theories, I contend, would hinder rather than help its accomplishment. Despite the postmodernists’ own desire to avoid universal claims, and despite their stated opposition to such claims, some universalistic assumptions creep back into their work. Thus, postmodernism, despite its stated efforts to avoid the problems of the European modernism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at best manages to criticize these theories without putting anything in their place. For those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodernist theories at their best give little guidance. (I should note that I recognize that some postmodernist theorists—Foucault, for instance—are committed to ending injustice. But this commitment is not carried through in their theories.)<sup>2</sup> Those of us who are not part of the ruling race, class, or gender, not a part of the minority which controls our world, need to know how it works. Why are we—in all our variousness—systematically excluded and margin-

---

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 82.

2. My criticism is that this commitment rests on what appears to be an ungrounded hope, as is evidenced by my discussion of Rorty below.

alized? What systematic changes would be required to create a more just society? At their worst, postmodernist theories merely recapitulate the effects of Enlightenment theories—theories that deny marginalized people the right to participate in defining the terms of their interaction with people in the mainstream. Thus, I contend, in broad terms, that postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt.

### *The Construction of the Colonized Other*

In thinking about how to think about these issues, I found the work of Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* offered a very useful structure for understanding both our situation with regard to postmodernist theorists and the situation of some postmodernist theorists themselves: those of us who have been marginalized enter the discussion from a position analogous to that which the colonized held in relation to the colonizer.<sup>3</sup> Most fundamentally, I want to argue that the philosophical and historical creation of a devalued Other was the necessary precondition for the creation of the transcendental rational subject outside of time and space, the subject who is the speaker in Enlightenment philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir has described the essence of the process in a quite different context: “Evil is necessary to Good, matter to idea, and darkness to light.”<sup>4</sup> While this subject is clearest in the work of bourgeois philosophers such as Kant, one can find echoes of this mode of thought in some of Marx’s claims about the proletariat as the universal subject of history.

Memmi describes the bond that creates both the colonizer and the colonized as one which destroys both parties, though in different ways. As he draws a portrait of the Other as described by the colonizer the colonized emerges as the image of everything the colonizer is not.

---

3. My language requires that I insert a qualification and clarification at this point: I will be using a “we/they” language. But while it is clear who “they” are, the “we” refers to a “we” who are not and never will be a unitary “we,” a “we” artificially constructed by the totalizing, Eurocentric, masculine discourse of the Enlightenment. I do not mean to suggest that white Western women share the material situation of colonized peoples but rather that we share similar positions in the ideology of the Enlightenment.

4. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953), 74.

Every negative quality is projected onto her/him. The colonized is said to be lazy, and the colonizer becomes practically lyrical about it. Moreover, the colonized is both wicked and backward, a being who is in some important ways not fully human.<sup>5</sup> As Memmi describes the image of the colonized, feminist readers of de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* cannot avoid a sense of familiarity. We recognize a great deal of this description.<sup>6</sup>

Memmi points to several conclusions drawn about this artificially created Other. First, the Other is always seen as Not, as a lack, a void, as deficient in the valued qualities of the society, whatever those qualities may be (*CC*, 83). Second, the humanity of the Other becomes "opaque." Colonizers frequently make statements like "You never know what they think. Do they think? Or do they instead operate according to intuition?" (Feminist readers may be reminded of some of the arguments about whether women had souls, or were capable of reason, or of learning Latin.) Memmi remarks ironically that the colonized must indeed be very strange, if he remains so mysterious and opaque after years of living with the colonizer (*CC*, 85). Third, the Others are not seen as fellow individual members of the human community, but rather as part of a chaotic, disorganized, and anonymous collectivity. They carry, Memmi states, "the mark of the plural" (*CC*, 85). In more colloquial terms, they all look alike.

I am not claiming that women are a unitary group, or that Western white women have the same experiences as women or men of color, or as colonized peoples. Rather, I am pointing to a way of looking at the world characteristic of the dominant white, male, Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the center and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities.

What is left of the Other after this effort to dehumanize her or him? S/he is pushed toward becoming an object. "As an end, in the colonizer's supreme ambition, [the Other] should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, i.e., be transformed into a pure colonized. An object for himself as well as for the colonizer" (*CC*, 86). The colonized ceases to be a subject of history, and becomes only what the colonizer is not. After having shut the colonized out of history and having

---

5. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 82; all further references to this work, abbreviated as *CC*, will appear in the text.

6. For example, compare de Beauvoir's statement that "at the moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of the Other arises" (*The Second Sex*, 73).

forbidden him all development, the colonizer asserts his fundamental immobility (CC, 92, 95, 113). Confronted with this image as it is imposed by every institution and in every human contact, the colonized cannot be indifferent to it. Its accusations worry the colonized even more because s/he admires and fears the powerful colonizing accuser.

We can expand our understanding of the way this process works by looking briefly at Edward W. Said's account of the European construction of the Orient. Said makes the political dimensions of this ideological move very clear: he describes the creation of the Orient as an outgrowth of a will to power. "Orientalism," he states, "is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>7</sup> (Interestingly enough, in the construction of these power relations, the orient is often feminized.) There is, however, out of this same process, the creation of the opposite of the colonized, the opposite of the Oriental, the opposite of woman, the creation of a being who sees himself (I use the masculine pronoun here purposely) as located at the center and possessed of all the qualities valued in his society. Memmi describes this process eloquently:

The colonialist stresses those things that keep him separate rather than emphasizing that which might contribute to the foundation of a joint community. In those differences, the colonized is always degraded and the colonialist finds justification for rejecting his subjectivity. But perhaps the most important thing is that once the behavioral feature of historical or geographical factor which characterizes the colonialist and contrasts him with the colonized has been isolated, this gap must be kept from being filled. The colonialist removes the factor from history, time, and therefore possibly evolution. What is actually a sociological point becomes labeled as being biological or, preferably, metaphysical. It is attached to the colonized's basic nature. Immediately the colonial relationship between colonized and colonizer, founded on the essential outlook of the two protagonists, becomes a definitive category. It is what it is because they are what they are, and neither one nor the other will ever change. (CC, 71-72)

---

7. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978). Interestingly enough, one can find this same will to power in the emerging European science developing during the same period.



Said points to something very similar. He argues that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”<sup>8</sup> Orientalism is part of the European identity that defines “us” vs. the non-Europeans. To go further, the studied object becomes another being in relation to whom the studying subject becomes transcendent. Why? Because, unlike the oriental, the European observer is a true human being.<sup>9</sup>

But what does all this have to do with theory and the search for an adequate epistemology? I want to suggest that in each of these cases—and the examples could be multiplied—what we see is the construction of the social relations, the power relations, which form the basis of the transcendent subject of Enlightenment theories—he (and I mean he) who theorizes. Put slightly differently, the political and social as well as the ideological/intellectual creation of the devalued Other was *at the same time* the creation of the universalizing and totalizing voice postmodernists denounce as the voice of Theory.

These social relations and the totalizing voice they constitute are incorporated as well in the rules of formal logic. As Nancy Jay points out, the rules of logic we have chosen to inherit from Aristotle must be seen as principles of order. She calls attention to the principle of identity (If anything is A, it is A), the principle of contradiction (Nothing can be both A and not-A), and the principle of the excluded middle (Anything and everything must be either A or not-A). “These principles are not representative of the empirical world; they are principles of *order*. In the empirical world,” she notes, “almost everything is in a process of transition: growing, decaying, ice turning to water and vice versa.”<sup>10</sup>

These logical principles of order underlie the pattern of thought I have been describing, a pattern which divides the world into A and not-A. The not-A side is regularly associated with disorder, irrationality, chance, error, impurity; indeed, not-A is *necessarily* impure, a catchall, negative category. The clue to this division of categories, Jay notes, is the presence of only one positive term. Thus, men/women/children is one form of categorizing the world, while men/women-and-children is

8. *Ibid.*, 3; and see 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 97, 108; see also the reference to the “tyrannical observer,” 310.

10. Nancy Jay, “Gender and Dichotomy,” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1981); 42.

quite another in implication.<sup>11</sup> Radical dichotomy, then, functions to maintain a certain kind of order. The questions posed eloquently in the literature I have been examining are these: In whose interest is it to preserve dichotomies? Who experiences change as disorder?<sup>12</sup> The central point I want to make is that the creation of the Other is simultaneously the creation of the transcendent and omnipotent theorizer who can persuade himself that he exists outside time and space and power relations.

The social relations which express and form a material base for these theoretical notions have been rejected on a world scale over the last several decades. Decolonization struggles, movements of young people, women's movements, racial liberation movements—all these represent the diverse and disorderly Others beginning to speak and beginning to chip away at the social and political power of the Theorizer. These movements have two fundamental intellectual/theoretical tasks—one of critique and one of construction. We who have not been allowed to be subjects of history, who have not been allowed to make our history, are beginning to reclaim our pasts and remake our futures on our own terms.

One of our first tasks is the construction of the subjectivities of the Other, subjectivities which will be both multiple and specific. Nationalism and separatism are important features of this phase of construction. Bernice Reagon (civil rights movement activist, feminist, singer with Sweet Honey in the Rock, and social historian with the Smithsonian) describes the process and its problems eloquently:

[Sometimes] it gets too hard to stay out in that society all the time. And that's when you find a place, and you try to bar the door and check all the people who come in. You come together to see what you can do about shouldering up all of your energies so that you and your kind can survive . . . . That space should be a nurturing space where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take the time to try to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society . . . . [This is] nurturing, but it is also nationalism. At a certain stage, nationalism is crucial to a

---

11. *Ibid.*, 47.

12. This is Jay's question; see *Ibid.*, 53.

people if you are ever going to impact as a group in your own interest.<sup>13</sup>

Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at this moment in history, when so many groups are engaged in “nationalisms” which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others, that doubt arises in the academy about the nature of the “subject,” about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical “progress.” Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes “problematic”? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be adequately theorized? Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of “meaningfully” organizing human society become suspect? And why is it only now that critiques are made of the will to power inherent in the effort to create theory? I contend that these intellectual moves are no accident (but no conspiracy either). They represent the transcendental voice of the Enlightenment attempting to come to grips with the social and historical changes of the middle to late twentieth century. However, the particular forms its efforts have taken indicate a fundamental failure of imagination and reflect the imprisonment of dominant modes of thought within Enlightenment paradigms and values. Let us examine more closely one effort to describe the tasks we are advised to engage in if we adopt the postmodernist project.

### *Richard Rorty's Conversational Alternative*

Richard Rorty's contribution to postmodernist work deserves attention as a model for an account of what theorists might do. Fundamentally, Rorty is arguing against the epistemology of the Enlightenment—something he terms simply “Epistemology.” (I read this move as a statement that there always has been only one way of knowing, such that to question this way of knowing is to question the project of knowing itself.)

---

13. Bernice Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Home Girls*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983), 357.

Rorty argues that the desire for a theory of knowledge is simply a desire for constraint. Moreover, it reflects the “overconfidence of theory.” We must instead “free ourselves from the notion that philosophy must center around the “discovery of a permanent framework for inquiry.”<sup>14</sup> Rather than view even normal science as the search for objective truth, he argues that we should see it as one discourse among many. One must reject the “tacit and self-confident commitment to the search for objective truth on the subject in question”; it was simply an error of systematic philosophy to think that such questions could be answered by some new transcendental and singular discourse (382, 383). In addition, he argues against the notion of epistemology that assumes all contributions to a discourse are commensurable (one might substitute the notion of mutual intelligibility here). Rather, he argues for a recognition of cacaphony and disorder. Epistemology told us that to be rational, i.e., to be fully human, we must find agreement. But this assumes that such a common ground exists (316). Rorty is confident, however, that it does not. Thus, hermeneutics, his preferred mode of philosophizing, will redefine rationality as a willingness to abstain from epistemology, that is, to abstain from the idea that to be rational is to find the common set of terms into which all contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible (318).

Hermeneutics is not to be a successor subject to Epistemology; rather, it represents the hope that the cultural space left by the demise of Epistemology will not be filled (315). Thus, it represents the abandoning of certain values—rationality, disinterestedness, the possibility of floating free of educational and institutional patterns of the day (331).

Accordingly, we must give up the notion that there is a human essence. We must give up the idea of a search for the truth and simply try to redescribe ourselves yet again. This entails, as part of the project, giving up the idea that any vocabulary has a privileged attachment to “reality,” and accepting the contention that sentences are more strongly related to other sentences than they are to “truth.” That is, we must abandon the notion of correspondence to reality in the case of sentences as well as ideas. We must see sentences as “connected with other sentences rather than with the world” (357, 358, 361, 363, 372).

---

14. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 315, 381, 380; all further references to this work will appear in the text.

In addition, Rorty argues that philosophers should give up the task of being constructive. Instead, they should take up an oppositional and reactive stance, should be skeptical about systematic philosophy (366).

Rorty, then, is proposing an interesting but dangerous mix of ideas. He is attacking the transcendental knower who exists outside time and space and has privileged access to true knowledge. Those of us who were marginalized by our very act of speaking have attacked this same figure of the transcendental knower—whether we were conscious of it or not. Rorty, thus, would seem to be involved in a project which is friendly to those we have been involved in.

To get a better sense, however, of whether the approach he advocates can be of use to us, let us examine the positive content of what he is suggesting. How would a hermeneutic approach work? Rorty proposes the notion of culture as a conversation rather than as a structure erected upon foundations (319). The conversation is to be about what he terms “edification”—“finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking.” The point of doing philosophy, then, should be seen as continuing a conversation that is developing a program rather than discovering truth. We must avoid the self-deception that comes from believing that we know ourselves by knowing a set of objective facts, and we must likewise avoid the notion that we are really different from “either inkwells or atoms” (373). Inquiry, then, should proceed on the ground that persons in conversation are simply those whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less common ground (318).

Using an analogy to Thomas Kuhn’s distinction between normal and revolutionary science, Rorty proposes a distinction between normal and “abnormal” discourse. Normal science is the practice of solving problems against the background of a consensus about what counts as a good explanation and about what it would take for a problem to be solved. Revolutionary science, in contrast, represents the introduction of a new paradigm indicating what is to count as a good explanation. By analogy, abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins the conversation who is ignorant of its “normal” conventions—or who chooses to set them aside. What results could be nonsense, or it could be intellectual revolution (320-21). (One wonders how one could tell the difference in Rorty’s system.) Hermeneutics,

then, is the study of these abnormal discourses through the creation of another abnormal discourse. As such, it must be reactive and must dread the possibility of being institutionalized. "Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, and aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over. They are intentionally peripheral" (353, 369).

Rorty argues that edifying philosophers should avoid having views, should "decry the notion of having a view while avoiding having a view about having views" (371). The proper image is one of conversational partners rather than of individuals holding views on subjects of common concern. Moreover, the edifying philosopher wants to use the conversation to expand the community—that is, to see knowledge connected with solidarity rather than with power. One should, he argues, operate from an "ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity," an aspiration based on moral hope rather than on claims about what we may know of the world.<sup>15</sup>

This, then, is his critique of the transcendental subject and his alternative project for philosophy. It would seem to be a project that might provide the underpinnings for an account of the world that would allow all conversational partners to participate. Yet, I believe that this form of argument is, in fact, dangerous to those of us who have been marginalized. It cannot accomplish the tasks we have in front of us. Indeed, despite its appearance of allowing space for many voices in the conversation, the effect of ideas like this is to smuggle back in the authority of the transcendental ego.

I have several problems with Rorty's argument. There are a number of internal inconsistencies in his proposal—more interesting to me as a philosopher than for our purposes here. But for our immediate purposes, my objections to this methodology as something of value to minority discourse rest on several points. First, Rorty ignores power relations: we are not all in a position now to participate as equals in a conversation. Many of us have not yet even had a chance to name ourselves and to theorize our situations. Second, Rorty sets out to be reactive, unconstructive, and peripheral. But those of us who have been marginalized are all too familiar with the powerlessness that limits our options to these stances. Rorty is, in a sense, choosing to be

---

15. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 208.

marginal—(a good thing for someone at the center but not for those at the margins who have of necessity been reactive, unconstructive and peripheral).

Third, and related, his substitution of “abnormal discourse” for Kuhn’s concept of “revolutionary science” represents an important shift: it is a retreat from the idea that we are seeing historical agency and action. Fourth, Rorty chooses to defend the values of the Enlightenment on the basis that they have produced good outcomes. Yet, these values cannot be defended without again dragging in the omnipotent subject created by the Enlightenment.

Let us take up these objections in turn. Rorty invites us to join his conversation, but he has, in a style reminiscent of the transcendental subject he inveighs against, set the rules of the discussion in a way inappropriate to those of us who have been marginalized. Moreover, the notion of a conversation implies that we are all equally able to participate, that we are not marked by culturally and historically constructed difference. One is reminded of Bell Hooks’s point about racism in feminist writing: “The force that allows white authors to make no reference to racial identity in their books about ‘women’ that are in actuality about white women is the same one that would compel any author writing exclusively on black women to refer explicitly to their racial identity.” She continues that “it is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of their racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem that their experience is representative.”<sup>16</sup>

From having been constructed as void and lack, and from having been forbidden to speak, we are now expected to join in equal conversation with someone who has just realized that philosophy has been overconfident. Rorty, with other postmodernists, is the inheritor of the disembodied, transcendent voice of reason. It is certainly a good thing for him to abandon the project of defining the world for everyone and instead to propose a conversation. But it will not work: conversation implies the presence of subjects—contingent, historically limited subjects, to be sure, but subjects who can speak. The silenced Others, however, are now involved in theorizing the world from their own perspective and in making this naming “stick.” Conversation on Rorty’s

---

16. Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 138.

terms would only reinforce previous power relations.

Let us turn to Rorty's second prescription for philosophy: the effort to be reactive, peripheral. Here, too, this is a good strategy for the inheritor of the voice of the transcendental ego. Becoming marginal is an important strategy for those of us who are privileged by race, class, gender, or heterosexuality. It is a strategy we should undertake. But to the extent that we have been constituted as Other, it is important to insist as well on a vision of the world in which we are at the center rather than at the periphery. The "center" will obviously look different when occupied by women and men of color and white women than it does now, when occupied by white men of a certain class background. Indeed, given our diversity, it may cease to look like a center at all. But, as for being peripheral, we've done that for far too long. Let those who have put themselves at the center practice moving to the margins now.

Third, and related to this, Rorty proposes the idea of abnormal discourse as a modification of Kuhn's normal vs. revolutionary science. While he intends this to counter the hegemonic, normal discourse of the supra-historical subject, the substitution of "abnormal" for "revolutionary" is not innocent. Revolutionary science, or the more precise parallel, revolutionary discourse, would not remain peripheral but rather would transform normal discourse. This, in fact, is a much more appropriate formulation of our task. We should undertake the construction of revolutionary discourses which would not remain "abnormal" or peripheral but would have the effect of transforming "normal" discourse.

Fourth, Rorty chooses to defend the values of the Enlightenment on the ground that they have produced good outcomes. Thus he demonstrates his commitment to the project of the Enlightenment—in other words, he brings the project of the Enlightenment in through the back door while claiming to get rid of it. These values have a homogenizing effect: they produce a homogeneous equality which fails to recognize the specificity of different communities.

The overall result is that the Others constructed by the Enlightenment are once again silenced, but this time in the name of a rejection of the methods, if not the values, of the Enlightenment. To return to the terms that Memmi uses, Rorty perhaps can be described not so much as the colonizer who consents, as the citizen of the metropolis who says, "But we gave them their independence—Why do they keep complaining about neocolonialism? Why do they keep bringing up questions of power?"



### *Foucault's Refusal*

I believe similar cases could be made about other postmodernist figures. Foucault represents another figure from Memmi's landscape, a figure who also fails to provide an epistemology which is usable for the task of revolutionizing, creating, and constructing. Foucault is more like Memmi's colonizer who refuses, and thus exists in a painful ambiguity.<sup>17</sup>

Memmi states that as a Jewish Tunisian he knew the colonizer as well as the colonized and so "understood only too well (the difficulty of the colonizer who refuses—) their inevitable ambiguity and the resulting isolation: more serious still, their inability to act" (CC, xiv-xv). He notes that it is difficult to escape from a concrete situation and to refuse its ideology while continuing to live in the midst of the concrete relations of a culture. The colonizer who attempts it is a traitor, but he is still not the colonized (CC, 20-21). The political ineffectiveness of the Leftist colonizer comes from the nature of his position in the colony. Has any one, Memmi asks, ever seen a serious political demand that did not rest on concrete supports of people, or money, or force. The colonizer who refuses to become a part of his group of fellow citizens faces the difficult political question of who he might be (CC, 41).

This lack of certainty and power infuses Foucault's work. He is clearly rejecting any form of totalizing discourse: reason, he argues, must be seen as born from chaos, truth as simply an error hardened into unalterable form in the long process of history. He argues for a glance that disperses and shatters the unity of man's being through which he sought to extend his sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> That is, Foucault appears to endorse a rejection of modernity. Moreover, he has engaged in social activism around prisons. His sympathies are obviously with those over whom power is exercised, and he suggests that many struggles can be seen as linked to the revolutionary working class movement. In addition, his empirical critiques in works such as *Discipline and Punish* powerfully unmask coercive power. Yet they do so, on the one hand,

---

17. My general remarks here are taken from a much more lengthy and nuanced chapter on Foucault in my forthcoming *Post-Modernism and Political Change*.

18. These are arguments he makes in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

by making use of the values of humanism that he claims to be rejecting: as Nancy Fraser points out, the project gets its political force from the “reader’s familiarity with an commitment to modern ideals of autonomy, dignity, and human rights.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Foucault explicitly attempts to limit the power of his critique by arguing that unmasking power can have only destabilizing rather than transformatory effects.<sup>20</sup>

But the sense of powerlessness and the isolation of the colonial intellectual resurfaces again and again. Thus, Foucault argues: “Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Foucault sees intellectuals as working only alongside, rather than with, those who struggle for power, working locally and regionally. Finally, in opposition to modernity, he calls for a history that is parodic, dissociative, and satirical, and thus a history that is directed against reality, identity, and truth. History, then, is not knowledge but counter-memory and, thus, a transformation of history. Genealogy, the form of history he calls for, accordingly, should be seen as a form of concerted carnival.<sup>22</sup>

We must view this as a positive step, just as many of Rorty’s oppositions to modernity must be considered as important and useful modifications of a paradigm. In the end, though, Foucault appears to endorse a one-sided wholesale rejection of modernity as such, and to do so without a conception of what is to replace it. Moreover, some have argued persuasively that, because Foucault refuses both the ground of foundationalism and the “ungrounded hope” endorsed by Rorty, he stands on no ground at all, and thus fails to give any reasons for resistance. Indeed, he suggests that if our resistance succeeded we would simply be changing one discursive identity for another, and in the

---

19. Nancy Fraser, “Foucault’s Body Language: A Post-Humanist Political Rhetoric?” *Salmagundi*, no. 61 (Fall 1983): 59.

20. See Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” *Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (May 1984): 175-76.

21. Michael Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977) 151.

22. *Ibid.* 160-61.

process would create new oppressions.<sup>23</sup>

But precisely the most pressing question for those of us committed to social change is what we can replace modernism with. This is crucial for those of us who have been marginalized. The so-called “majority” can probably perform the greatest possible political service by resisting and by refusing the overconfidence of the past. But the message we get from them is either that we should abandon the project of modernity and substitute a conversation or that we should simply take up a posture of resistance as the only strategy open to us. However, if we are not to abandon the project of creating a new and more just society, neither of these options will work for us.

### *Toward Minority Theories*

Those of us who have been marginalized by the transcendental voice of universalizing Theory need to do something other than ignore power relations, as Rorty does, or resist them, as figures such as Foucault and Lyotard suggest. We need to transform them—and to do so, we need a revised and reconstructed theory, indebted to Marx, among others, and incorporating several important features.

First, rather than getting rid of subjectivity or notions of the subject, we need to engage in the historical and political and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects as well as objects of history. We need to recognize that we can be the makers of history and not just the objects of those who have made history until now. Our nonbeing was the condition of being of the “majority,” the center, the taken-for-granted ability of one small segment of the population to speak for all; our various efforts to constitute ourselves as subjects (through struggles for colonial independence, struggles for racial and sexual liberation, etc.) were fundamental to creating the preconditions for the current questioning of universalistic claims. But, I believe, we need to sort out who we really are. Put differently, we need to dissolve the false “we” I have been using into its real multiplicity and variety and, out of this concrete multiplicity, build an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can transform these margins into

---

23. See Gad Horowitz, “The Foucaultian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution,” *Political Theory* 15, no. 1 (February 1987): 63–64.

centers. The point is to develop an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated knowledges, but as primary.

It may be objected that I am calling for the construction of another totalizing and falsely universal discourse. But that is to be imprisoned by the alternatives posed by Enlightenment thought and postmodernism: either one must adopt the perspective of the transcendental and disembodied voice of Reason, or one must abandon the goal of accurate and systematic knowledge of the world. Other possibilities exist and must be (perhaps can only be) developed by hitherto marginalized voices. Moreover, our history of marginalization will work against creating such a totalizing discourse. This is not to argue that oppression creates “better” people; on the contrary, the experience of domination and marginalization leaves many scars. Rather it is to note that marginalized groups are far less likely to mistake themselves for the universal “man.” We know that we are not the universal man who can assume his experience of the world is the experience of all. But if we will not make the mistake of assuming our experience of the world is the experience of all, we still need to name and describe our diverse experiences. What are our commonalities? What are our differences? How can we transform our imposed Otherness into a self-defined specificity?<sup>24</sup>

Second, we must do our thinking on an epistemological base that indicates that knowledge is possible—not just conversation or a discourse on how it is that power relations work. Conversation as a goal is fine; understanding how power works in oppressive societies is important: but if we are to construct a new society, we need to be assured that some systematic knowledge about our world and ourselves is possible. Those who are (simply) critical of modernity can afford to call into question whether they ever really knew the world. But we will not have the confidence to act if we believe that we do not know the world. They are, in fact, right that they have not known the world as it is rather than as they wished and needed it to be: they created their world not only in their own image but in the image of their fantasies. To create the world in our various images, we need to understand how it works.

Third, we need an epistemology that recognizes that our practical

---

24. See my “Difference and Domination in the Women’s Movement: The Dialectic of Theory and Practice,” in *Class, Race, and Sex: the Dynamics of Control*, ed. Amy Swerdlow and Hanna Lessinger (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

daily activity contains an understanding of the world—subjugated, perhaps, but present. Here I am reaffirming Gramsci's argument that all men are intellectuals and that all of us have an epistemology. The point, then, for "minority" theories is to "read out" the epistemologies in our various practices. I have argued elsewhere for a "standpoint" epistemology—an account of the world with great similarities to Marx's fundamental stance.<sup>25</sup> While I would modify some of what I argued there, I would still insist that we must not give up the claim that material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations and that, in systems of domination, the vision available to the rulers both will be partial and will reverse the real order of things.

Fourth, our epistemology needs to recognize the difficulty of creating alternatives. The ruling class, race, and gender actively structures and envisions the world in a way that forms the material-social relations in which all parties are forced to participate; their vision, therefore, cannot be dismissed as simply false or misguided. In consequence, oppressed groups must struggle for their own vision, which will require both theorizing and the education that can come only from committed political struggle to change those material and social relations.

Fifth, as an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed exposes the relations among people as inhuman, and thus there is a call to political action. That is, the critique is not one that leads to a turning away from engagement but rather one that is a call for change and participation in altering power relations.

The critical steps are, first, using what we know about our lives as a basis for critique of the dominant culture and, second, creating alternatives. When the various "minority" experiences have been described, and when the significance of these experiences as a ground for critique of the dominant institutions and ideologies of society is better recognized, we will have at least the tools with which to begin to construct an account of the world sensitive to the realities of race and gender, as well as class. To paraphrase Marx, the point is to change the world, not simply to redescribe ourselves or reinterpret the world yet again.

---

25. I have made an extended case for such an epistemology in *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984), ch. 10.