

POSTMODERNISM AND THE CORRUPTION OF THE ACADEMIC INTELLIGENTSIA

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The destruction of truth is so advanced in capitalist culture that it should come as no surprise that even in the halls of Critical Theory, imagined *sanctum sanctorum* of independent consciousness and conscience, truth is now openly profaned and condescended to by some among those who, historically, have been charged with sheltering its sacred flame – the intellectuals. ‘The truth never dies, but is made to live as a beggar’, goes the Yiddish proverb, reminding us that truth has always suffered in this world. But no intellectual movement of recent memory has so beggared the truth as poststructuralism has.¹ With the postmodernist turn in theory, truth became a dirty word, and affirmation of truth came to be seen as a sign not of conviction but of one’s pitiable naiveté.

The tide began to turn against truth, and in postmodernism’s favour, in the late 1970s. It was then that French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault first boldly put truth in scare quotes. “‘Truth’”, he declared, ‘is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements “Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it’.² No longer would ‘the true’ be understood, as it had for millennia, as that which is ‘in accordance with fact or reality’. From now on, for a growing and influential sector of the intelligentsia, the true would be posed as *a problem to be solved*. The prerogative of truth was thus transformed from a right of the oppressed into an object of study for the technical or academic expert. Only the qualified ‘specific intellectual’ or ‘genealogist’ could speak meaningfully of truth – or rather, could investigate the conditions of the possibility of ‘truth’. What discourses give rise to the appearance of truth? How does ‘truth’, as a form of power, a system of ‘constraints’, function and manifest itself? How does knowledge, as power, disguise itself as truth, in order to achieve its effects? These questions are not uninteresting. The trouble is that poststructuralism

insists we are entitled to ask *only* such questions, and so conflates inquiry into the ways that discourse about truth produces particular effects with endorsing the claim that truth-telling as such is impossible.

This fateful move can be traced to Friedrich Nietzsche, the intellectual forefather of poststructuralism. The faith in truth of the Christian and Jewish traditions, Nietzsche held, was merely a distorted or intellectualized version of the frustrated will to power of the oppressed. It was for this reason that Nietzsche viewed truth with deep suspicion and hostility, seeing it as the origin of nihilism in European culture. 'There is no pre-established harmony between the furtherance of truth and the well-being of mankind', he wrote.³ Rather, only the free, unapologetic exercise of power – power as power over – over the self, over others – could provide a ground for new human values. But the ancient prophets and theologians were not wrong to believe that the oppressed, lacking power, have only the truth to console them. Deny the oppressed even this – the right to bear witness to the way things really are – and they have nothing. Surrender the possibility of truth, and one surrenders too the possibility of comparing the way things are with the way things ought to be. Nietzsche's contempt for justice (which is at root always and only a claim of truth against *power*), was thus an attack on the very desirability of general or social liberation.

As brilliant, if one-sided, as Nietzsche's critique of religious asceticism and repression was, it succumbed at the tail end of the 20th century to the very nihilism Nietzsche hated and tried to vanquish. Postmodernism, misappropriating Nietzsche, embraces a nihilism without borders. And this nihilism has been institutionalized by the bureaucratic institutions and modern pedantic types that Nietzsche abhorred. Since Foucault's death in 1984, truth has been continuously put on trial, interrogated, and found guilty of being 'truth' – an epiphenomenon of power, an artifact of discourse – by countless postmodernist academics who have made theory a profitable career. The effect of this highly ritualized repetition compulsion by the erstwhile 'leading' wing of the intelligentsia has been to blunt the critical imagination and to erode our capacity for truth-telling, precisely at humanity's hour of greatest need.

This is not to say that no poststructuralist thinker has ever contributed to the history of ideas. Our thinking has been improved, for example, by Foucault's insights into disciplinary apparatuses, by Derrida's discussion of the *pharmakon* and the equivocal nature of signs, and by Jean-François Lyotard's far-sighted comprehension of the postmodern condition of knowledge and the waning of the intellectual. A fair accounting, however, would have to conclude that such contributions have on the whole been modest, and that they have come to us exclusively from 'first wave' poststructuralist thinkers, not from their subsequent innumerable (and mediocre) epigones.

Worse, such an accounting would also have to conclude that the many critics of postmodernism have been basically right: that postmodernism is explicit where it should be vague or open-ended – e.g., on the subject of the best means of praxis, which it offers in prescriptive form (dispersion, difference, anti-strategicism, etc.) – and exasperatingly vague or noncommittal where it ought to be most explicit – e.g., on the ethical values and strategic goals of social movements.⁴ Such aporias and contradictions would be of little consequence but for the fact that many academics and some activists, who count themselves on the Left, turn first to postmodernism for theoretical guidance. As a result, the postmodernist sensibility has gravely damaged the critical instruments of not one but several classes of intellectuals.

POSTMODERNISM IN THE ACADEMY

The very formlessness of postmodernism, its theoretical equivocations and lack of an explicit canon or defined method, has in fact been integral to its phenomenal success in the academy. A protean cultural identity as much as a theoretical canon, postmodernism has weathered decades of hostility from all sides and persuasions – radical feminist, Marxist, liberal, conservative – by constantly changing form, taking on new disguises, adapting itself to new conditions. Like a virus travelling through the body of critical thought, postmodernism has succeeded by commandeering the disciplinary apparatus nearest to hand and turning it to account – stamping out genetic replicas of itself for export to other fields, other sub-disciplines, other geographies. Once settled in its discursive host, the virus takes hold again, blooms, sends off new messengers. Incubated in the elite universities of the capitalist metropolises, the institutional centres dominating the global trade routes of intellectual production and exchange, the virus has exported itself to the periphery. In the early years of the 21st century, postmodernism calved a new generation of postcolonial theorists on the Indian subcontinent, provided solace to dispirited activists in Latin America, attracted leftist academics disenchanted with Marxism, and struck the fancy of Islamic fundamentalists in Iran. If it is true, as Mark Twain wrote, that a lie will travel half way around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes, then let us begin by noting that no theory of recent vintage has travelled as fast, or as far, as postmodernism has.

But it is in the West, and above all in the United States, that postmodernism has left its greatest mark on the native intelligentsia. Just how great a mark is a subject of dispute. Barbara Epstein suggests that poststructuralism is so dominant in the humanities and social sciences that ‘theory’ is now essentially synonymous with the term ‘postmodern’.⁵ Poststructuralists themselves, however, tend to downplay their influence within the academy. Thus Dempsey and Rowe, replying to Epstein, write that poststructuralist

approaches are popular only within ‘marginalized theoretical subdisciplines of the marginalized divisions of the social sciences and humanities within US universities’, as if they were members of an embattled minority or vanishing breed.⁶ Such modesty, however, is difficult to credit. Far from being a small or insignificant movement, postmodernism is now *the primary field of knowledge for the education of the critical intelligentsia* in the United States. It is the leading theoretical tendency on the terrains of about two dozen different disciplines, subfields, and areas of study, including Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Rhetoric and Composition, English Literature, French Literature, American Studies, Film Studies, Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies (including Asian American Studies, African and African-American Studies, and Latin American Studies), Queer Theory, Media Studies, Communications, Music Theory, Science and Technology Studies, Theater and Performance Studies, Anthropology, Continental Philosophy, and Theology. Even in the social sciences – in Sociology, Economics, Geography, Psychology, and Political Science – among those academics who identify with the emancipatory or ‘critical’ tradition, postmodernism has begun to vie on at least equal ground with Marxism as the preferred theoretical ‘tool kit’. In Critical Legal Studies, post-structuralism is triumphant – the lingua franca of left law scholars.

The shrewd critic will be tempted to point out that such achievements, impressive though they are, are materially irrelevant to civilization and life as we know them on planet earth. This would be a mistake. The academic humanities, where postmodernism has furnished a series of comfortable rooms for itself, are not as marginal either to the contemporary academy, or to the reproduction of knowledge in society at large, as critics such as Dempsey and Rowe imply. One has only to realize that the annual conference of the Modern Language Association dwarfs that of the American Sociological Association – in 2004, 8,900 scholars attended the MLA, a mere 5,600 the ASA – to appreciate the key role played by the humanities in the reproduction of the intelligentsia. Millions of undergraduates still enrol in courses in the humanities, many thousands of books still get published by humanities scholars each year, and over the last quarter century the number of humanities conferences, events, and journals has skyrocketed. It is certainly true that the humanities and arts have nowhere near the status of, say, the applied sciences or mathematics. Yet even in the rather dire context of today’s neoliberalized university, the humanities remain of strategic importance, both within the overall political economy of academic knowledge and in the reproduction of the intelligentsia nationally and globally.⁷

To understand the role of postmodernism in the humanities, as well as the role of the humanities in the wider intellectual field, we first need to consider the problem of *mediation*. Intellectuals are so called not because they

work solely with their heads or intellects (instead of their hands or bodies), but because of their distinctive role in what Gramsci termed the 'ensemble of social relations' in which intellectual activity takes place and produces certain effects. Because the work intellectuals do is connected not to the production of goods and services, but to the circulation of ideas and culture, their function is primarily ideological. This does not, however, mean that they produce ideas in a vacuum. Whereas other kinds of knowledge workers have a more or less direct role in the production process – e.g., managing insurance accounts, working in sales or service – intellectuals have a *mediated* relationship to production. Specifically, the intellectual's labour is mediated 'by two types of social organization' – the state and civil society ('the ensemble of private organizations in society').⁸

Intellectuals today are far more mediated than they were in Gramsci's time. We must first note that there are far fewer 'organic' intellectuals today (i.e., intellectuals who developed naturally out of particular classes and social groups), and many more 'traditional' ones (individuals tied to disciplinary regimes and professional associations). Not to put too fine a point on it, the sympathetic intellectual today is far more likely to enter a Ph.D. program than, say, to assume a leadership role in a political party or social movement, or to take up arms (the present author not excluded). Whereas the critical or revolutionary intellectual of the past would have emerged out of a particular class, a national or ethnic identity, or a church or religious network, today's intellectuals are ostensibly 'free-floating' – deracinated thinkers without close connections to specific movements or identities. Or rather, they would be free-floating, were it not for the chains binding them to a limb of the state apparatus: the accredited, degree-granting college or university. The destruction of the public sphere, the decline of social movements, and the virtual disappearance of an independent press has shunted much of the intelligentsia into the academic system. There, the 'state nobility' finds its mental labour mediated through the tenure process and the competition for scarce federal grants and fellowships (the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and so on).

The bureaucratization and professionalization of knowledge over the last century – particularly the last half century – has in turn shaped the content and form of knowledge itself. 'Universities', Russell Jacoby observes, 'hire by committees: one needs degrees, references, the proper deference, a pleasant demeanor'. As such, they 'encourage a definite intellectual form'. Serious authors today are obliged to precede their tomes with 'a dense list of colleagues, friends, institutions, and foundations', as if to suggest 'that the author or book passed the test, gaining the approval of a specific network, which filtered out the unkempt and unacceptable'. The result is cautious

scholarship heavily cloaked in the armour of authority – ‘a book inspected by scores of scholars, published by a major university, and supported by several foundations’.⁹

Over the last twenty years, institutional constraints and pressures on scholarly knowledge have increased greatly. By the early 1980s, competition among the leading capitalist powers had made necessary a complete overhaul of higher education. The result has been the most significant and far-reaching reorganization of education – hence of the means of knowledge production – in the history of the Western university.¹⁰ ‘The corporatisation of higher education’, Diane Reay observes, ‘has enabled the market to invade and reshape the practices, organisation and values of universities across the globe’.¹¹ In this context, the rise and consolidation of postmodernism, what I have elsewhere termed ‘baroque theory’ – lavishly designed, opaque discourses with no social use value – is to be comprehended against the background of resource scarcity, growing socio-economic inequality within the academic system, and the commodification of knowledge, including within the humanities and arts.¹²

Prior to about 1970, higher education in the West had been legitimated ideologically in terms of the university’s role in fulfilling traditional humanistic ideals – increasing the storehouse of human knowledge, shaping individual character, creating an informed national citizenry, and so on. The fact that this mission was largely a fiction, or that these lofty ideals worked hand in glove to promote the interests of capital and the state, is not the point. What is significant is that the legitimation mechanisms of the university have been transformed almost overnight. The fundamental purpose of higher education today is seen as providing a pool of educated workers capable of out-competing workers in other national economies (as well as other states within the USA).¹³ As the professoriate is ‘casualized’, and programs and resources are reshuffled to highlight disciplines that generate income for the university (e.g., the biosciences and informatics), traditional humanities values and norms are being uprooted. Lindsey Waters, former editor in chief of one of the most prestigious university presses in the US, summed up the effects of these changes on humanities scholarship:

If humanists do not keep firmly in mind what they are about, no one else will. Humanists study books and artifacts in order to find traces of our common humanity [T]here is a causal connection between the corporatist demand for increased productivity and the draining from all publications of any significance other than as a number. The humanities are in a crisis now because many of the presuppositions about what counts are absolutely inimical

to the humanities. When books cease being complex media and become objects to quantify, then it follows that all the media that the humanities study lose value. Money has restructured the U.S. academy in its own image, and money is a blunt instrument.¹⁴

However, the market pressures decried by Waters – which have increased the sheer volume of humanities scholarship, while diminishing its overall quality – have paradoxically tended to benefit scholars who are media-savvy or otherwise adept at marketing their academic commodities. On the one hand, the subordination of knowledge production directly to the interests of capital, rather than (during the Cold War period) chiefly to the national security state, has placed enormous personal, economic, and professional pressures on scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Some, however, have profited personally – and often handsomely – from the new conditions by adopting novel discursive and professional strategies. Six figure salaries are no longer unusual among rising academic stars. I recently learned of a talented young academic who was offered close to \$190,000 to sign on with a top ethnic studies program in the US. In the new, intensely competitive environment of the humanities, only scholars who can package their works as ‘cutting-edge’ can maintain their cultural and academic capital.¹⁵ In this context, the perceived sexiness of poststructuralist-inflected knowledge products has led directly to postmodernism’s disproportionate intellectual sway over the humanities, as publishers flood their catalogues with works in cultural studies, postcolonial studies, etc. The rationalization of the university and the commodification of knowledge have generated the very conditions that have enabled poststructuralism to flourish.

The crisis in higher education and the fiscal disciplining of the professoriate has required scholars and academic administrators to develop new ways of justifying the mission of the humanities. One way has been to depict the humanities as a value-added source for technological innovation and entrepreneurialism. Postmodernism fits into this plan. At the University of California (the largest public university in the US), planners trumpet the importance of humanities research in boosting the University’s prestige through national rankings systems like those of the National Research Council. But they also now emphasize the role of the humanities in achieving regional and national competitiveness. The most recent master budget of the UC system thus makes special mention of the ‘systemwide Humanities Research Institute’ at UC Irvine, which it credits with ‘spearheading a transformative effort to bring technology to bear on cultural issues’ and working ‘closely with scientists and engineers to develop new approaches to interdisciplinary scholarship and collaborative research’.¹⁶ In 2004, two key figures

at the Institute, Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, published 'A Manifesto for the Humanities in a Technological Age' in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which they made a passionate case for the role of the humanities in illuminating the social implications of technology and culture. It is telling that the authors felt compelled to justify the humanities in terms of their use value for capitalism: '... [I]ndustry, more than anyplace else, wants not only highly trained scientists; it wants scientists who can also understand applications, intellectual property, issues of equity, human awareness, perspective, and other forms of critical analysis and logical thinking ...'.¹⁷

Significantly, of the twelve distinguished academics on the Board of the Humanities Research Institute at Irvine, six publish work in the area of poststructuralist cultural studies or postcolonialism.¹⁸ And of the dozens of workshops, seminars, colloquia, and conferences sponsored by the Institute, most have been on recognizably poststructuralist themes, or have featured scholars with a poststructuralist flair. As a multi-campus research program reporting directly to the Office of the UC President, the Humanities Research Institute at Irvine thus plays an important role in training a new cadre of postmodernist academics. In the last 17 years, the Institute has sponsored some 45 project teams, involved over 600 national and international fellows and participants, and hosted in residence over 500 scholars and other specialists representing over 60 disciplines in the humanities, arts, social sciences, technological fields, and sciences'.¹⁹

The Humanities Research Institute at Irvine is a good example of the convergence of postmodernism with two signal processes in the production and circulation of academic knowledge in the humanities today. The first is the increased level of contacts between humanities scholars and commercial industry. Of the sixteen members on the Institute's Board of Governors, eight are professors of Literature or Film (including the current president of a top liberal arts college), two are professors of sociology and ethnic studies, one is Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, one is CEO of a Holocaust foundation, one is director of the J. Paul Getty Trust, one is chairman of the Executive Committee of the Walt Disney Company, and one is director of an academic think-tank on technology issues whose corporate sponsors include IBM, Ericsson, Microsoft, Intel, Siemens, Applied Materials, and Texas Instruments. The fact that leading scholars now rub shoulders with Walt Disney World and the Getty Trust, while not ominous in itself, is indicative of a subtle but important shift in the institutional fortunes of critical thought. Critical knowledges, which in the 18th and 19th centuries were weapons deployed by organic revolutionaries against the state, are rapidly being transformed into value-added instruments of the state and capital. The integration of corporations, humanist intellectuals, private foundations, and

public education is now almost seamless. Postmodernism, with its chameleon-like ability to blend with its surroundings, has benefited from the new, corporate-enhanced environment. In what may be a sign of things to come, poststructuralist feminist theorist Lucy Suchman spent the mid-1990s working on the payroll of the Xerox research park in Palo Alto, applying postmodernist science studies discourse to developing new products for the Xerox Corporation.²⁰

The Humanities Research Institute is in fact only one of a number of national and international humanities think-tanks that serve as nexus points for the reproduction and dissemination of postmodernist culture – institutions which have played a pivotal role in shoring up the market value of the humanities, chiefly by legitimating postmodernism within the academic field.²¹ One key feature of this legitimation process, and the second material factor in the circulation of theoretical discourse today, is the rise of the academic star system. Rationalization and the competition for resources has combined with popular media culture to thrust a handful of academic scholars to the uppermost echelons of an increasingly inegalitarian and cutthroat humanities system. The rise of the academic star system in the humanities has not only greatly exacerbated inequalities within the university system and the humanities; it has also inflated the importance of poststructuralist approaches by setting up postmodernist theorists as exemplars for younger scholars to emulate. Typically, the curricula of the humanities institutes features the same ‘A-list’ of academic celebrities. At the School of Criticism and Theory, for example, a summer institute sponsored by the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, the majority of the School’s courses in 2005 were presided over by poststructuralist celebrities like Homi Bhabha, Joan Scott, Elizabeth Grosz, and Toril Moi.

The School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell also regularly takes out paid advertisements in academic journals, promising graduate students and young scholars the opportunity to ‘study with leading figures in critical theory’ and to ‘explore recent developments in literary and humanistic studies’. As the ads unabashedly make clear: ‘The program sets up levels of expectations of what it takes to be a top-flight academic and scholar, not only in the United States, but internationally’.²² Clearly, no graduate student or young professor in the humanities today can afford to be uninterested in learning what today’s expectations of being ‘a top-flight academic and scholar’ are. The intellectual is now forced, like any other consumer, to participate in what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘the endless chase for the appearances of use-value in which ... commodities are wrapped’.²³ And of the available scholarly commodities in the humanities today, postmodernism still fetches the highest price. There still remain humanities and social science institutes that have managed to

avoid celebrity worship and poststructuralist canards alike. To give but one example, the Women's Studies Department at Duke University (perhaps the best programme of its kind in the US) continues to sponsor institutes and conferences that are staunchly materialist, politically engaged, and historically grounded.²⁴ But most of the leading centres for the distribution of 'critical' theory in the United States, Canada, and Europe – in cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, San Francisco, New York, Dublin, and Cardiff – still place the poststructuralist star at the centre of their philosophical cosmos.

POSTMODERNISM'S SCHOLARLY HABITUS

I have suggested that postmodernism has played a formative ideological role in the education of the contemporary intelligentsia, particularly its critical or radical wing. But one of the most striking aspects of postmodernism is that it functions less as a set of ideas or intellectual movement than as an *ethos* or 'habitus', a 'structuring structure' of practice that delimits the experiences of a particular culture.²⁵ Postmodernism is at once a milieu, an epistemological orthodoxy, and a shared common sense about the world. It is defined not by principles so much as practices: in Foucault's terms, regimes of 'truth' and ways of knowing the world, habits of bodily comportment and affect. This is why the most empirically satisfying accounts of life and thought in the academic humanities are to be found not in scholarly journals but in the satirical campus novels of writers like David Lodge, John L'Heureux, or James Hynes. Only vivid literary scenes, it seems, are able to convey fully the curious behaviour of the postmodern university intelligentsia.

One of the consequences of the rise of the academic star system (of which postmodernism has been the prime beneficiary and exemplar) is the reduction of the theorist to the status of a scarce commodity. The star system represents the penetration of the university system by mass popular culture and commodity fetishism. 'The individual who in the service of the spectacle is placed in stardom's spotlight', Guy Debord wrote, 'is in fact the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others.... [He] renounces all autonomy in order to identify himself with the general law of obedience to the course of things'.²⁶ Indeed, the academic star is not so much a person as the fetish of a person: a charismatic body anointed by the market as a sign of academic capital.²⁷ Such a star or superstar not only commands attention, he or she distorts entire fields of knowledge, like a black hole warping academic time-space. Less prominent scholars in the system are interpellated as voyeurs or remote fans of the *spectacle* of theory. The leading stars' names themselves, cited repeatedly by other scholars, often serve as little more than 'markers of truth', ways of 'authorizing' scholarly procedure.²⁸ Sycophancy, as well as intellectual

standardization, cannot help but result. The star's very proximity to power (academic capital) makes her or him coveted by graduate students, which in turn leads to corruption of the ethical relation between teacher and taught. Bourdieu observed of the fate of knowledge within highly competitive and hierarchical fields:

The boldness or even rashness statutorily granted to some provides the best of justifications and the safest of alibis for the institutional prudence which is incumbent on the greater number. The cult of 'brilliance', through the facilities which it procures, the false boldness which it encourages, the humble and obscure labours which it discourages, is less opposed than it might seem to the prudence of *academica mediocritas*, to its epistemology of suspicion and resentment, to its hatred of intellectual liberty and risk....²⁹

At the end of his first year in graduate school at one of the 'flagship' humanities programs in the University of California system, a Persian Marxist friend of mine who, years before, had had to flee Iran after being sentenced to death there by the Islamic regime, angrily remarked that 'There is more intellectual orthodoxy [in his graduate program] than under the Ayatollah!' As this anecdote suggests, postmodernism, notwithstanding its veneer of radicalism and iconoclasm, in practice functions as a cultural force that stifles genuine critical inquiry and creative thought and penalizes those who dissent from its ideological frame.

Frederic Jameson has argued that a symptom of postmodernity is the waning of affect.³⁰ This is not quite correct, however. From the shallow depths of postmodern or commodity culture there erupt potent displays of aggression and hostility. The struggle for scarce university resources exacerbates the anxiety and insecurity; hence too, the aggressive instincts of a portion of the intelligentsia, which the postmodern subculture thrives on. If the personal is political, then in the highly competitive world of academia the personal is frequently also pathological. This is especially true of the contemporary, high-pressure humanities program, an autoclave where only pathogens of the stoutest genetic build can survive, thrive, and multiply. The liquidation of humanism in theory parallels and mirrors increasingly *inhuman* relations between and among graduate students, faculty, administrators, and university staff. In this regard, the received poststructuralist wisdom, that 'modern society cannot be saved',³¹ perpetually leaves social practice vulnerable to scarcely concealed authoritarian impulses. It is telling that Michel Foucault's instinctive response to the paroxysm of the Iranian Revolution was initially not to sympathize with the leftists and feminists who participated in that

upheaval, but to praise the extremist Islamist followers of the Ayatollah Khomeini. This was not simply an oversight on Foucault's part, but a stance that flowed organically out of his profound scepticism toward all modern institutions and norms, including those of representative democracy. As Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson remind us:

... [S]cholars often assume that Foucault's suspicion of utopianism ... hostility to grand narratives and universals ... and his stress on difference and singularity rather than totality would make him less likely than his predecessors on the Left to romanticize an authoritarian politics that promised radically to refashion from above the lives and thought of a people However, his Iran writings showed that Foucault was not immune to the [same] type of illusions that so many Western leftists had held with regard to [the USSR and China].³²

Foucault's sympathy for the Islamic militants has its counterpart today in the offhanded contempt with which some young academics now treat the very idea of democracy – i.e., not merely 'really existing' democracy's imperfect or distorted practice.

Another striking aspect of the postmodernist habitus is the way that post-modern philosophy's casual indifference to truth as an ontological category – that is, as a means of ascribing signs or meaning to matters of fact, the Real – gets mirrored in the bad faith with which postmodernism's advocates engage in conversation and debate. I still recall, for example, a conversation I had with a fellow graduate student while attending a doctoral program in the humanities in the early 1990s. The student, who had apprenticed herself to a leading poststructuralist scholar, announced in seminar that truth did not exist, and that the assembled company had no business talking about it as though it did. At the break, I asked the student what she would say if I told her that, in the middle of our class, I had seen Abraham Lincoln open the door to our classroom, take a stroll around, and leave. Wouldn't she then have to assess whether such a thing really happened, or whether I had imagined it? 'Not at all', she confidently replied. 'I would be concerned for your safety and would try to protect you. Because we live in a disciplinary society that would try to interpellate you as "mad"'. The theorist-in-training here was not simply applying Foucault's critique of the discourse of madness; she was tacitly disavowing her participation in a shared or common *human condition* in which questions of truth are an inescapable and vital feature of our lives. An obscure Cartesianism lurks here: the poststructuralist's self-image is that of a disembodied mind hovering above the play of mere mortal events. Yet

presumably the graduate student in this case did not doubt the existence of her TIAA-CREF benefits account, and was careful to check the accuracy – truthfulness – of its balance.

In my own graduate school experience, the students most insistent on the point that truth was nothing but a discourse also happened to be the ones most credulous toward occult systems like astrology. My postmodernist friends spent countless hours running horoscope programs on their computers, and always swore to the accuracy and veracity of their astrological charts, even as they disputed all materialist and scientific descriptions of reality. Stendhal's ironic depiction of Fabrizio, the credulous young protagonist of *The Charterhouse of Parma*, a man who prides himself on being intellectually sophisticated but naively clings to his own brand of superstition, comes to mind: 'Fabrizio's reasoning could penetrate no further He was far from devoting his time to patient consideration of the real particularities of things in order to divine their true causes. Reality seemed to him flat and muddy ...'.³³

In point of fact, poststructuralists exhort their followers *not* to inquire into causality – or politics. Thus Kirstie McClure:

The task at hand is to rethink the political character of the desire for comprehensive causal theory as a reflection of the 'truth' of the social world – to examine, rather than yield to, the supposition that 'theory' is a guarantor of practical imperatives, a fund of justifications for instrumental action, and an authoritative foundation.... Rather, in other words, than restricting attention to 'theories' as intellectual constructs bent on representing the truth of the world, we might attend to 'theorizing' as itself an activity ... a political practice always and inescapably implicated with power. 'Theorizing' in this sense is always contestable, not simply or narrowly in terms of the 'truth' of its content or the 'accuracy' of its representations, but more broadly in terms of its filiations, disaffiliations, and equivocations with the dominant understanding of 'the political'.³⁴

The author goes on to suggest that 'what is at stake in these contests is a matter neither of explanatory adequacy nor of political efficacy ... but a matter of breathing room for the articulation of new knowledges, new agencies, and new practices ...'.³⁵ Needless to say, however, to suggest that theory should be purged of its traditional concern with 'practical imperatives', as well as a fundamental concern for truth and accuracy, is to rule out placing theoretical reflection in the service of *human beings*, rather than the preoc-

cupations of the theorist. What comes to matter is professionalization, not liberation. Hence the otherwise incomprehensible advice of the senior post-colonial anthropologist who warns graduate students in Aboriginal Studies not to focus on oppression or injustice. Theory, he writes, should not be 'based on victimisation or oppression (symptomatic Recovery of Ideology – in other words, 'this is what's wrong'), but [on] a more affirmative [narrative] based on becoming, dissemination, and exchange'.³⁶

THE POSTMODERN WORLD OF THE LIBERAL ARTS STUDENT

Postmodernism has had an incalculable impact not only on the academic intelligentsia (doctoral students and faculty), but also on ordinary undergraduates. For an increasing number of students, postmodernism is their first – and in many cases last – exposure to critical thought. Such students typically have not had the benefit of prior training in heuristic disciplines or methods, and are not assigned texts critical of poststructuralist approaches. The consequence is that 'the best and the brightest' of the middle and upper classes are being educated into a mode of discourse that is relativistic and sceptical. As one postmodernist academic writes to another in David Lodge's novel, *Nice Work* (on the occasion of splitting up with her, and leaving academia altogether):

Poststructuralist theory is a very intriguing philosophical game for very clever players. But the irony of teaching it to young people who have read almost nothing except their GCE set texts and *Adrian Mole*, who know almost nothing about the Bible or classical mythology, who cannot recognize an ill-formed sentence, or recite poetry with any sense of rhythm – the irony of teaching them about the arbitrariness of the signifier in week three of their first year becomes in the end too painful to bear³⁷

Students exposed to postmodernism typically have one of two reactions. Either they are bewildered and appalled by it, or they come away mesmerized. For students who sense they are being sold a bill of goods but have no native intellectual or disciplinary ground from which to raise objections to the postmodernist project, the experience can be truly dispiriting and confusing. A returning undergraduate student I once knew told me of her demoralization when, on the first day of a women's studies class on sexuality, her 'sex positive' postmodernist cultural studies instructor proceeded to screen multiple clips from porn videos, including from a 'snuff' film purporting to show actual women being murdered. When one of the younger students in

the class has raised her hand and asked why they were being shown women being killed, and in what way this could be considered erotic, the instructor replied, 'If you're not prepared to have fun, you shouldn't be in this class'. But many other students are attracted by postmodernism's self-referential playfulness, its apparent iconoclasm and lack of respect for tradition. For this group of students, postmodernist theory resonates with the nihilism of mass popular culture – the fast-moving, 'hip', faux alternative, cynical pose of MTV, Beavis and Butthead, *South Park*, and first-person shooter video games.³⁸ These students are rewarded by their instructors with the pleasure of the arcane – honorary membership in the priesthood of Theory.

More than this, they come to believe that they are involved in an important *political* project. For example, female undergraduates encountering women's studies or literature courses are taught that it is *political* to dismiss second wave (liberal and radical) feminism as outmoded, or to eschew the feminist pedagogy of consciousness-raising. Young 'post-feminists' are more comfortable discussing 'the lack' or 'the *differend*' than the material circumstances and experiences of being a woman in society today – e.g., fraternity violence and date rape, the feminization of poverty, the sexual objectification of women by the media, the pervasiveness of pornography. Actor Maggie Gyllenhaal, who majored in English Literature at Columbia University in the late 1990s, has said in interviews that she was drawn to her role in the film *The Secretary*, in which she played a submissive office worker who becomes empowered through sado-masochist humiliation at the hands of her boss, by the film's 'political agenda' – the fact 'that it was intended to be transgressive and to push something forward'.³⁹ Gyllenhaal took the role in part, she says, 'to fight against all those old-school feminists' (i.e., those who used to think that it was bad politics for women to want to be dominated). 'I began to think that my entire college education was preparing me to defend the politics of this movie ...'.⁴⁰

But postmodernism now affects virtually all undergraduates, not just those majoring in literature, through the writing and composition programmes and centres that proliferated on college and university campuses in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹ Many instructors and lecturers in such programmes, which now serve as the first point of contact between many undergraduate students and self-reflexive or theoretical bodies of knowledge, have adopted postmodernist theories as a way of addressing multicultural and pluralist themes in the classroom. Much of the critical literature in Composition, Education, Rhetoric, Writing, and Art Education now draws on poststructuralist figures like Derrida, Bakhtin, Cixous, Kristeva, and Lyotard.⁴² The new writing critics champion approaches to literacy and writing that emphasize disjuncture, plurality, and a pedagogy carefully shorn of normative judgment or

standards. That is, rather than teach students to be able to discriminate analytically, or to notice the difference between the truth and a lie, educators stress an 'expressivist' ideology that privileges individual expression over critical thinking. Thus Alice Gillam, for example, in her influential essay, 'Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective', praised Bakhtin for celebrating the 'centrifugal forces [of] ... *heteroglossia* [which] ... perpetually destabilize language through multiple meanings, varying contexts, and the free play of dialects'.⁴³ According to Gillam, a good writing tutor is not one who helps students to realize a norm of academic or logical discourse, but rather to achieve 'self-expression'. The enemy is univocality – anything which silences or obscures the 'multiple voices' in the student's own text. For, she writes (paraphrasing and quoting Bakhtin), 'the fact that we ... can never arrive at certain answers nor establish a final, 'unitary identity' is 'not to be lamented', but rather to be celebrated'.⁴⁴

Similarly, the well-known education and writing theorist Kathleen Berry declares that 'the democratic negotiation of, and resistance to injustice' leads not to 'unity or totality as in authoritarianism and liberal humanism, but [to] the complexity of author(ities) in postmodernism...'.⁴⁵

No longer is the teacher/textbook/society/institution the sole authority. Teaching/learning in the postmodern (con)text blurs dominant author(ity)... Teacher, teaching practices, assignments, testing, and evaluation will no longer be seen as authoritative distribution centers and measurements of knowledge ... Modern infrastructures of what and who counts as excellent in teaching and learning will be dismantled.⁴⁶

While scholars like Berry and Gillam are undoubtedly well-meaning, it is extremely disturbing just the same to see theorists conflating authoritarianism with 'liberal humanism', or eschewing forms of undergraduate instruction that might provide students with a cognitive handle on the confusion, nihilism, and alienated forms of culture and economy that envelop them. In fact, cognitive confusion – the dropping of socio-economic and historical context – has replaced the teaching of argument and of what, for want of a better expression, we might term the sociological imagination. College composition and writing programmes have in this way become ground zero for the postmodernists' fissioning of undergraduate student consciousness. When enshrined as pedagogy or the philosophy of education, postmodernism leads college instructors and educators to teach their students not about *power* – that is, about the merest facts of our social existence – but about the impossibility of knowing anything at all. 'I hope', writes yet another writing theorist, 'that

we postmodernists can hold our ground ... in the open field of a decentralized community where there are no hierarchies, only *ad hoc* constructions, no answers, only questions'.⁴⁷ Similarly, the editor of the online Deleuzian journal *Rhizomes* praises 'creative and critical practices that encourage us to unite ideas that seem most disparate or incompatible, thereby deliberately *dislocating us from the known*' (emphasis added). Academic practices, she writes, should 'be unpredictable, performative, and incomplete'.⁴⁸

The postmodernist educator's avowed concern for radical democracy in the classroom has one foot planted in poststructuralism and the other in the pedagogy of Paolo Freire. But Freire, a socialist, never relinquished his hold on reality, nor on his fervent belief that it was the responsibility of the educator to help the student develop a dialectical understanding of social structure. Education, he wrote, should never be conceived as the transmission of an ideological orthodoxy, but as the cultivation of the student's own 'critical transitivity'. 'The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them ... by soundness of argumentation ... by accepting what is valid in both old and new'.⁴⁹ Thus, while Freire emphasized equality between student and teacher, he never failed to acknowledge the crucial role of the educator in coaxing the student toward a more comprehensive awareness of power. Postmodernists, by contrast, seem positively hostile to the notion that undergraduates should be taught how to assess arguments analytically, or to perceive relations between particular phenomena and the material and cultural totality in which they appear.

This obsession with incomplete knowledge, coupled with making a fetish of 'democratic process', has been especially damaging to feminist pedagogy. An obsessive poststructuralist feminist emphasis on *process* and method often comes at the expense of normative instruction and dialectical inquiry. Meg Woolbright, for example, relates the story of how she 'corrected' her feminist student tutor's impulse to show her young charges how patriarchal values were expressed in a particular work of fiction. By imposing her feminist reading on the text, the tutor was 'reinforcing institutional norms of silence and obedience' and 'the values of hierarchy and objectivity'.⁵⁰ Precisely *as* feminist educators, Woolbright writes, we must 'admit ... that the dichotomization between feminist and patriarchal practices is a false one', and that there is no 'right' way to write: the tutor errs when she reinforces 'the positivistic, patriarchal value that there is a "correct" reading ...'.⁵¹ In other words, rather than telling students that their interpretation of a text, or reality, might be wrong, we should help students discover and express their own feelings

and experiences. Postmodernism thus leads to the intellectual's abdication of responsibility precisely for the *education* of consciousness. The student's own self-expression, rather than her understanding and politicization, becomes the *raison d'être* of pedagogy.

FROM ACADEMIA TO ACTIVISM

Postmodernism has seriously compromised the ability of academic feminist thinkers to critique patriarchal violence and the objectification of women.⁵² But if postmodernism has been damaging to feminist thought in the university, it has also had a palpable impact on activist feminist communities outside academia. Radical feminists like Irene Reti have pointed out that the rise of poststructuralist theories of sexuality has both legitimated sado-masochistic and pornographic practices within the gay and lesbian movement in ways that disturbingly mirror the violence of patriarchy at large, and has depoliticized feminism and the women's movement in the US.⁵³ Even feminist critiques of male violence against women have been blunted by the postmodernist sensibility.

On December 6, 1989, Marc Lépine, a frustrated would-be engineer, murdered fourteen young women students at the École Polytechnique in Montreal, after lining them up and shouting that they were 'all a bunch of feminists'. Reeling from the disaster, a group of Canadian feminists responded with *The Montreal Massacre*, a collection of feminist essays, poems, and letters published shortly after the event. Contributors to the book movingly recounted feelings of pain and outrage, or else offered material analyses of the sexual and political economy of Canadian patriarchy that gave rise to Lépine's violence. However, one essay struck a decidedly different note. Invoking the highly abstract, distanced language of Lacan's poststructuralist theories, a psychoanalyst named Monique Panaccio wrote:

... Marc Lépine's insane act was directed at *jouissance*, which we are all supposed to say 'no' to, and that is why, beyond the tragedy for those who are personally affected by the loss of a dear one, this act is intolerable. While it is part of Marc Lépine's personal life story, it also touches each and every one of us in our own life story, causing us to *imagine* once again that there is a way to thumb our noses at castration and the Law, thus awakening... all that always remains of our grief over our separation from the Mother's body, and showing us both the mortal outcome of its failure and the mortal result of transgressing it Marc Lépine accomplished what is for all of us both desirable and taboo: incest and murder.⁵⁴

According to Panaccio, L epine’s act was not, in the first instance, an enactment of misogynistic violence, but was a case of ‘Madness ... running wild’, a madness which ‘has eluded social control and is attacking the very foundations of order’.⁵⁵ While admitting that the widespread feminist view of L epine as representative of a ‘kind of male thinking which threatens women with execution if they reject the place which keeps them socially inferior’ was ‘not entirely wrong’, Panaccio suggested that ‘the truth is surely not so simple’.⁵⁶ L epine’s attack was directed not against women or feminists (the simplistic, perhaps even simple-minded, view) but against ‘*jouissance*’ – play outside the Law. To understand the ‘truth’ of L epine’s action, we must acknowledge it as an event unavailable to conventional means of description. ‘This is the point at which all discourse comes to a complete halt, whether psychiatric, feminist, psychological or other. This is the point where a limit is irreversibly, irreparably transgressed, where the Symbolic and the Imaginary topple over This is the point where love and hate merge in the site of what is unnameable’.⁵⁷ Having effectively declared L epine’s act to be *historically* unintelligible, Panaccio now implicates modern society as such in ‘the unnameable’ – i.e., in the facticity of the fourteen young corpses. ‘Marc L epine’, she concludes, ‘accomplished what is *for all of us* both desirable and taboo: incest and murder’.⁵⁸ L epine’s atrocity, in other words, was a crypto-transgressive or subversive act that enacted our own collective fantasies (men’s and women’s alike).

What we see here is the osmosis of academic poststructuralism by the non-academic grassroots. Clinical psychotherapy has begun to be colonized by poststructuralist rhetoric.⁵⁹ The same dynamic can be observed elsewhere. Consider the following three passages. The first two are by academic theorists, Homi Bhabha and Hardt and Negri, while the third is by a self-described ‘nineteen-year-old radical black feminist-student-activist-educator’ (and fourth-year undergraduate at UC Berkeley), who is heavily involved in the ‘abolitionist’ anti-prison movement:

[The] emphasis on the disjunctive present of utterance ... allows the articulation of subaltern agency as relocation and reinscription This is the historical movement of hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time-lag of sign/symbol which is a space in-between the rules of engagement.⁶⁰

... [We] might say that the sovereignty of Empire ... is realized at the margins, where borders are flexible and identities are hybrid and fluid In fact, center and margin seem continually to be shifting positions, fleeing any determinate locations. We could even

say that the process itself is virtual and that its power resides in the power of the virtual.⁶¹

... I wish to speak from the margins [I]t is necessary for us to locate and deconstruct the iterative space from which power flows, recognizing and continually addressing the fact that space (and, by extension, spatial metaphor) is in constant flux.⁶²

What is significant is not only that the anti-prison activist now speaks in a Foucauldian idiom, but that she also affirms and reproduces the central tenets of the poststructuralist orthodoxy – a collapsed sense of temporality ('the now'), the spatial indeterminacy of power, and a prejudice against building alternative institutions. Postmodernist ways of knowing can in fact be found in a growing number of social movements. Many on-line activist communities and blogs now bandy about poststructuralist rhetoric or ideas without seeming to have any direct knowledge of, or connection to, the academic humanities. The Hacktivist website, for example, describes computer hacking as a 'rhizomic' form of political action, invoking a term popularized by Deleuze.

Postmodernism has even seeped into that most putatively universal of social movements – the movement for international human rights. When I recently engaged a friend of mine, a senior manager at one of the world's largest international human rights organizations, over questions of theory, he wrote: '... I don't find all of poststructuralism to be so negative. I think there is a liberatory potential in undermining Absolute Truth systems, including those of the Liberal Centre or the Authoritarian Left. I suspect a lot of these Truth systems take science as their archetype, and as an ex-quantum physicist I would certainly argue that the Truth claims of scientific ontology are untenable...'.⁶³ On the one hand, I agreed with my friend's further assertion (in the same email) that, 'In a post-Enlightenment spirit, I'm tempted to describe Human Rights, for example, as a myth – but in the positive sense of Sorel's 'Myth of the General Strike' (i.e. as an inspirational emblem rather than a concrete existent)'. On the other hand, I was struck by the fact that even members of the technical intelligentsia (my friend works in information technology) have come to think of scientific claims as mere narratives.

What is going on here? How do we account for the remarkable intrusion of an effete, complicated, and self-contradictory philosophical movement into the mainstream of grassroots activism? How has postmodernism succeeded in displacing what came before – namely, the entire Western Marxist tradition? A good part of the answer is that the historical crisis of socialism and left social movements in the 1980s and 1990s left a gaping hole in theories

of praxis, a void which poststructuralism was able to fill. Confronted with the apparent waning of the socialist tradition and workers' movements, on the one hand, and the rise of the political right and fundamentalists on the other, activists at the grassroots have understandably been eager to embrace reassuring (if facile) narratives that seem both iconoclastic and faintly optimistic. The tales postmodernism tells – of the inevitability but also the virtue of movement fragmentation; of unending historical indeterminacy and flux; of the impossibility of knowledge of the totality; of the positive effects of globalization (border crossings, hybridity, and so on) – are appealing precisely because they seem to mirror the experience of postmodernity itself. Here lies the obscure truth of postmodernist theory – in both form and content postmodernism really does mimic the actual conditions of late capitalism. That this mimicry also faithfully reproduces the alienated social conditions, lies, and fragmented time-space of capitalism is less often acknowledged.

On the other side of the equation, many poststructuralist theorists themselves have undoubtedly craved connection. They too have wanted to 'make a difference' in a world where paths to effectual political and social struggle have been occluded or otherwise blocked. In historical psychoanalytic terms, we might speculate that postmodernism as an intellectual movement represents a form of collective psychic and affective flight from the despair and anxiety and denial generated by ecological destruction, mounting social chaos, and the loss of the dream of 1968. The legacy of the sixties movement has been ambiguous, as Isaac Balbus observes: 'Both the longing for (an idealized version of) what has been lost and the (seemingly) sober message that nothing valuable was ever really lost ward off the sorrow – and the guilt – that would inevitably accompany a fully embodied awareness of the magnitude of our loss. Both serve, in other words, to defend against the deeply difficult but absolutely indispensable task of mourning (what we used to call) the Movement'. According to Balbus, 'the atrophy of our imagination is a symptom of our *political depression*'.⁶⁴ Postmodernism, similarly, can be seen as an adaptive response by critical intellectuals to their own personal and political losses – even a form of what Marcuse termed 'repressive desublimation'.

While some academic postmodernists have warned of the 'contamination' of theory by practice, most have on the contrary taken pains to make themselves politically relevant.⁶⁵ There has in fact been growing fraternization between academics and activists in recent years, as postmodernist thinkers take on the role of *savants* to grassroots social movements. In recent years, for example, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has participated in grassroots conferences on the 'Prison-Industrial Complex', while poststructuralist authors of such works as *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality* and *The Transubstantiation of Queer Identity in Postmodern Capitalism* have appeared

alongside veteran organizers at the ‘Renewing the Anarchist Tradition’ conference. In a similar vein, Michael D. Hardt, a Deleuzean theory maven at Duke University, has been fêted at meetings of the World Social Forum.

With the advent of new information technologies and the internet, academic postmodernism has also begun to seep into alternative popular youth culture. Numerous websites now actively promote postmodernism to young people and activists, creating a matrix of left politics, pop culture, and postmodernism. Often, such sites are maintained by intellectuals with formal schooling in poststructuralist theory. The manager of a website called ‘The Postmodern Anarchist’ has a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies in Education from Ohio State.⁶⁶ Another leading site is Voxygen, a popular youth- and women-oriented website with links to leading poststructuralist and cultural studies thinkers. Designed and maintained by Laura Sells, an Assistant Professor of Communications at Louisiana State University, the site describes itself as ‘a compilation of interests in feminist cultural politics’ with a special focus ‘on issues relating to generations X and Y, popular culture, and virtual culture’. And its guiding premise? ‘... [T]hat power is everywhere and nowhere, that the codes that have defined our voices and identities can be identified and rewritten...’. The Voxygen site integrates links and paeans to poststructuralist feminist icons (one page is devoted to an ‘Ode to Donna Haraway’), while forging purposive links with other sites featuring alternative female youth subcultures – S/M lesbian pornography, video gaming culture, and so on.⁶⁷ But the site also features links to traditional ‘left’ and liberal political organs like FAIR, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and even the AFL-CIO – further evidence, if any was needed, that the confusion or conflation of postmodernism with liberal and left values as such is now functionally complete.

THE DEATH OF POSTMODERNISM?

In place of reason and argument – in short, dialectics – postmodernists celebrate cognitive confusion, ‘paralogy’, and an aesthetics of fragmentation.⁶⁸ Postmodernism obfuscates and muddies perceptual reality, rather than clarifying it.⁶⁹ Hence composition theorist Ruth Ray’s assertion that theory should be understood as “‘a lens, a philosophical perspective, a stance’”, one that is ‘narrative rather than paradigmatic’ – ‘an anti-foundationalist epistemology’ rather than a ‘method’.⁷⁰

But theory is, on the contrary, precisely at its best when it serves as a paradigm of knowing, in Thomas Kuhn’s specific sense of a perceptual framework providing the scientist or observer with a means for discerning patterns of meaning or order amidst an infinity of otherwise random and unintelligible phenomena. As Kuhn argued, ‘neither scientists nor laymen learn to see the

world piece-meal or item by item.... [Rather] both scientists and laymen sort out whole areas together from the flux of experience'.⁷¹ What paradigmatic theories do, then, is to provide the engaged observer with a means for discriminating between useful and useless data. As Antonio Gramsci wrote in his prison notebooks:

...[R]eality is teeming with the most bizarre coincidences, and it is the theoretician's task to find in this bizarreness new evidence for his theory, to 'translate' the elements of historical life into theoretical language, but not vice versa, making reality conform to an abstract schema.... (Leonardo knew how to discover number in all the manifestations of cosmic life, even when the eyes of the ignorant saw only change and disorder.)⁷²

In Gramsci's view, then, the role of the 'critical' intellectual – the revolutionary – is primarily to discern patterns of significance in history and culture, in order to identify more or less promising lines of action. Effective political knowledge is always rooted in a perception of the totality or gestalt of historical probabilities – in the complex interplay of economic and cultural factors, class interests, and human passion and will, over time. It is not a question of our being able to predict the future 'scientifically', but of understanding, as accurately and fully as we are able, the subtle combination of forces that structure the field of meaning and which therefore are likely to give rise to one or another phenomenon. This much radical or revolutionary theory has in common with other varieties of human political or strategic thought. What differentiates the critical theorist from other theorists or intellectuals is, first, her or his belief that society – the ensemble of social relations – can be changed, and second, the moral conviction that it ought to be changed. This may seem a trivial point, but it in fact places the critical intellectual 'in' the world in a qualitatively different way. The normative commitments of the critical intellectual – the subjective will to know the world in order to change it – enables a particular way of seeing and perceiving.

If we define critical theory in this way, as a means for making history and world intelligible *in order that we might act consciously to change history and world*, then the inadequacies of postmodernism become apparent. Postmodernism is a doctrine that systematically renders intelligibility impossible. That is its message, as well as its method. Knowing and not-knowing – the distinction is irrelevant to it. If Marxists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were overly confident about the power of thought to arrive at mastery of the totality – and they often were – today's generation of critical theorists commits the opposite mistake, stripping thought of the right and ability to

know the world at all. But without the ability to think clearly and critically about the nature of existing power (and about how to defeat it) we are blind to historical possibility. It is therefore ironic that poststructuralism has become conflated with 'theory' as such, because at root it is profoundly *anti*-theoretical. Like the vulgar Marxism that it both arose out of and developed in reaction against, poststructuralism's doctrines have reduced complex social and historical problems to a catechism of pre-digested formulas, mechanistic banalities, and unexamined and frequently tautological propositions concerning the nature of society, power, and the subject. And its few modest theoretical contributions can never begin to compensate us for the harm done to critical thought by the destructive conceits that postmodernism has spawned. I am speaking of the movement's naive spontaneism and amorality; of the facile disavowal, by figures like Foucault and Lyotard, of the need for political leadership on the Left; of the grand narcissism of the postcolonial intellectuals (whose celebration of their own 'hybridity' and 'border crossings' obscures the traumas of less privileged refugees and economic immigrants made rootless by capital); of the deconstructionists' search-and-destroy mission against empathy and imaginative identification in literary studies; of the repellant defence of pornography and 'debasement' by poststructuralist feminists; of the rococo Lacanian fetish of the dis-integrated subject; of the refusal of the language of universals – now *déclassé* concepts like humanism, liberation, revolution, and totality.

Postmodernist critics have ridiculed universal metanarratives and truth, even while sombrely discussing such weightless metaphysical conceits as *episteme*, phallogocentrism, *différance*, and 'the lack' – the contemporary theorist's version of ectoplasm and ether. They have systematically privileged local, particular movements over global and universal ones, without considering the exigencies or needs of actual practice. Unaware of or indifferent to its own internal contradictions and elisions, postmodernism has preached epistemological scepticism and radical historicism, all the while remaining innocent of its own social determinations. But most damning of all, when it comes to offering us something concrete, something really *useful* with which to gain traction on the great intellectual, social, and political problems of our day, postmodernism falls silent. Here, postmodernism truly distinguishes itself: unlike virtually every other intellectual movement or ideology of the past – anarchism, socialism, liberalism, libertarianism, conservatism, communism, fascism – postmodernism offers a theory neither of society nor of politics and the state.

In the past, such obvious deficiencies in the doctrine have not affected its fortunes. But reality may finally have begun to intrude upon the postmodern idyll. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States

postmodernists have been increasingly embarrassed by their inability to say anything of political or social substance.⁷³ There are even tantalizing signs that postmodernists themselves know or suspect that the party is over. The Society for the Humanities at Cornell, for example, has made its theme for 2006-07 'Historicizing the Global Postmodern'. In that program's description, a new defensiveness, a new ambivalence or anxiety seems to hover over the entire poststructuralist project, like a descending shroud:

If we can speak of a post-modern moment that enabled humanists to engage critically the enlightenment logic of western modernity, then now is the time to historicize the logic attributed to the post-modern itself In a global context, has the post-modern de-centering of the humanistic subject, critique of enlightenment, and apparent embrace of fragmentation and hybridity acted as an emancipatory or conservative force? How has the postmodern challenging of the distinction between high and low culture, between the oppositional stance and the subversively ironic or parodic one, contributed to new modes of consuming and producing global commodity culture? And why, and in what political contexts, has blame for the shrinking of public space, the demise of public culture and, indeed, the perceived retreat from public engagement of the humanities themselves, been laid at the door of post-modernism? ... Arguably, the theoretical reach, seduction, and ambiguity marking the concept of the postmodern are symptoms of a certain privilege it has exercised Has the post-modern radically undermined, or rather revitalized and consolidated, Eurocentrism and new forms of cultural imperialism?⁷⁴

Whether this self-agonizing project of reflection will lead to a genuine rethinking of the postmodernist project, or whether it will simply provide poststructuralists with new fodder for commodity innovation, remains to be seen: behind every narcissist's love of self is the repressed terror of having to face the true self. However, were postmodernism to gaze at its own reflection in the mirror of theory, it would be forced to acknowledge its *own* historical overdeterminations, its own ideologies, myths, and *episteme*. It would then certainly self-destruct. But then, what would be left to take its place? The trouble is that poststructuralism is now so institutionally and culturally entrenched, and the field of theory itself is now so hopelessly muddied by the proliferation and fragmentation of discourse that it has produced, that the implosion of the postmodernist project as such would not produce a sudden renaissance of praxis. Theory is useless, and prone to speculative distortions,

without social movements to support and invigorate it, which explains why postmodernist theory has grown at the same rate that contemporary social movements have declined and lost momentum.

The crisis of the Left, of which postmodernism is both symptom and cause, will therefore not be dissolved simply by the collapse of the illusions of theory. What we need, and need urgently, is not merely a repudiation of the poststructuralist canon, but a bold new theoretical project – a paradigmatic theory of action that yokes materialist analysis to an unabashedly moral, utopian, ecological vision. Such a project, closely interwoven with practice, would both take up and go well beyond the lost thread of Marxist-humanist and socialist-feminist thought. The work of our combined intellects must be to map the totality of oppression and liberation – not by seeking the Holy Grail of a scientific theory of everything, but by establishing an ethical horizon for liberatory practice as such. Only by returning, in this way, to holism in theory and practice might we begin to undo the terrible damage inflicted by nihilism on our praxis, and on truth.

NOTES

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- 1 Postmodernism began as a separate – initially aesthetic – current from poststructuralism, but the two did converge: the poststructuralist critique of humanism, subjectivity, and foundationalism became indistinguishable from a general rejection of modernity and modern institutions (hence ‘post-modernism’, a philosophical outlook). For the purposes of this essay the two are used interchangeably to denote a theoretical discourse and set of assumptions, rather than to describe a general social experience – i.e., a ‘postmodern condition’ (Lyotard) or ‘condition of postmodernity’ (David Harvey).
- 2 Michel Foucault, ‘Truth and Power’, *Power/Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon, 1980, p. 133.
- 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, §168, *Human, All Too Human*, in R.J. Hollingdale, ed., *A Nietzsche Reader*, New York: Penguin, 1977, p. 198.
- 4 See especially Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, New York: Blackwell, 1997; Norman Geras, *Discourses of Extremity: Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravagance*, London: Verso, 1990; Peter Dews, *The Logic of Disintegration*, London: Verso, 1987; and Teresa Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

- 5 Barbara Epstein, 'Why Poststructuralism is a Dead End for Progressive Thought', *Socialist Review*, 25(2), 1995, p. 83.
- 6 Jessica Dempsey and James K. Rowe, 'Why Poststructuralism is a Live Wire for the Left', *Praxis (e)Press*, 2004 (www.praxis-epress.org).
- 7 In their defence of poststructuralism, Dempsey and Rowe essentially imply that Epstein's criticisms are alarmist, because that movement has little consequence politically. 'It is unclear how much institutional power poststructural [sic] theorizing, or theorizing in general, currently has to help or hinder progressive politics' (Ibid., p. 37).
- 8 Antonio Gramsci, §49, Fourth Notebook, in Joseph A. Buttigieg, ed., *Prison Notebooks*, Volume II, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 200.
- 9 Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987, pp. 232–33.
- 10 On the corporatization of education, see especially Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; Derek Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003; Ann Brooks and Alison MacKinnon, eds., *Gender and the Restructured University*, Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press, 2001; Richard S. Ruch, *Higher Ed., Inc.: The Rise of the For-Profit University*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- 11 Diane Reay, 'Cultural Capitalists and Academic Habitus: Classed and Gendered Labour in UK Higher Education', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 27, 2004, p. 33.
- 12 John Sanbonmatsu, *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004.
- 13 As the 2005–06 budget for the University of California puts it: 'California's companies will be creating thousands of new professional and managerial jobs over the next ten years. The best way to keep these good jobs here in California is to have a workforce with the knowledge and skills to compete in the global marketplace. The CEOs of Intel, Hewlett-Packard, and Microsoft have all recently said that the best way to compete is to have a strong university system. Therefore, California must increase its investment in higher education and help ensure that enough highly-educated graduates are available to meet the workforce demands of a knowledge-based economy ...'. University of California 2005–06 Budget for Current Operations, Sacramento: University of California Board of Regents, 2005, p. 18.

- 14 Lindsay Waters, 'Bonfire of the Humanities', *The Village Voice*, 30 August 2004.
- 15 See Michelle Lamont, 'How To Become a Dominant French Philosopher', *American Journal of Sociology*, 93(3), November, 1987, pp. 584–622. Also, Niilo Kauppi, *French Intellectual Nobility: Institutional and Symbolic Transformation in the Post-Sartrean Era*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1996. Cf. Maria Ruegg, 'The End(s) of French Style: Structuralism and Post-Structuralism in the American Context', *Criticism*, 21(3), 1979.
- 16 University of California 2005–06 Budget, p. 161.
- 17 Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, 'A Manifesto for the Humanities in a Technological Age', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50(23), 13 February 2004, B7.
- 18 Recognizably postmodernist books and articles by Humanities Research Institute governors include: 'Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences'; 'Literary Nomadics in Franco-phone Allegories of Postcolonialism'; 'Cosmological Meditations on the In/Human: Lyotard and Beckett'; 'Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, Nomadisms'; 'Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn'; 'Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriated Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape'; et cetera.
- 19 <http://uchri.org/main.php?nav=sub>
- 20 Sanbonmatsu, *The Postmodern Prince*, pp. 86–7.
- 21 There are other legitimation mechanisms as well. The issuing of 'definitive' anthologies, readers, and guides like the *Cultural Studies Reader* or *Queer Theory Reader* serves to legitimate new cottage industries in theory. The *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, Second Edition, edited by Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) subtly presents postmodernism as the logical and necessary fruition of the critical theoretical tradition. See Christopher Hitchens, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Literary Scholars Embrace an Elite Language, Yet Imagine Themselves Subversives', *New York Times Book Review*, 22 May 2005, p. 18.
- 22 Advertisement in *Lingua Franca*, October 1997, p. 4.
- 23 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, p. 190.
- 24 For example, a March 2005 symposium organized by the Department emphasized '[undoing] the theory/practice divide by reconciling the disproportionate victimization of women and children in ethnic conflict with a critical understanding of women's participation in and resistance to ethnic conflict itself'. *Duke Women's Studies Newsletter*, Spring 2005, p.

4. The program's director, the incomparable Jean Fox O'Barr, deserves credit for having kept feminist theory afloat in postmodernist times.
- 25 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- 26 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York: Zone Books, 1994, p. 39.
- 27 David Shumway, 'The Star System in Literary Studies', *PMLA*, 112(1), January 1997, pp. 85-100.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. by Peter Collier, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 94.
- 30 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- 31 Camille E.S.A. Acey, 'This is an Illogical Statement: Dangerous Trends in Anti-Prison Activism', *Social Justice*, 27(3), 2000, p. 209.
- 32 Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 5. Foucault also expressed sympathy with extrajudicial and popular forms of justice (summary executions or mob killings by the people in revolutionary contexts). See Foucault, 'On Popular Justice: A Discussion with Maoists', in *Power/Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon, 1980, pp. 1-36.
- 33 Stendhal, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, trans. by Richard Howard, New York: Modern Library, 1999, p. 152.
- 34 Kirstie McClure, 'The Issue of Foundations', in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 364-5.
- 35 *Ibid.* Similarly, Homi Bhabha praises another postcolonial Indian critic for demanding 'a historiography of the subaltern that displaces the paradigm of social action as defined primarily by *rational action*, and seeks [instead] a form of discourse where affective writing develops its own language. History as a writing that constructs the moment of defiance...'. Homi K. Bhabha, 'Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 65 (emphasis added).
- 36 Stephen Muecke, 'Dialogue with a Post-Graduate Student Wanting to Study Aboriginal Culture', *Textual Spaces*, North Sydney: New South Wales University Press, Ltd., 1992, p. 204.
- 37 David Lodge, *Nice Work*, New York: Penguin, 1988, p. 314.
- 38 Thomas Frank has shown how the rise of a new business culture intersected both with the marketing of 'alternative' culture to youth and false populist narratives within academic cultural studies. Thomas

- Frank, 'Alternative to What?', in Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, pp. 153-4; see also Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God*, New York: Anchor, 2001.
- 39 Interviewed by Tom Dawson of the BBC for her role in *Secretary* (2003), www.bbc.co.uk.
- 40 'Maggie Gyllenhaal's Secretary Challenge', 19 May 2003, www.contactmusic.com.
- 41 The spread of such programs is itself a symptom of the rationalization of higher education, the mass processing of students with an emphasis on providing them with skills, rather than with substantive knowledge.
- 42 See especially Arthur Efland, *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1990.
- 43 Alice M. Gillam, 'Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective', in Christina Murphy and Joe Law, eds., *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers*, Davis: Hermagoras Press, 1995, pp. 128. For other theoretical texts on rhetoric and writing that celebrate cognitive fragmentation, see Nancy Welch's application of Julia Kristeva to writing tutor pedagogy in 'From Silence to Noise: The Writing Center as Critical Noise', *The Writing Center Journal*, 14.1, 1993, pp. 32-9. See also Nancy Maloney Grimm, *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1999; Lester Faigley, *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1992.
- 44 Gillam, 'Writing Center Ecology', p. 134.
- 45 Kathleen S. Berry, 'Teaching as Postmodern (Con)Text', in *Teaching Voices*, University of New Brunswick Bulletin on University Teaching, 37, January 2004.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Jane Bowers, 'Plain Language from a Postmodernist Professor', *Writing on the Edge*, 2(2), 1991, p. 57.
- 48 Ellen E. Berry, 'Rhizomes, Newness, and the Condition of Our Postmodernity', *Rhizomes*, 1(Spring) 2000 (www.rhizomes.net).
- 49 Paolo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, New York: Continuum, 1973, p. 18.
- 50 Meg Woolbright, 'The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism within the Patriarchy', in Murphy and Law, *Landmark Essays*, pp. 238, 237.
- 51 Ibid., p. 238.
- 52 For example, as Kathy Miriam notes, the theory of poststructuralist feminist Judith Butler 'obscures the subject of feminist practice, which is

- the liberation of women'. Kathy Miriam, 'Feminist Intellectualism and the "Pornographic Imagination": Deconstructing Butler', forthcoming in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*.
- 53 Irene Reti, *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, Santa Cruz: HerBooks Feminist Press, 1993.
- 54 Monique Panaccio, 'Lépine and the Roses: Beyond Eros', in Louise Malette and Marie Chalouh, eds., *The Montreal Massacre*, trans. by Marlene Wildeman, Charlottetown: Gynergy Books, 1991, p. 115.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 111. But another contributor to the collection wrote: 'No he wasn't crazy. His aim was accurate, straight to the heart of the highest symbolic site, the university, and especially the Polytechnique where, day after day, women calmly make their way through the worst kind of prejudice'. Nathalie Petrowski, 'Red Riding Hood', in Malette and Chalouh, *Montreal Massacre*, p. 37.
- 56 Panaccio, 'Lépine', p. 111.
- 57 *Loc. cit.*
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 115 (emphasis added).
- 59 See, for example, the on-line journal, 'Postmodern Therapies', which promotes the use of Bakhtin, Derrida, and Wittgenstein in clinical therapeutic work, <http://www.california.com>.
- 60 Bhabha, 'Postcolonial Authority', p. 65.
- 61 Michael D. Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- 62 Acey, P. 208.
- 63 Personal communication, London, April 2005.
- 64 Isaac Balbus, *Mourning and Modernity: Essays in the Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Society*, New York: Other Press, 2005, pp. 80-90.
- 65 An example of the former is feminist political theorist Wendy Brown, who has called for the segregation of theory from topical social and political concerns: Wendy Brown, 'The Time of the Political', *Theory and Event*, 1(1), 1997.
- 66 On his site, Clay Richards describes himself as an 'anarchist blogger' who 'writes about politics, art, sexuality and emerging digital realities. More poststructuralist than postmodern ... the Postmodern Anarchist believes in anarchy without anarchists...', www.netweed.com/postmodernanarchist.
- 67 Website links on Sells' site include SusieBright.com, Gurl.com, Technodyke, Women Gamers, Grrl Gamer, Scarleteen, Geeks Girl Magazine, Chicklit, and Rockgrl Magazine (www.voxygen.net, 30 May 2005).
- 68 Thus Sue-Ellen Case, who writes in *The Domain-Matrix* that she has purposefully disorganized, and added several dense visual graphic layers

- to, her text, in order to mimic the non-linear, disintegrative cognitive style of the internet: Sue-Ellen Case, *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 7–8.
- 69 Hence the significance of postmodernist critic Rey Chow's comment that, rather than seek to fill in the holes of history – i.e., augment existing Eurocentric narratives of history with narratives that highlight the historical experiences of ethnic minorities, women, and the oppressed – we 'need to detail history, in the sense of cutting it up'. Rey Chow, 'Postmodern Automaton', in Butler and Scott, *Feminists Theorize*, p. 115.
- 70 Ruth Ray, *The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition*, Urbana: NCTE, 1993, as paraphrased and quoted by Kristine Hansen in 'Face to Face with Part-Timers: Ethics and the Professionalization of Writing Faculties', in J. Janagelo and Kristine Hansen, eds., *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*, Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1995, p. 34.
- 71 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 28.
- 72 Antonio Gramsci, §48, Third Notebook, in Buttigieg, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 52.
- 73 In 2002, Anouar Majid wrote an article entitled 'The Failure of Post-colonial Theory After 9/11' (in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 November 2002), in which he pointedly observed that the postcolonial emperor has no clothes. 'Enthralled by the triumphant creed of hybridity – premised on the notion that people, as well as nations, are made up of incommensurable, mobile, unstable parts – many postcolonial theorists sought the signs that confirmed this faith, not the ones that complicated it', Majid wrote. 'That people everywhere were serious about their gods and still yearned for a sense of place didn't matter to scholars busy showing how the worldwide movement of people, with its resulting instabilities, was destabilizing power relations among nations by undermining the claim to national and cultural purity'.
- 74 Focal Theme 2006/2007, 'Historicizing the Global Postmodern', Society for the Humanities at Cornell University (www.arts.cornell.edu), 1 June 2005.