

Postmodern Theory

Critical Interrogations

STEVEN BEST
and
DOUGLAS KELLNER

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'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone (John Donne).

There is nowhere anything lasting, neither outside me, nor within me, but only incessant change. I nowhere know of any being, not even my own. There is no being. I *myself* know nothing and am nothing. There are only *images*: they are the only thing which exists, and they know of themselves in the manner of images . . . I myself am only one of these images (J. G. Fichte).

It is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era . . . The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change (G. W. F. Hegel).

State and Church, law and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears (Friedrich Schiller).

There is no firm ground under the feet of society. Nothing any longer is steadfast . . . Hence the chaos seen in certain democracies, their constant flux and instability. There we get an existence subject to sudden squalls, disjointed, halting, and exhausting (Emile Durkheim).

Dramatic changes in society and culture are often experienced as an intense crisis for those attached to established ways of life and modes of thought. The breaking up of once stable social orders and patterns of thought frequently evoke a widespread sense of social incoherence, fragmentation, chaos and disorder. The response is often despair and pessimism, panic and hyperbolic discourse, and desperate searches for solutions to the apparent crisis.

The quotes from Donne, Fichte, Hegel, Schiller and Durkheim cited above signify that the transition from traditional to modern

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society was experienced as a crisis which required new perspectives and solutions to the perceived social and political problems. From this vantage point, theoretical discourses can be read as responses to historical crises, to unsettling economic and technological developments, and to social and intellectual turbulence produced by the disintegration of previously stable or familiar modes of thinking and living. New theories and ideas articulate novel social experiences and a proliferation of emergent discourses therefore suggests that important transformations are taking place in society and culture.

During the 1960s, sociopolitical movements, new intellectual currents, and the cultural revolts throughout the West against the stifling conformity of the postwar celebration of the 'affluent society' produced a sense that a widespread rebellion was occurring against a rigid and oppressive modern society. Sixties radicalism put in question modern social structures and practices, culture, and modes of thought. While the radical political movements of the era eventually dispersed and failed to carry through the revolution that many thought would follow the tumultuous events of 1968, a series of socioeconomic and cultural transformations in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that a break with the previous society had indeed taken place. An explosion of media, computers and new technologies, a restructuring of capitalism, political shifts and upheavals, novel cultural forms, and new experiences of space and time produced a sense that dramatic developments have occurred throughout culture and society. The contemporary postmodern controversies can therefore be explained in part by an ongoing and intense series of crises concerned with the breaking up of the 'modern' modes of social organization and the advent of a new, as yet barely charted, 'postmodern' terrain. From this vantage point, the writings of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and others articulate new perspectives that map the allegedly novel postmodern socio-cultural conditions and develop new modes of theorizing, writing, subjectivity, and politics. In this book we shall sort out and appraise the contributions and limitations of these perspectives which present themselves as the newest avant-garde in theory and politics, more radical than radical, and newer than new: the hyperradical and hypernew.

While the writers we consider develop quite diverse projects, they can be seen as representatives of 'postmodern theory' to the extent that they criticize and break with the dominant goals and assumptions informing modern theories of society, history, politics, and the individual, while embracing a variety of new principles and emphases. While the term 'postmodern theory' may seem problematical, since postmodern critiques are directed against the notion of 'theory' itself – which implies a systematically developed conceptual structure anchored in the real – the writers we classify under the postmodern rubric nonetheless develop theoretical positions on diverse topics. We approach these positions through 'critical interrogations' that assess their usefulness for developing critical theories of society and radical politics for the present age, as well as pointing to their deficiencies. The specific projects of critical theory and radical politics that we have in mind will build on our earlier works (see our Bibliography) and will be developed in the course of our inquiries.

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We would like to dedicate this book to the next generation of radical intellectuals and activists who we hope will use the insights of postmodern theory and other critical discourses to develop new

theories and politics to meet the challenges of the current decade and next century.

STEVEN BEST
DOUGLAS KELLNER

Chapter 1

In Search of the Postmodern

For the past two decades, the postmodern debates dominated the cultural and intellectual scene in many fields throughout the world. In aesthetic and cultural theory, polemics emerged over whether modernism in the arts was or was not dead and what sort of postmodern art was succeeding it. In philosophy, debates erupted concerning whether or not the tradition of modern philosophy had ended, and many began celebrating a new postmodern philosophy associated with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty, Lyotard, and others. Eventually, the postmodern assault produced new social and political theories, as well as theoretical attempts to define the multifaceted aspects of the postmodern phenomenon itself.¹

Advocates of the postmodern turn aggressively criticized traditional culture, theory, and politics, while defenders of the modern tradition responded either by ignoring the new challenger, by attacking it in return, or by attempting to come to terms with and appropriate the new discourses and positions. Critics of the postmodern turn argued that it was either a passing fad (Fo 1986/7; Guattari 1986), a specious invention of intellectuals in search of a new discourse and source of cultural capital (Britton 1988), or yet another conservative ideology attempting to devalue emancipatory modern theories and values (Habermas 1981 and 1987a). But the emerging postmodern discourses and problematics raise issues which resist easy dismissal or facile incorporation into already established paradigms.

In view of the wide range of postmodern disputes, we propose to explicate and sort out the differences between the most significant articulations of postmodern theory, and to identify their central positions, insights, and limitations. Yet, as we shall see, there is no unified postmodern theory, or even a coherent set of positions. Rather, one is struck by the diversities between theories often lumped together as 'postmodern' and the plurality – often conflictual – of postmodern positions. One is also struck by the inadequate and undertheorized notion of the 'postmodern' in the theories which adopt, or are identified in, such terms. To clarify some of the key words within the family of concepts of the postmodern, it is useful to distinguish between the discourses of the modern and the postmodern (see Featherstone 1988).

To begin, we might distinguish between 'modernity' conceptualized as the modern age and 'postmodernity' as an epochal term for describing the period which allegedly follows modernity. There are many discourses of modernity, as there would later be of postmodernity, and the term refers to a variety of economic, political, social, and cultural transformations. Modernity, as theorized by Marx, Weber, and others, is a historical periodizing term which refers to the epoch that follows the 'Middle Ages' or feudalism. For some, modernity is opposed to traditional societies and is characterized by innovation, novelty, and dynamism (Berman 1982). The theoretical discourses of modernity from Descartes through the Enlightenment and its progeny championed reason as the source of progress in knowledge and society, as well as the privileged locus of truth and the foundation of systematic knowledge. Reason was deemed competent to discover adequate theoretical and practical norms upon which systems of thought and action could be built and society could be restructured. This Enlightenment project is also operative in the American, French, and other democratic revolutions which attempted to overturn the feudal world and to produce a just and egalitarian social order that would embody reason and social progress (Toulmin 1990).

Aesthetic modernity emerged in the new avant-garde modernist movements and bohemian subcultures, which rebelled against the alienating aspects of industrialization and rationalization, while seeking to transform culture and to find creative self-realization in art. Modernity entered everyday life through the dissemination of modern art, the products of consumer society, new technologies,

and new modes of transportation and communication. The dynamics by which modernity produced a new industrial and colonial world can be described as 'modernization' – a term denoting those processes of individualization, secularization, industrialization, cultural differentiation, commodification, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationalization which together have constituted the modern world.

Yet the construction of modernity produced untold suffering and misery for its victims, ranging from the peasantry, proletariat, and artisans oppressed by capitalist industrialization to the exclusion of women from the public sphere, to the genocide of imperialist colonialization. Modernity also produced a set of disciplinary institutions, practices, and discourses which legitimate its modes of domination and control (see our discussion of Foucault in Chapter 2). The 'dialectic of Enlightenment' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972) thus described a process whereby reason turned into its opposite and modernity's promises of liberation masked forms of oppression and domination. Yet defenders of modernity (Habermas 1981, 1987a, and 1987b) claim that it has 'unfulfilled potential' and the resources to overcome its limitations and destructive effects.

Postmodern theorists, however, claim that in the contemporary high tech media society, emergent processes of change and transformation are producing a new postmodern society and its advocates claim that the era of postmodernity constitutes a novel stage of history and novel sociocultural formation which requires new concepts and theories. Theorists of postmodernity (Baudrillard, Lyotard, Harvey, etc.) claim that technologies such as computers and media, new forms of knowledge, and changes in the socioeconomic system are producing a postmodern social formation. Baudrillard and Lyotard interpret these developments in terms of novel types of information, knowledge, and technologies, while neo-Marxist theorists like Jameson and Harvey interpret the postmodern in terms of development of a higher stage of capitalism marked by a greater degree of capital penetration and homogenization across the globe. These processes are also producing increased cultural fragmentation, changes in the experience of space and time, and new modes of experience, subjectivity, and culture. These conditions provide the socioeconomic and cultural basis for postmodern theory and their analysis provides the per-

spectives from which postmodern theory can claim to be on the cutting edge of contemporary developments.

In addition to the distinction between modernity and postmodernity in the field of social theory, the discourse of the postmodern plays an important role in the field of aesthetics and cultural theory. Here the debate revolves around distinctions between modernism and postmodernism in the arts.² Within this discourse, 'modernism' could be used to describe the art movements of the modern age (impressionism, *l'art pour l'art*, expressionism, surrealism, and other avant-garde movements), while 'postmodernism' can describe those diverse aesthetic forms and practices which come after and break with modernism. These forms include the architecture of Robert Venturi and Philip Johnson, the musical experiments of John Cage, the art of Warhol and Rauschenberg, the novels of Pynchon and Ballard, and films like *Blade Runner* or *Blue Velvet*. Debates centre on whether there is or is not a sharp conceptual distinction between modernism and postmodernism and the relative merits and limitations of these movements.

The discourses of the postmodern also appear in the field of theory and focus on the critique of modern theory and arguments for a postmodern rupture in theory. Modern theory – ranging from the philosophical project of Descartes, through the Enlightenment, to the social theory of Comte, Marx, Weber and others³ – is criticized for its search for a foundation of knowledge, for its universalizing and totalizing claims, for its hubris to supply apodictic truth, and for its allegedly fallacious rationalism. Defenders of modern theory, by contrast, attack postmodern relativism, irrationalism, and nihilism.

More specifically, postmodern theory provides a critique of representation and the modern belief that theory mirrors reality, taking instead 'perspectivist' and 'relativist' positions that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects, and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated. Some postmodern theory accordingly rejects the totalizing macroperspectives on society and history favoured by modern theory in favour of microtheory and micropolitics (Lyotard 1984a). Postmodern theory also rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, post-

modern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentred and fragmented subject.

Thus, to avoid conceptual confusion, in this book we shall use the term 'postmodernity' to describe the supposed epoch that follows modernity, and 'postmodernism' to describe movements and artifacts in the cultural field that can be distinguished from modernist movements, texts, and practices. We shall also distinguish between 'modern theory' and 'postmodern theory', as well as between 'modern politics' which is characterized by party, parliamentary, or trade union politics in opposition to 'postmodern politics' associated with locally based micropolitics that challenge a broad array of discourses and institutionalized forms of power.

To help clarify and illuminate the confusing and variegated discourse of the postmodern, we shall first provide an archaeology of the term, specifying its history, early usages, and conflicting meanings (1.1). Next, we situate the development of contemporary postmodern theory in the context of post-1960s France where the concept of a new postmodern condition became an important theme by the late 1970s (1.2). And in 1.3 we sketch the problematic of our interrogations of postmodern theory and the perspectives that will guide our inquiries throughout this book.

1.1 Archaeology of the Postmodern

Our archaeology of postmodern discourse explores the history of the term in its uneven development within diverse theoretical fields. We begin by searching for sediments and layers of postmodern discourses as they have accumulated historically. We thereby use the term archaeology in a broad and metaphorical sense rather than in Foucault's technical sense of an analysis that articulates the rules which constitute and govern a given discourse (see 2.2). In undertaking such an inquiry, one discerns that there are anticipations of and precursors to ideas and terminology which gain currency at a later date. For example, an English painter, John Watkins Chapman, spoke of 'postmodern painting' around 1870 to designate painting that was allegedly more modern and avant-garde than French impressionist painting (Higgins 1978: p. 7). The term appeared in 1917 in a book by Rudolf Pannwitz,

Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur, to describe the nihilism and collapse of values in contemporary European culture (cited in Welsch 1988: pp. 12–13). Following Nietzsche, Pannwitz described the development of new 'postmodern men' who would incarnate militarist, nationalistic, and elite values – a phenomenon soon to emerge with fascism which also called for a break with modern Western civilization.

After World War II, the notion of a 'postmodern' break with the modern age appeared in a one-volume summation by D. C. Somervell of the first six volumes of British historian Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1947), and thereafter Toynbee himself adopted the term, taking up the notion of the postmodern age in Volumes VIII and IX of his *A Study of History* (1963a and 1963b; both orig. 1954). Somervell and Toynbee suggested the concept of a 'post-Modern' age, beginning in 1875, to delineate a fourth stage of Western history after the Dark Ages (675–1075), the Middle Ages (1075–1475), and the Modern (1475–1875) (Somervell 1947: p. 39). On this account, Western civilization had entered a new transitional period beginning around 1875 which Toynbee termed the 'post-Modern age'. This period constituted a dramatic mutation and rupture from the previous modern age and was characterized by wars, social turmoil and revolution. Toynbee described the age as one of anarchy and total relativism. He characterized the previous modern period as a middle-class bourgeois era marked by social stability, rationalism, and progress – a typical bourgeois middle-class conception of an era marked by cycles of crisis, war, and revolution. The postmodern age, by contrast, is a 'Time of Troubles' marked by the collapse of rationalism and the ethos of the Enlightenment.

Toynbee, however, did not develop a systematic theory of the new postmodern era and his universalistic philosophy of history with its notion of historical cycles of the rise and decline of civilizations, his philosophical idealism, and the religious overtones of his analysis would be totally foreign to those who took up the concept of postmodernity in the contemporary scene. Toynbee's scenario is reminiscent in some ways of Nietzsche's *Will to Power* and Spengler's *Decline of the West* with their diagnosis of social and cultural nihilism in the present age. All projected a historical process of regression combined with different projects of cultural renewal. All saw the modern age rapidly approaching its

end and interpreted this as a catastrophe for established traditional values, institutions, and forms of life.

Several historical–sociological notions of a new postmodern age appeared in the 1950s in the United States within a variety of disciplines. In his introduction to a popular anthology on *Mass Culture*, cultural historian Bernard Rosenberg used the term postmodern to describe the new conditions of life in mass society (Rosenberg and White 1957: pp. 4–5). Rosenberg claimed that certain fundamental changes were taking place in society and culture:

As Toynbee's Great West Wind blows all over the world, which quickly gets urbanized and industrialized, as the birth rate declines and the population soars, a certain sameness develops everywhere. Clement Greenberg can meaningfully speak of a universal mass culture (surely something new under the sun) which unites a resident of Johannesburg with his neighbors in San Juan, Hong Kong, Moscow, Paris, Bogota, Sydney and New York. African aborigines, such as those recently described by Richard Wright, leap out of their primitive past – straight into the movie house where, it is feared, they may be mesmerized like the rest of us. First besieged with commodities, postmodern man himself becomes an interchangeable part in the whole cultural process. When he is momentarily freed from his own *kitsch*, the Soviet citizen seems to be as titillated as his American counterpart by Tin Pan Alley's products. In our time, the basis for an international sodality of man at his lowest level, as some would say, appears to have been formed (1957: p. 4).

Rosenberg describes the ambiguity of the new postmodern world, its promising and threatening features, and concludes: 'In short, the postmodern world offers man everything or nothing. Any rational consideration of the probabilities leads to a fear that he will be overtaken by the social furies that already beset him' (1957: p. 5). The same year, economist Peter Drucker published *The Landmarks of Tomorrow* subtitled 'A Report on the New Post-Modern World' (1957). For Drucker, postmodern society was roughly equivalent to what would later be called 'postindustrial society' and Drucker indeed came to identify himself with this tendency. In his 1957 book, however, he argued that: 'At some unmarked point during the last twenty years we imperceptibly moved out of the Modern Age and into a new, as yet nameless, era' (Drucker 1957: p. ix). He describes a philosophical shift from the modern Cartesian world-view to a 'new universe of pattern,

purpose, and process'; to new technologies and power to dominate nature with their resulting responsibilities and dangers; and to transformations wrought by the extension of education and knowledge. In the optimistic mode of theorists of the 'postindustrial society', Drucker believed that the postmodern world would see the end of poverty and ignorance, the decline of the nation state, the end of ideology, and a worldwide process of modernization.

A more negative notion of a new postmodern age emerges in C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Mills claims that: 'We are at the ending of what is called The Modern Age. Just as Antiquity was followed by several centuries of Oriental ascendancy, which Westerners provincially call The Dark Ages, so now The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period' (1959: pp. 165-6). Mills believed that 'our basic definitions of society and of self are being overtaken by new realities' and that it is necessary to conceptualize the changes taking place in order to 'grasp the outline of the new epoch we suppose ourselves to be entering' (1959: p. 166). In conceptualizing transformations of the present situation, he claimed that many previous expectations and images, and standard categories of thought and of feeling, are no longer of use. In particular, he believed that Marxism and liberalism are no longer convincing because both take up the Enlightenment belief in the inner connection between reason and freedom, which holds that increased rationality would produce increased freedom. By contrast, Mills claims that in the present this can no longer be assumed.

In an analysis close to that of the Frankfurt School, Mills points to some of the ways that increased societal rationalization is diminishing freedom and he paints the spectre of a society of 'cheerful robots' who might well desire, or happily submit to, increased servitude. Mills, however, like Toynbee and the other theorists cited, is very much a modernist, given to sweeping sociological generalization, totalizing surveys of sociology and history, and a belief in the power of the sociological imagination to illuminate social reality and to change society. Consequently, the early uses of the term postmodern in social and cultural theory had not made the conceptual shifts (described in the next section), which would come to characterize the postmodern turn in theory.

In his 1961 essay, 'The Revolution in Western Thought', Huston Smith (1982), however, found that postmodern conceptual shifts

had greatly affected contemporary science, philosophy, theology, and the arts. For Smith, the twentieth century has brought a mutation in Western thought that inaugurates the 'post-modern mind'. He describes the transformation from the modern world-view that reality is ordered according to laws that the human intelligence can grasp, to the postmodern world-view that reality is unordered and ultimately unknowable. He suggests that postmodern scepticism and uncertainty is only a transition to yet another intellectual perspective, one that hopefully will be characterized by a more holistic and spiritual outlook.

A more systematic and detailed notion of the postmodern age than is found in the works mentioned so far is present in British historian Geoffrey Barraclough's *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (1964). Barraclough opens his explorations of the nature of contemporary history by claiming that the world in which we live today is 'different, in almost all its basic preconditions, from the world in which Bismarck lived and died' (1964: p. 9). He claims that analysis of the underlying structural changes between the 'old world' and the 'new world' requires 'a new framework and new terms of reference' (ibid.). Against theories which emphasize continuity in history, Barraclough argues: 'What we should look out for as significant are the differences rather than the similarities, the elements of discontinuity rather than the elements of continuity. In short, contemporary history should be considered as a distinct period of time, with characteristics of its own which mark it off from the preceding period, in much the same way as what we call 'medieval history' is marked off ... from modern history' (1964: p. 12). After discussing some of the contours of the new era, Barraclough rejects some previous attempts to characterize the current historical situation and then proposes the term postmodern to describe the period which follows modern history (1964: p. 23). He describes the new age as being constituted by revolutionary developments in science and technology, by a new imperialism meeting resistance in Third World revolutionary movements, by the transition from individualism to mass society, and by a new outlook on the world and new forms of culture.

While the term postmodern was occasionally used in the 1940s and 1950s to describe new forms of architecture or poetry, it was not widely used in the field of cultural theory to describe artifacts that opposed and/or came after modernism until the 1960s and

1970s. During this period, many cultural and social theorists began discussing radical breaks with the culture of modernism and the emergence of new postmodern artistic forms. Irving Howe (1970; orig. 1959) and Harry Levin (1966; orig. 1960) were generally negative toward the new postmodern culture, which they interpreted in terms of the decline of Enlightenment rationalism, anti-intellectualism, and loss of the modernist hope that culture could advance social change. For Susan Sontag (1972), Leslie Fiedler (1971), and Ihab Hassan (1971), by contrast, postmodern culture is a positive development which opposes the oppressive aspects of modernism and modernity. Expressing her dissatisfaction with modernist fiction and modes of interpretation, Sontag's influential essays from the mid-1960s celebrated the emergence of a 'new sensibility' (a term first used by Howe) in culture and the arts which challenges the rationalist need for content, meaning, and order. The new sensibility, by contrast, immerses itself in the pleasures of form and style, privileging an 'erotics' of art over a hermeneutics of meaning.

The 1960s were the period of pop art, film culture, happenings, multi-media light shows and rock concerts, and other new cultural forms. For Sontag, Fiedler, and others, these developments transcended the limitations of previous forms like poetry or the novel. Artists in many fields began mixing media and incorporating *kitsch* and popular culture into their aesthetic. Consequently, the new sensibility was more pluralistic and less serious and moralistic than modernism.

Even more than Sontag, Fiedler applauded the breakdown of the high-low art distinction and the appearance of pop art and mass cultural forms. In his essay 'The New Mutants' (1971: pp 379-400; orig. 1964), Fiedler described the emergent culture as a 'post-' culture that rejected traditional values of Protestantism, Victorianism, rationalism, and humanism. While in this essay he decries postmodern art and the new youth culture of nihilistic 'post-modernists', he later celebrated postmodernism and saw positive value in the breakdown of literary and cultural tradition. He proclaimed the death of the avant-garde and modern novel and the emergence of new postmodern artforms that effected a 'closing of the gap' between artist and audience, critic and layperson (Fiedler 1971: pp. 461-85; orig. 1970). Embracing mass culture and decrying modernist elitism, Fiedler called for a new post-

modern criticism that abandons formalism, realism, and highbrow pretentiousness, in favour of analysis of the subjective response of the reader within a psychological, social, and historical context.

But the most prolific celebration and popularization of literary postmodernism was carried through by Hassan, who published a series of discussions of postmodern literature and thought (1971, 1979, 1987) – although he has recently tried to distance himself from the term on the grounds that it is inadequate and that we are beyond even postmodernism (Hassan 1987: pp. xi-xvii). In a body of work which is itself often postmodern in its non-linear, playful, assemblage-like style that constructs a pastiche text comprised largely of quotations and name-dropping, Hassan characterizes postmodernism as a 'decisive historical mutation' from industrial capitalism and Western categories and values. He reads postmodern literature as symptomatic of the changes occurring throughout Western society. The new 'anti-literature' or 'literature of silence' is characterized by a 'revulsion against the Western self' (Hassan 1987: p. 5) and Western civilization in general.

Postmodern forms in literature, poetry, painting, and architecture continued developing in the 1970s and 1980s and were accompanied by a proliferation of postmodern discourses in the arts. In architecture, there were strong reactions against the purity and formalism of the high modern style. The utopian dreams of architects like Le Corbusier to engineer a better world through architecture were belied in sterile skyscrapers and condemned urban housing projects. Charles Jencks' influential book, *The Language of Modern Architecture* (1977), celebrated a new postmodern style based on eclecticism and populism, and helped to disseminate the concept of the postmodern.

Against modernist values of seriousness, purity, and individuality, postmodern art exhibits a new insouciance, a new playfulness, and a new eclecticism. The elements of sociopolitical critique characteristic of the historical avant-garde (Burger 1984) and desire for radically new art forms are replaced by pastiche, quotation and play with past forms, irony, cynicism, commercialism, and in some cases downright nihilism. While the political avant-garde of the modernist movement celebrated negation and dissidence, and called for a revolution of art and life, most postmodernist art often took delight in the world as it is and happily coexisted in a pluralism of aesthetic styles and games.

Other theorists and artists, however, such as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Hans Haacke sought an oppositional current in postmodern art and produced interesting new forms of political art that challenge and subvert prevailing ideologies and codes of representation (see Foster 1983; Conner 1989; Hutcheon 1989).

While Sontag, Fiedler, Hassan, and others valorize postmodern culture as a refreshing break with stale conventions and practices in the arts and life, cultural theorist George Steiner (1971), by contrast, attacked the new 'post-culture' which he claims has rejected and destroyed the foundational assumptions and values of Western society. For Steiner this involves: a loss of geographical and sociological centrality, where the Western world, and the United States in particular, could claim moral superiority and rights over 'uncivilized' peoples; an incredulous attitude toward progress as the trajectory and goal of history, accompanied by a dark pessimism toward the future and a decline of utopian values; and a scepticism toward the modernist belief in a direct correlation between liberal-humanist principles and moral conduct, a position made questionable in this century by the savagery of world wars and the harmonious coexistence of high culture and concentration camps. Thus, for Steiner post-(Enlightenment/humanist/modern) culture no longer blindly and unproblematically trusts in science, art, and reason as beneficent, humanizing forces, and, consequently, there has been a loss of ethical absolutes and certainties. As a cultural conservative, he attacks the political struggles of the 1960s, the countercultural movements, and radicalism within the academy. Steiner bemoans the loss of community, identity, and classical humanism, while deploring the rise of mass culture for eroding standards of classical literacy. He acknowledges, however, that society cannot turn back and must therefore move as best it can into the brave new world of science and technology.

A similar sense that an old era is coming to an end and a new historical situation and choices now confront us is found in *The Active Society* by sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1968) who advances the notion of a postmodern society which he interprets more positively than Steiner. For Etzioni, World War II was a turning point in history; he argued that the postwar introduction of new modes of communication, information, and energy inaugurated a postmodern period. He hypothesized that relentless technological development would itself either destroy all previous values, or

would make possible the use of technology to better human life and to solve all social problems. Etzioni championed an 'active society' in which normative values would guide technological developments and human beings would utilize and control technology for the benefit of humanity. This activist normative ideal was one of the few positive visions of a postmodern future, although Etzioni was also aware of the dangers.

In the mid-1970s, more books appeared in the United States which used the term postmodern to designate a new era in history. Theologian Frederick Ferre's *Shaping the Future. Resources for the Post-Modern World* (1976) projected an alternative set of values and institutions for a postmodern consciousness and new future. His emphasis was primarily positive and took the form of quasi-religious prophecy and advocacy of religious values to guide the new age. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), sociologist Daniel Bell also took up the theme that the modern era was coming to an end and that humanity now faced fundamental choices for the future: 'We are coming to a watershed in Western society: we are witnessing the end of the bourgeois idea – that view of human action and of social relations, particularly of economic exchange – which has molded the modern era for the last 200 years' (1976: p. 7). He interprets the postmodern age much like Toynbee: it represents for him the unleashing of instinct, impulse and will, though, like Steiner, he tends to identify it with the 1960s counterculture (1976: pp. 51f.). For Bell, the postmodern age exhibits an extension of the rebellious, anti-bourgeois, antinomic and hedonistic impulses which he sees as the legacies of the modernist movements in the arts and their bohemian subcultures. He claims that cultural modernism perpetuates hedonism, the lack of social identification and obedience, narcissism, and the withdrawal from status and achievement competition. The postmodern age is thus a product of the application of modernist revolts to everyday life, the extension and living out of a rebellious, hyperindividualist, hedonist lifestyle.

Bell sees contemporary postmodern culture as a radical assault on tradition which is fuelled by an aggressive narcissism that is in profound contradiction with the bureaucratic, technocratic, and organizational imperatives of the capitalist economy and democratic polity. This development, in Bell's view, portends the end of the bourgeois world-view with its rationality, sobriety, and moral

and religious values (1976: pp. 53f.). In response to the corrosive force of postmodernism on traditional values, Bell calls for a revivification of religious values.

Yet as Habermas has argued (1981: p. 14),⁴ Bell tends to blame culture for the ills of the economy and polity, as when he refers to 'cultural crises which beset bourgeois societies and which, in the longer run, devitalize a country, confuse the motivations of individuals, instil a sense of *carpe diem*, and undercut its civic will. The problems are less those of the adequacy of institutions than of the kinds of meanings that sustain a society' (1976: p. 28). Yet in other passages, Bell notes the extent to which the development of the consumer society itself with its emphasis on consumption, instant gratification, easy credit, and hedonism is responsible for the undermining of traditional values and culture and the production of what he calls the 'cultural contradictions of capitalism'. Thus while Mills' (1959) early critique of a postmodern society of cheerful robots derived from a progressive concern with diminution of the ability to shape, control, and change the conditions of society and one's life, Bell's critique derived from fear of the collapse of the bourgeois world-view and its value system.

Our archaeological inquiries have disclosed that there are two conflicting matrices of postmodern discourse in the period before it proliferated in the 1980s. One position – Drucker, Etzioni, Sontag, Hassan, Fiedler, Ferre, and others – gave the term a predominantly positive valence, while others produced negative discourses (e.g. Toynbee, Mills, Bell, Baudrillard). The positive perspective was itself divided into social and cultural wings. The affirmative social discourse (Drucker, Etzioni, Ferre, and theorists of the postindustrial society) reproduced 1950s optimism and the sense that technology and modernization were making possible the break with an obsolete past. These theories replicated the ideologies of the 'affluent society' (Galbraith), 'the end of ideology', and the 'Great American celebration' (Mills) that affirmed contemporary capitalist modernity in the 1950s and 1960s, believing that capitalism had overcome its crisis tendencies and was on the way to producing a 'great society'. The positive culturalist wing (Sontag, Fiedler, Hassan) complemented this celebration by affirming the liberating features of new postmodern cultural forms, pop culture, avant-gardism, and the new postmodern sensibility.

This positive culturalist discourse and the proliferation of post-

modern cultural forms helped prepare the way for the reception of the discourse of the postmodern in the 1980s. In general, the cultural discourse had a much greater impact on later postmodern theory than the sociohistorical discourses, which were rarely noted or discussed. The cultural discourses also shared certain epistemological perspectives with later postmodern theoretical discourse which emphasized difference, otherness, pleasure, novelty, and attacked-reason and hermeneutics. The affirmative social discourse of the postmodern, by contrast, continued the modern modes of thought (reason, totalizations, unification, and so on) which later postmodern theory would assault.

The negative discourses of the postmodern reflected a pessimistic take on the trajectories of modern societies. Toynbee, Mills, Bell, Steiner, and others saw Western societies and culture in decline, threatened by change and instability, as well as by the new developments of mass society and culture. The negative discourse of the postmodern thus posits a crisis for Western civilization at the end of the modern world. This pessimistic and apocalyptic discourse would be reproduced in postmodern theorists like Baudrillard. The negative cultural discourse of Howe, Steiner, Bell and others would also prepare the way for the neo-conservative attacks on contemporary culture in the 1980s.

Both the positive and negative theorists were responding to developments in contemporary capitalism – though rarely conceptualizing them as such – which was going through an expansionist cycle and producing new commodities, abundance, and a more affluent lifestyle. Its advertising, credit plans, media, and commodity spectacles were encouraging gratification, hedonism, and the adoption of new habits, cultural forms, and lifestyles which would later be termed postmodern. Some theorists were celebrating the new diversity and affluence, while others were criticizing the decay of traditional values or increased powers of social control. In a sense, then, the discourses of the postmodern are responses to socioeconomic developments which they sometimes name and sometimes obscure.

Thus, by the 1980s, the postmodern discourses were split into cultural conservatives decrying the new developments and avant-gardists celebrating them. Postmodern discourses were proliferating through different academic fields and by the 1980s debates erupted concerning breaks with modernity, modernism, and

modern theory. More extreme advocates of the postmodern were calling for ruptures with modern discourses and the development of new theories, politics, modes of writing, and values. While the discussions of postmodern cultural forms were primarily initiated in North America, it was in France that Baudrillard and Lyotard were developing notions of a new postmodern era that were much more comprehensive and extreme than those produced earlier in Britain and the United States. The developments in postmodern theory in France constituted a rupture with the French rationalist tradition founded by Descartes and further developed in the French Enlightenment. New French Theory can be read as one of a series of revolts against Cartesian rationalism ranging from the Enlightenment attack on theoretical reason in favour of promoting rational social change, through Comte and Durkheim's revolt against philosophical rationalism in favour of social science, to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's attempts to make philosophy serve the needs of concrete human existence. As we shall see in the next section, French structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodern theory constituted a series of attacks on rationalist and Enlightenment theory. Yet these critiques built on another French counter-Enlightenment tradition rooted in the critiques of reason by de Sade, Bataille, Artaud, and others whom Habermas (1987a) terms 'the dark writers of the bourgeoisie'. A French 'dandy' and bohemian tradition stemming from Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and others also helped produce the aestheticized, ironic, and subversive ethos of French postmodern theory. In addition, the French reception of Nietzsche and Heidegger played a major role in turning French theory away from Hegel, Marx, phenomenology and existentialism and toward development of new theoretical formations that eventually produced postmodern theory.

1.2 The French Scene: From Structuralist to Postmodern Theory

While the discourses of the postmodern circulated throughout the world in the 1980s, the most significant developments of postmodern theory have taken place in France and it is upon French postmodern theory that we shall largely focus in this book. As we shall argue in this chapter, a series of socioeconomic, cultural, theoretical, and political events occurred in France which helped give rise to new postmodern theories.

French theories of a postmodern break in history were influenced by the rapid modernization process in France that followed World War II, exciting developments in philosophy and social theory during the 1950s and 1960s, and the dramatic sense of rupture produced by the turbulent events of 1968, in which a student and workers' rebellion brought the country to a standstill, appearing to resurrect French revolutionary traditions. While the political hopes of the day were soon dashed, the apocalyptic impulses of the time were translated into the postmodern theories of a fundamental rupture in history and inauguration of a new era.

Post-World War II modernization processes in France produced a sense of rapid change and a feeling that a new society was emerging. At the end of World War II, France was still largely agricultural and suffered from an antiquated economy and polity. John Ardagh (1982: p. 13) claims that between the early 1950s and mid-1970s 'France went through a spectacular renewal. A stagnant economy turned into one of the world's most dynamic and successful, as material modernization moved along at a hectic pace and an agriculture-based society became mainly an urban and industrial one. Prosperity soared, bringing with it changes in lifestyles, and throwing up some strange conflicts between rooted French habits and new modes . . . Long accused of living with their eyes fixed on the past, they now suddenly opened them to the fact of living in the modern world – and it both thrilled and scared them.'

New social theories emerged to articulate the sense of dynamic change experienced by many in postwar France, analyzing the new forms of mass culture, the consumer society, technology, and modernized urbanization. Throughout France, high-rise buildings, highways, drugstores, shopping centres, consumer goods, and mass culture created dramatic changes in everyday life. The new social configurations were theorized in terms imported from the United States as the 'postindustrial society' (Aron, Touraine) and through original theories that were subsequently highly influential throughout the Western world. Roland Barthes critically dissected the ways that mass culture naturalized and idealized the new social configuration through 'mythologies' which provided propaganda for the new consumer society; Guy Debord attacked the new culture of image, spectacle, and commodities for their stultifying and pacifying effects, claiming that the 'society of the spectacle' masked the continuing reality of alienation and oppression; Baudrillard analyzed the structures, codes, and practices of the consumer

society; and Henri Lefebvre argued that the transformations of everyday life were providing new modes of domination by bureaucracies and consumer capitalism.

In addition, developments in literary and cultural criticism advanced new concepts of writing, theory, and discourse (for example, the 'structuralist revolution', the theories of the *Tel Quel* group, and the development of poststructuralist theory which we discuss below).

The rapid changes in the social and economic spheres were thus paralleled by equally dramatic changes in the world of theory. In postwar France, the intellectual scene had been dominated by Marxism, existentialism, and phenomenology, as well as by attempts to synthesize them (Poster 1975; Descombes 1980). By the 1960s, however, these theories were superseded by the linguistically-oriented discourses of structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis which advanced new concepts of language, theory, subjectivity, and society (Jameson 1972; Coward and Ellis 1977; Frank 1989).

Structuralists applied structural-linguistic concepts to the human sciences which they attempted to re-establish on a more rigorous basis. Lévi-Strauss, for instance, applied linguistic analysis to structural studies of mythology, kinship systems, and other anthropological phenomena, while Lacan developed a structural psychoanalysis and Althusser developed a structural Marxism. The structuralist revolution deployed holistic analyses that analyzed phenomena in terms of parts and wholes, defining a structure as the interrelation of parts within a common system. Structures were governed by unconscious codes or rules, as when language constituted meaning through a differential set of binary opposites, or when mythologies codified eating and sexual behaviour according to systems of rules and codes. In Barthes' words (1964: p. 213): 'The aim of all structuralist activity, in the fields of both thought and poetry, is to reconstitute an object, and, by this process, to make known the rules of functioning, or "functions", of this object. The structure is therefore effectively a *simulacrum* of the object which . . . brings out something that remained invisible, or, if you like, unintelligible in the natural object.'

Structural analysis focused on the underlying rules which organized phenomena into a social system, analyzing such things as totemic practices in terms of divisions between the sacred and profane in traditional societies, or cuisine in modern societies in

terms of culinary rules. Structural analysis aimed at objectivity, coherence, rigour, and truth, and claimed scientific status for its theories, which would be purged of mere subjective valuations and experiences.

The structuralist revolution thus described social phenomena in terms of linguistic and social structures, rules, codes, and systems, while rejecting the humanism which had previously shaped the social and human sciences. Althusser, for example, advocated a theoretical anti-humanism and eliminated human practice and subjectivity from the explanatory scheme of his version of Marxism. The structuralist critique wished to eliminate the concept of the subject which had dominated the philosophical tradition stemming from Descartes through Sartre. The subject was dismissed, or radically decentred, as merely an effect of language, culture, or the unconscious, and denied causal or creative efficacy. Structuralism stressed the derivativeness of subjectivity and meaning in contrast to the primacy of symbolic systems, the unconscious, and social relations. On this model, meaning was not the creation of the transparent intentions of an autonomous subject; the subject itself was constituted by its relations within language, so that subjectivity was seen as a social and linguistic construct. The *parole*, or particular uses of language by individual subjects, was determined by *langue*, the system of language itself.

The new structuralist currents were in part products of a linguistic turn which had roots in the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Arguing that language can be analyzed in terms of its present laws of operation, without reference to its historical properties and evolution, Saussure interpreted the linguistic sign as comprised of two integrally related parts: an acoustic-visual component, the signifier, and a conceptual component, the signified. Language is a 'system of signs that expresses ideas', or signifieds, through differing signifiers that produce meaning. Saussure emphasized two properties of language that are of crucial importance for understanding contemporary theoretical developments. First, he saw that the linguistic sign was arbitrary, that there is no natural link between the signifier and the signified, only a contingent cultural designation. Second, he emphasized that the sign is differential, part of a system of meanings where words acquire significance only by reference to what they are not: 'In language, there are only differences *without positive terms*' (Saussure 1966: p. 120).

As linguist Emile Benveniste and Derrida argued, Saussure nonetheless believed that speech gives presence to the world, that the sign has a natural and immediate relation to its referent, and that the signifier stands in a unitary and stable relationship with the signified (Coward and Ellis 1977; Harland 1987). By contrast, later poststructuralists would emphasize, in a far more radical way than structuralists and semioticians, the arbitrary, differential, and non-referential character of the sign. Indeed poststructural and postmodern theorists would stress the arbitrary and conventional nature of everything social – language, culture, practice, subjectivity, and society itself.

1.2.1 The Poststructuralist Critique

Just as structuralists radically attacked phenomenology, existentialism, and humanism, so too did poststructuralists assault the premises and assumptions of structuralist thought. The poststructuralists attacked the scientific pretensions of structuralism which attempted to create a scientific basis for the study of culture and which strove for the standard modern goals of foundation, truth, objectivity, certainty, and system. Poststructuralists argued as well that structuralist theories did not fully break with humanism since they reproduced the humanist notion of an unchanging human nature. The poststructuralists, by contrast, criticized the claims of structuralists that the mind had an innate, universal structure and that myth and other symbolic forms strove to resolve the invariable contradictions between nature and culture. They favoured instead a thoroughly historical view which sees different forms of consciousness, identities, signification, and so on as historically produced and therefore varying in different historical periods. Thus, while sharing with structuralism a dismissal of the concept of the autonomous subject, poststructuralism stressed the dimensions of history, politics, and everyday life in the contemporary world which tended to be suppressed by the abstractions of the structuralist project.

The critiques of structuralism were articulated in a series of texts by Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lyotard, and Barthes which produced an atmosphere of intense theoretical upheaval that helped to form postmodern theory. Unlike the structuralists who confined the play of language within closed structures of opposi-

tions, the poststructuralists gave primacy to the signifier over the signified, and thereby signalled the dynamic productivity of language, the instability of meaning, and a break with conventional representational schemes of meaning. In traditional theories of meaning, signifiers come to rest in the signified of a conscious mind. For poststructuralists, by contrast, the signified is only a moment in a never-ending process of signification where meaning is produced not in a stable, referential relation between subject and object, but only within the infinite, intertextual play of signifiers. In Derrida's words (1973: p. 58): 'The meaning of meaning is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signified ... Its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest ... it always signifies again and differs.' This production of signification that resists imposed structural constraints, Derrida terms 'dissemination', and we shall see the same sort of dynamic emphases in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire, Lyotard's theory of intensities, Baudrillard's concept of semiurgy, and Foucault's concept of power.

✓ The new theories of language and discourse led to radical critiques of modern philosophy, attacking its root assumptions.⁵ It was claimed that modern philosophy was undermined by its impossible dream of attaining a foundation for knowledge, an absolute bedrock of truth that could serve as the guarantee of philosophical systems (Rorty 1979). Derrida (1976) termed this foundationalist approach to language and knowledge a 'metaphysics of presence' that supposedly guaranteed the subject an unmediated access to reality. He argued that the binary oppositions governing Western philosophy and culture (subject/object, appearance/reality, speech/writing, and so on) work to construct a far-from-innocent hierarchy of values which attempt not only to guarantee truth, but also serve to exclude and devalue allegedly inferior terms or positions. This binary metaphysics thus works to positively position reality over appearance, speech over writing, men over women, or reason over nature, thus positioning negatively the supposedly inferior term.

Many later poststructuralists and postmodern theorists followed Derrida in concluding that a thoroughgoing deconstruction of modern philosophy and a radically new philosophical practice were needed. Precursors of the postmodern critique of philosophy