

# 1

## WHAT IS POSTMODERNITY

The *Modern-day Dictionary of Received Ideas* says of 'postmodernism': 'This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible.' With a few notable exceptions, cultural theorists have been following this advice. The term postmodernism has been used with astonishing frequency in a surprising variety of ways. Its popularity seems to derive from the way it can mean anything to anyone. However there is more to the proliferation of the term than this. It signifies participation in the debate about whether there has been a radical cultural transformation in the world, particularly within Western societies, and if so, whether this has been good or bad. To define the postmodern is not just to define a term. It is to characterize the present age and to assess how we should respond to it.

What then are the defining features of the present age? The most widely accepted characterization of the postmodern condition is that offered by Lyotard. It is 'the incredulity towards metanarratives';<sup>1</sup> that is, the incredulity to any metadiscourse which makes appeal to some grand narrative, such as the emancipation of the rational, the liberation of the exploited, or the creation of wealth, which can legitimate all particular claims to knowledge. What does this mean? The loss of credibility of grand narratives is essentially a loss of belief in 'progress'.

If this is the case, it is indeed a major cultural event. In his *History of the Idea of Progress* Robert Nisbet convincingly argued that the whole of European civilization since the Ancient Greeks has been based on belief in progress. It was the Christians within the Roman Empire who gave a moral dimension to history, and defined themselves and their destiny in terms of participation in humanity's cumulative advance towards a final state of perfection. Modernity with its assumption of progress in knowledge, reason, technology, the arts and the economy, began as a secularisation of Christian eschatology. The central tenets of Western civilization were merely rewritten in a new key. According to Nisbet, there have been at least five constant premises to be found in the idea of progress from Ancient Greece until the present: 'belief in the value of the past; conviction of the nobility, even superiority, of Western civilization; acceptance of the worth of economic and technological growth; faith in reason and in the kind of scientific and scholarly knowledge that can come from reason alone; and, finally, belief in the intrinsic importance, the ineffaceable *worth* of life on this earth.'<sup>2</sup> It is these premises which have lost their plausibility - at least within Western societies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, [1979] tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p.xxvi.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, New York: Basic Books, 1980, p.317.

Without a belief in the future, the whole structure of Western culture falls apart. Nietzsche noted how the notion of progress first emerged, the role it has played in European civilization, and the significance of its destruction:

From time immemorial we have ascribed the value of an action, a character, an existence, to the *intention*, the *purpose* for the sake of which one has acted or lived: the age-old idiosyncrasy finally takes a dangerous turn... there seems to be in preparation a universal disvaluation: "Nothing has any meaning"... In accordance with this valuation, one was constrained to transfer the value of life to a "life after death," or to the progressive development of ideas or of mankind or of the people or beyond mankind; but with that one had arrived at a *progressus in infinitum* of purposes: one was at last constrained to make a place for oneself in the "world process" (perhaps with the dysdaemonistic perspective that it was a process into nothingness).<sup>3</sup>

People now appear to believe that the world process is a process into nothingness.

### ***Postmodernism, the environmental crisis, and globalization***

How could this have happened? How can the central principle which has dominated a civilization for two and a half millenia and which has inspired that civilization to dominate the world, dissolve into nothingness. While people's faith in progress has been shaken in the past, it is only in the second half of the twentieth century that disbelief in these premises has become widespread. This could only be possible in a world where there were very good reasons for ceasing to believe in such premises. What seems to have happened is that the triumph of Western civilization has revealed the hollowness of its promises. As Richard Newbold Adams summed up recent developments in Western culture:

The nineteenth-century vision of how to make the world a better place in which to live was called "progress." It was a coal-fueled ideology for a vast colonial expansion and it was crushingly discredited by World War I and the interwar era of stagnation and depression. Development is the successor to the vision of progress that accompanied the petroleum-fueled spread of industrialism in the post-World War II nationalizing. If the illusion of progress was dashed by the First World War, the "development" illusion began to crack and fragment, on the one hand, with increasing poverty, social movements and revolts, military interventions and regional wars, and, on the other hand, environmental pollution and degradation.

Of these problems it is the environmental crisis which is the most significant, because it reveals that all the suffering inflicted by Western civilization both on its own members and on those civilizations and traditional societies it has conquered, has been for nothing. It appears impossible now to construct a plausible grand narrative able to legitimate the past and the present, which would enable individuals to identify themselves in a way which could excuse their participation in the imminent destruction of humanity.

The disorientation created by the environmental crisis has been accentuated by and resonates with the 'globalization' of economic and cultural processes. The idea of progress was very much bound up with a particular group of people's identifying themselves as having advanced more than others, as being at the cutting edge of the evolution of humanity in contrast to others who were

---

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage, 1968, §666, p.351.

represented as backward. It was associated with an evaluation of nations and peoples. The notion of progress was based on a hierarchical ordering of nations and races, with Europeans being at the top of the hierarchy, and 'primitives' such as Australian aboriginals being at the bottom. Such hierarchical ordering of peoples has been threatened by globalization.

Roland Robertson coined the term 'globalization' to describe a process by which the world is being integrated.<sup>4</sup> The conditions of this have been the spread of capitalism, Western imperialism and the development of a global media system; but the unity is a unity of a general and global agency-structure. In its most recent phase, globalization has been associated with new forms of media, new forms of technology and new forms of management which have transformed the spatio-temporal relations within capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Time has conquered space. The ease with which people can now communicate over long distances, the rapidity with which people can travel and goods can be transported, has brought the affluent throughout the world into closer contact, while creating greater distances between them and the people in their geographical neighbourhood. International trade has steadily increased as a proportion of the national incomes of almost all nations. New patterns of communication within transnational business enterprises and financial organizations has reduced the autonomy of their local branches, and capital can be moved in and out of countries with astonishing rapidity. It is likely that in this new global order, Westerners will no longer be the main beneficiaries of 'progress'. The future no longer belongs automatically to people of European descent. The incredulity towards grand narratives can be partly understood as disorientation caused by this, and a refusal by members of Western civilization to face up to a world in which they are losing their privileged positions. It is the response of people of European descent to their powerlessness within the world-order which was originally created by European civilization.

Globalization has undermined State control over national economies in the core and semi-peripheral zones of the world economy - States have never had much control in peripheral economies. Since the early 1970's the regulatory mechanisms States established over their economies after the Great Depression, and the Second World War which resulted from it, have been steadily undermined. Effectively, this has meant a successful onslaught by oligarchical institutions against democratic institutions which were the product of centuries of popular struggles for freedom. The growing internationalization of capital was brilliantly analysed by Stephen Hymer in the early 1970's.<sup>6</sup> Hymer noted the tendency for transnational corporations to grow faster than national corporations, generating a degree of capital mobility which was forcing States to compete with each other to attract capital investment. He argued that this would create a crisis in both capitalism and in the labour movement, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Roland Robertson, 'Mapping the Global Condition', *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. Mike Featherston, London: Sage, 1990, and 'Social Theory, Cultural Relativity and the Problem of Globality', *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> On this, see David Harvey, 'Time-space compression and the postmodern condition', *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, Ch.17. On changing management, see Stewart R. Clegg, *Modern Organizations: Organizational Studies in the Postmodern World*, London: Sage, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Hymer, 'Internationalization of capital and international politics: a radical approach' in Edward J. Nell, *Growth, Profits, & Property: Essays in the Revival of Political Economy*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1980, pp. 189-203. This paper is a blend of two papers, one written in 1972 and the other in 1974, shortly before the author's death. The developments identified by Hyman were analysed and described in more detail by Richard J. Barnet & Ronald E. Müller, *Global Reach*, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1974, and more recently by a number of political economists in Richard Peet ed. *International Capitalism and Industrial Restructuring*, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987 and Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations*, New York: Vintage, 1991.

identified two possible paths of development. Either a new international order would be established dominated by international capital and supported by a privileged section of the working class in the advanced countries which would suppress blacks, Third World people, foreign workers, women and the aged, or a new socialist movement would emerge, which, in the attempt to gain community control over their own work and consumption, would struggle for national or regional self-sufficiency. Hymer thought the first path would not be taken because of the large numbers and strength of the disadvantaged groups who could only be contained with enormous brutality. It is clear that the first path has been taken, and that proponents of the second barely got off the mark. As Claus Offe, Scott Lash and John Urry have shown, whether national control over economic processes had been achieved from above, as in the case of Germany, or from below, as in the case of Sweden, the institutions set up to control national economies for the benefit of their members are failing.<sup>7</sup> Loss of State control over national economies has been greatest in Anglophone nations, where it was weakest in the first place, and least in Asian nations. With this loss, capital has been exported to rapidly expanding centres of economic activity in the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world economy, which are now outcompeting the old core zone manufacturing industries of Europe and America. In these old core zones, capital freed from production and repatriated from peripheral countries has been invested unproductively in the stock market, real estate, luxury goods and the arts. Deindustrialization with high levels of unemployment has been associated with increased wealth for the wealthy and the gentrification of central city areas. As Jonathon Friedman has pointed out: 'Slumification and yuppification, the increased stratification of the "really declining" centres, is a single systemic process.'<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, globalization has been associated with the decline of the West and the fragmentation of Western societies. Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, the English could define themselves in opposition to and as superior to people of other European nations, as Europeans superior to Orientals, and as civilized people superior to 'primitives'.<sup>9</sup> North Americans' identity as a superior form of human life was developed somewhat later than the English, and has been less stable, but defining themselves in opposition to Europeans, to Latin Americans, to Asians, to blacks and to primitive tribes, white North Americans had developed a strong sense of their place in the world as members of a nation more powerful than any other, particularly after the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> Anglophones, whether English, Americans or colonials had come to believe that they could contain within their own discourse the discourses of everyone else, or almost everyone else, past and present. With Britain's loss of world hegemony and then economic decline and with its growing non-Caucasian population, with USA's declining economic power relative to Japan and continental Europe and with its fastest growing economy in California increasingly peopled by non-English speaking Latin Americans and Asians, such clear-cut identities of superiority can no longer be sustained. Anglophones are being forced to recognize themselves as just another ethnic

---

<sup>7</sup> Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985; and Scott Lash & John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Friedman, 'Narcissism, roots and postmodernity', *Modernity & Identity* ed. Scott Lash & Jonathan Friedman, Blackwell: Oxford, 1992, pp.331-366, p.334.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance George W. Stocking Jr., 'The Dark-Skinned Savage: The Image of Primitive Man in Evolutionary Anthropology', *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> On this, see R. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, N.Y.: Braziller, 1959.

group.<sup>11</sup> And other Europeans, though never as unselfconsciously ethnocentric as Anglophones, nor in such rapid decline, are also being forced to question their self-definitions relative to others.<sup>12</sup>

These developments have undermined national identities. To begin with, they have created a global class consisting of an international bourgeoisie and a sub-class of 'symbolic analysts' - those who make their living manipulating symbols<sup>13</sup> (collectively, the 'new bourgeoisie') sharing one culture with a very weak allegiance to any nation. Typically, the media magnate Rupert Murdoch simply renounced his Australian citizenship and became an American when it suited his business interests. While the process of identification with nations as 'imaginary communities'<sup>14</sup> has been thus weakened from above, identification has been weakened from below by assertions of cultural identity against national identity by ethnic minorities. Native Hawaiians, North American Indians and Australian Aboriginals, groups who had been defined as primitives and relics of a superseded stage of human evolution, are all rejecting the cultures which denied their present significance, and are now reviving their traditional cultures.<sup>15</sup> Similarly migrants are no longer embracing the national cultures of their new homelands but are demanding that their own cultures be accorded the same respect as the native culture.<sup>16</sup> Under these circumstances it can no longer be assumed that the future will belong to people of European descent, and this disinclines them to even contemplate grand narratives, which, to have any plausibility, could only portray them as insignificant bystanders in the march of history.

### **Changing class composition and cultural change**

Globalization, the disorganization of capitalism and changes in people's thinking have not taken place without resistance. These developments reflect the outcome of class struggle, a struggle which has resulted in the subordination of previously powerful classes by the new international bourgeoisie, and the expansion of a new petite bourgeoisie, a service sub-class. Class conflict has involved cultural conflict, and the emergence of a new balance of classes has been associated with new cultural configurations which have also affected the readiness of people to believe in grand narratives.

Globalization involved the breaking up of the previous balance of class relations, with the decline of the domestic bourgeoisie - those capitalists whose firms which produce for the home market, of farmers, of the working class, and

---

<sup>11</sup> On this, see Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity' and 'Old and New Identities', *Old and New Ethnicities*, ed. Anthony King, ed. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991.

<sup>12</sup> The loss of self-assurance of the French is superbly described by Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Routledge: London, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> The rise of symbolic analysts as a sub-class in alliance with the international bourgeoisie has been described by Robert B. Reich, *The Wealth of Nations*, New York: Vintage, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> The term used by Benedict Anderson to characterize nationalism. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

<sup>15</sup> On these groups see Jonathon Friedman, 'Narcissism, roots and postmodernity: the constitution of selfhood in the global crisis', *Modernity and Identity* ed. Scott Lash & Jonathan Friedman, Oxford: Blackwells, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> On the issues this has raised, see Homi K. Bhabha ed., *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge and New York, 1990.

in most cases of the 'salarariat' or salary earners.<sup>17</sup> The decline of the domestic bourgeoisie has not been as dramatic as one might expect, since for the most part they have either transformed themselves into members of the international bourgeoisie, or have gone bankrupt and declined into lower classes. Those remaining have been too entrenched in their traditional opposition to the working class and too small a group to develop into an organized opposition to the rise of the new international bourgeoisie. They have been going quietly to the wall, along with farmers who are now an insignificant proportion of the population in advanced capitalist nations. The working class have been fighting a rear-guard action, sometimes successfully, more often, unsuccessfully. Where they have been able to maintain control over the market for labour, blue-collar workers are more affluent than ever before. However this control is being challenged from every direction. Workers in the core zones now have to compete with workers in the peripheral regions of the world-economy and from migrant workers. As a consequence increasingly high proportions of people from working class backgrounds are either unemployed or are engaged in casual work. The traditional working class is a rapidly diminishing proportion of the population. The salariat, which for a long time was the fastest growing class within Western countries, has been divided between increasingly affluent administrators and increasingly poor and insecure professionals. There has generally been an increase in the incomes, power and numbers of those engaged in administration relative to those salaried members of the workforce who actually provide services. Those who are engaged in providing services - teachers, academics, medical practitioners working for a salary, librarians and social workers - have suffered radical reductions in real income and conditions with reduced job security while bearing increasingly heavy loads of work. And many are being forced into the new service sub-class of the petite bourgeoisie as governments have abandoned responsibility for services to the community.

The bourgeoisie, the working class and the salariat supported different versions of the grand narrative of progress. The domestic bourgeoisie, as the ruling class, promoted the dominant version, that capitalism based on the free market would generate increasing national wealth in the first instance, and then international wealth, rescuing all who accepted the rule of the market from poverty and oppression; and for the most part farmers supported the bourgeoisie and their belief in themselves as the foremost agents of national progress. This had been reinforced by projecting onto nature the working of capitalist society, so that free competition and the struggle for survival between individuals, firms and nations which had resulted in the triumph of Anglophone nations was seen as part of cosmic evolution.<sup>18</sup> The working class deviated from this model either mildly, in the case of social democrats, or more radically in the case of Marxists. However the difference was more in emphasis than in kind. For both, the development of capitalism was seen to be providing the conditions for the creation of a more benign social order in which the working class increasingly would be able to appropriate for themselves the goods produced by industrial development, and through gaining power within the institutions of the State, increasingly would become managers of the economy. The salariat did not develop an independent class consciousness and its members have been divided in their alignments between the domestic

---

<sup>17</sup> On the changing relations between classes in modern capitalist societies see Richard Peet, 'The geography of class struggle and the relocation of United States manufacturing industry,' *International Capitalism and Industrial Restructuring* ed. Richard Peet, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987.

<sup>18</sup> On this, see Jim Moore, 'Socializing Darwinism', *Science as Politics* ed. Les Levidow, London: Free Association Books, 1986, and the essays in Robert Young, *Darwin's Metaphor*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1985.

bourgeoisie and the working class. However they have offered a distinctive colouring to the grand narratives of other classes, promoting civil liberties, education, equality between the sexes, and more humanitarian treatment of people and non-human forms of life. They have been the bearers and extenders of the enlightenment ideal of progress through reason, and as Alvin Gouldner has pointed out, they have been 'the most progressive force in modern society and ... the center of whatever human emancipation is possible in the foreseeable future.'<sup>19</sup> The decline of all these classes has involved their cultural subordination as well as their political and economic subordination. The narratives by which they had previously defined themselves and their role in history have been undermined.

### ***The New International Bourgeoisie***

While undermining the grand narratives legitimating old class identities, the new international bourgeoisie has not replaced these with a new grand narrative - or at least not one that can be appropriated, or even argued against, by others. The new international bourgeoisie is the class responsible for the transformation of the world-system. While capitalism is less organized at the national level, it is becoming more organized at an international level.<sup>20</sup> The new international bourgeoisie are the agents of the new transnational organization of capitalism, bringing to fulfilment the grand narrative underlying capitalism. The achievement and maintenance of this power has been possible through developments in communications, and to a considerable extent through the control of mass media which has been the site of unprecedented corporate activity in recent decades. This has been associated with massive expenditure by large, mainly transnational, business corporations on public relations, promoting the economic policies favourable to their expansion.<sup>21</sup> However by far the biggest factor in their domination is their ability to circumvent efforts by national governments to regulate them, to organize enterprises and projects at an unprecedented level of complexity. Since they have been able to move money and capital around the globe and force State governments to compete with each to serve their interests - in order to attract or retain investment - it has not been necessary for members of this class to justify the power they have gained.

This does not mean that the new bourgeoisie are devoid of beliefs about the nature of the world and their place within it. They assume a modern, refined version of the mechanical world-view and of Darwinism.<sup>22</sup> However, unlike the Darwinian grand narrative of the old bourgeoisie, there is no presumption that what is evolving is improving the lot of humanity at large. In place of matter in motion, the world is seen in terms of information; and instead of life being seen as a struggle between individuals, nations and races, life is seen as a struggle between information processing systems. The evolution of humanity is seen to

---

<sup>19</sup> Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, N.Y.: Seabury, 1979, p.68.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, esp.p.45ff.

<sup>21</sup> Alex Carey, 'The Ideological Management Industry', in *Communications and the Media in Australia*, ed. Ted Wheelwright and Ken Buckley, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987, describes this, mainly in relation to Australia, but also looking at other countries.

<sup>22</sup> The ideology of the new bourgeoisie is essentially the ideology of the New Right. Their views are most clearly evident in *The Economist*, the most widely read and perhaps the most influential ideological organ of this new bourgeoisie.

be leading us into the 'technotronic age.'<sup>23</sup> While this conception of the world is more broadly articulated through information theory, socio-biology and a psychology which now represents people as information processing 'cyborgs', the ideological spearhead of this class is post-Keynesian neo-classical economics. This is characterized not only by monetarism, rational expectations theory and supply-side economics, the ideological weapons of the New Right in their struggle to dismantle social welfare provisions and institutions and to promote the deregulation of markets and reduction of trade barriers, but also by the rapid expansion of econometrics and computer modelling, and the transformation of economics from a science primarily concerned with guiding political policy-making to a science concerned to guide investment decisions by financiers.<sup>24</sup> The rise of the new class has been associated with the rise in status of economics, business studies and information science to the dominant intellectual positions within universities and government bureaucracies - and the devaluing of everything which does not serve as an instrument of the international economy.<sup>25</sup>

What is conspicuously lacking in this configuration of beliefs is any direction, any point to it all. For the new bourgeoisie there is nothing but power for the sake of power, control for the sake of control, and conspicuous consumption on a massive scale. The telos of the grand narrative guiding their actions is already realized. As Francis Fukuyama, a deputy director of the US State Department's Policy Planning Staff, argued, history has come to an end.<sup>26</sup> Many members of this class are engaged in finance, design, marketing and purchasing.<sup>27</sup> They are the 'paper entrepreneurialists'. As such they are responsible for the massive redistributions of income both within and between countries, all of it from the poorer to the wealthier, which have disrupted the economic life of businesses and nations, particularly Anglophone and Third World nations.<sup>28</sup> Their entry into the mass media and book publishing and distribution has been associated almost uniformly with the decline in standards of newspapers, television and books, and the disruption and impoverishment of education and cultural life. Their domination of world agriculture is impoverishing farmers in the affluent nations, is starving to death some twelve million people each year in Third World countries - more than were being killed each year during the Second World War, and is permanently destroying agricultural land at a rate which promises a

---

<sup>23</sup> See Z. Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technotronic Era*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. Brzezinski argued that we are entering the 'technetronic' (technological + electronic) age in which humans will be remoulded by the new technologies and sciences associated with information processing.

<sup>24</sup> On the dominant ideas of recent economic thought see Lester C. Thurow, *Dangerous Currents The State of Economics*, Oxford: O.U.P., 1983.

<sup>25</sup> This development within Australia has been described by Michael Pusey, *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1991.

<sup>26</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992.

<sup>27</sup> On the operations of the new class of financiers, see Adrian Hamilton in *The Financial Revolution*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986.

<sup>28</sup> The deleterious effects of corporate takeovers have been examined in Alan Auerbach ed., *Corporate Takeovers: Causes and Consequences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; and David Ravenscroft and F.M. Scherer, *Mergers, Sell-Offs and Economic Efficiency*, N.Y.: Brookings Institute, 1988. On the general effects of this on the U.S. economy see S. Melman, *Profits Without Production*, N.Y.: Knopf, 1983. On an international level their activities have had disastrous effects. See Susan George, *A Fate Worse than Debt*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1988; and *The Debt Boomerang*, London: Pluto Press, 1992.

catastrophe unparalleled in human history.<sup>29</sup> This class is contributing nothing to human welfare, and their attitude to this is summed up in the words of an economist writing in *Business and Society Review*: 'Suppose that, as a result of using up all the world's resources, human life did come to an end. So what?'<sup>30</sup>

### **Class conflict and cultural politics**

To say that the rise of the new bourgeoisie was associated with the discrediting of the narratives of progress of the defeated classes, does not explain this cultural transformation. The transformation suggests cultural conflict, but the question is whether this conflict was a mere by-product of the demise of the old classes, the condition of their demise, or something more complex. That cultural politics was insignificant in determining events is highly plausible. The growing powerlessness of the old bourgeoisie and the old working class itself would be enough to undermine the confidence of their members in narratives defining and celebrating their destiny as primary agents of history. The development of transnational corporations and of the new bourgeoisie, once this had reached a certain stage, was inexorable. The new bourgeoisie did not need to engage in a great deal of cultural politics in order to have their way once they were in a position to undermine the economies of nations. In place of legitimation through grand narratives the new bourgeoisie could threaten governments with the withdrawal of capital, and rely on a population seduced into almost total market dependence by the products of global capitalism to remove any government which did not bow to such threats. The uniformity with which the States of Western nations lost control over their economies suggests that changes in culture were of little importance in this transformation.

However the success of Asian nations has been largely due to the ability of Asian States to retain control over their economies.<sup>31</sup> Such control *was* possible, and if it was not maintained or re-established within the affluent nations of the West, one must ask, Why? It is here that the role of culture and cultural politics becomes evident. However the dynamics of cultures is extremely complex. It is too simple to account for the cultural transformations of the West as the result of strategy of a class to establish cultural hegemony over society. These can only be understood by taking into account the unintended effects of social and economic processes, the ways in which social changes affecting the way people live has affected their ways of thinking, the ways in which individual members of classes responded to their situation, as well as the more deliberate efforts to control people's thinking. In the cultural conflict between classes leading to the decline of the old classes, it is the culture of the middle classes, particularly the new petite bourgeoisie, which has played the greatest part in determining the outcome. And it is in the analysis of cultural transformations within and brought about by the new petite bourgeoisie that most of the other features of postmodern culture become intelligible.

---

<sup>29</sup> On this see Susan George, *How the Other Half Dies*, Harmondsworth, 1977, and *Ill Fares the Land*, [1984] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990; Jon Bennett, *The Hunger Machine*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987; and Michael W. Fox, *Agricide*, New York: Schocken Books, 1986.

<sup>30</sup> Cited by Robert L. Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into The Human Prospect*, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1975, p.170.

<sup>31</sup> For an analysis of the economic success of Asian societies, see Nigel Harris, *The End of the Third World*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.

To begin with, what needs to be explained is the lack of resolution of the domestic bourgeoisie to protect its own interests, and then the inability of the working class to mobilize effectively as a class to meet the threat to its welfare. What globalization and the rise of the new international bourgeoisie seems to have revealed is how the unity within these two classes had been undermined in Western societies. This is not to say that there was no unity at all. Members of the bourgeoisie generally recognized their unity in their interests as employers in opposition to the working class, and members of the working class recognized their unity in their interests as employees struggling for better wages in opposition to employers. However there was little more holding them together as classes than this. In the face of a threat coming from an entirely different direction the old bourgeoisie could only attack the wages and conditions of the working class. Under this attack the last element of working class identity dissolved with the shift from national bargaining to enterprise-level bargaining. As politicians placed in power by the vote of the working class consistently acted against their interests, members of the working class have increasingly turned to racist ideologies to protect themselves.

What was responsible for the weakness of these old classes? One of the most profound analyses of the cultural dimension of the class struggle has been provided by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argues that each class and class fraction has a particular 'habitus', an embodied set of classificatory schemes underpinning consciousness and language through which people orient themselves. The first principle of such classifications is based on the high versus low opposition, which is elaborated into such distinctions as 'noble' and 'ignoble', the 'elite' and the 'masses', and the second on the light versus heavy opposition, which is elaborated in pre-modern societies into such distinctions as that between warriors and clerics. Such classificatory schemes are at the same time, for the people who embody them, systems of ultimate values which are experienced viscerally as tastes and distastes. There are continual struggles between groups to impose those taxonomies most favourable to their own characteristics, that is, their own habitus, on other groups and on the whole of society. Bourdieu's analysis can be utilized to explain how narratives come to be disbelieved. The narratives by which people define themselves should not be thought of only as tales produced and recited. They are embodied as orientations to the world, its past, its present and its future.<sup>32</sup> Such embodied narratives embody the taxonomies described by Bourdieu. The struggles between groups to impose their habitus will also be a struggle to impose a particular narrative as the correct interpretation and evaluation of the present situation, of what has happened in the past, and what ends should be realized in the future. Success by one group in such a struggle will involve people of a rival group coming to experience themselves in terms of the taxonomies of the victorious group, and re-evaluating their position in history accordingly. This will often involve their ceasing to experience themselves as agents of history, and coming to experience history having a dynamics beyond their ideals and goals. If the old classes are weak and are no longer able to function as agents, this suggests that another class has successfully imposed its habitus on their members, and they are no longer able to see themselves in terms of a coherent narrative as playing a leading role in history.

In the case of the subordination of the domestic bourgeoisie, globalization must be understood as the disintegration of taxonomies, projects and ideals

---

<sup>32</sup> This has been cogently argued by David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

centring around symbols exalting 'the nation', and their reconstitution around the international economy and its symbols. Henceforth 'success' must be success on the international stage. Success at a local level is drained of significance, particularly if the local market is protected by tariffs. How has this subordination occurred? How did the old symbols lose their meaning? Direct contact through a shared social milieu with the form of life of members of the new international bourgeoisie, with their 'Californian' style - eschewing national symbols and partaking of an international symbol market, may have played a part. However the images promoted in the public relations of businesses and business organizations and celebrated in the mass media, now largely under the control of the new bourgeoisie,<sup>33</sup> and the complex economic theories and models of the economy produced by academics and touted by politicians, are more likely to be responsible for undermining the old habitus.

The cultural subordination of the working class was more complex. It was effected through the transformation of capitalism from a system in which people gained their identity through participation in production processes, that is, in terms of their job or trade, to a system in which people gain their identity through consumption. As in the case with the old bourgeoisie, old habituses and the narratives with which they were associated have been undermined by images projected by the mass media. However the impact of the mass media has not been uniform. A new habitus has been imposed on the general population initially by affecting a small number of people, and then by reinforcing the habitus of such people at the expense of those more resistant to mass media images. For the most part, it has been the 'middle class' which has been influenced directly by the mass media, and the rest of the population has then succumbed to the influence of the middle class.

### ***The evolution of the middle class***

The 'middle class', that is, lawyers, doctors, members of the salariat, shopkeepers, small businessmen, professionals and various kinds of artists and intellectuals, has a long history. Its career as a component of capitalism goes back to its origins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This class absorbed artisans, former peasants, descendents of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, and people rising from the working class. For the most part they were imbued with a strong work ethic and had a high regard for education, and these were central to their identity. They were associated with Protestantism, or with 'protestant' elements within Catholicism. The lower middle class defined themselves primarily as upholders of a severe morality and work discipline in opposition to the working class, while the upper middle class defined themselves as upholders of culture and higher values in opposition to the bourgeoisie. As the middle class began to expand towards the end of the nineteenth century, its habitus began to change. The early stages of this change, along with the causes of it, have been chartered by Daniel Bell.<sup>34</sup>

According to Bell, American capitalism was established on the basis of an ascetic Protestant ethic. This ethic was sustained by the small towns in which

---

<sup>33</sup> On the control of the media by the new bourgeoisie and its effects, see Jeremy Tunstall and Michael Palmer, *Media Moguls*, London: Routledge, 1991, and Armand Mattelart, *Transnationals and the Third World: The Struggle for Culture*, South Headley, Mass: Bergin and Garvey, 1983.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Bell, 'The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,' in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York: Basic Books, 1976, pp.33-84; and 'Beyond Modernism, Beyond Self,' in *Sociological Journeys*, London: Heinemann, 1980, pp.275-302.

most of the population lived. However towards the end of the nineteenth century, more and more people began to live in big cities, freeing them from the small-town pressures to social conformity. Mass consumption which made possible by new developments in technology - cars which made it possible for people to get away from their local communities, radio and film which brought new ideas and models to conform to, advertising which continually pressed people to consume the latest products, and then the introduction of television - dissolved local cultures and created a common culture committed to social and personal transformation. The virtues endorsed by Protestantism had no place within this common culture which was concerned not with how to work and achieve, but how to spend and enjoy.

Artists and writers promoted this transformation, and in so doing undermined their own position in society. Bell accepts the argument of Lionel Trilling that:

Any historian of literature of the modern age will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, that characterizes modern writing - he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that produced him.<sup>35</sup>

According to Bell, it is the culture of Protestant asceticism that has been most under attack. Responding to the new awareness of motion and speed, light and sound which came from communication and transport, and from a new self-consciousness generated by the loss of religious certitude, artists adopted a stance of unyielding rage against the official order. In doing so they attacked all forms of external constraint, and more particularly, all forms of self-discipline. In place of religion and morality, in place of restraint, of planning for the future, modernists proposed an aesthetic justification of life - to free people to create works of art, to create themselves as works of art. While it was not the intention of the modernists to reduce works of art to objects of consumption, such a reduction was the inevitable outcome of their attacks on self-discipline and moral constraint.<sup>36</sup> To the postmodernist successors of modernist artists, '[i]mpulse and pleasure alone are real and life-affirming; all else is neurosis and death. In a literal sense, reason is the enemy and the desires of the body the truth. Objective consciousness defrauds, and only emotion is meaningful.'<sup>37</sup> Modernist artists and writers are no longer significant in society, are no longer seen as the harbingers of a new order. They have won. They have transformed culture, or played a major part in its transformation, and there is nothing left for them to do. This has devalued works of art and literature. They are now *consumed*. As Hannah Arendt argued, mass society now 'wants not culture, but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just as are any other consumer good.'<sup>38</sup>

Bell's analysis accords with, and is supported by radical cultural theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Mark Poster and Neil Postman. These theorists have been particularly concerned with how changing media, the displacement of the print medium by electronic media, has transformed culture along lines similar

---

<sup>35</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p.12.

<sup>36</sup> That they would do so was to some extent anticipated by Baudelaire who argued that 'since the the complete absence of the right and the true in art amounts to a lack of art, the entire man perishes...' Cited by Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry* [1969], London: Methuen, 1982, p.5.

<sup>37</sup> Bell, 'Beyond Modernism, Beyond Self?', p.288.

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Society and Culture,' in *Culture for the Millions?*, ed. Norman Jacobs, Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961, pp.43-53. Cited by Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*.

to those described by Bell. That different media have the potential to profoundly transform the way people think and construct their identities is made plausible by studies which have revealed the effects of writing and print media on oral cultures. Walter Ong has shown how the whole development of Western philosophy, the capacity for abstract thinking, for constructing definitions, for entertaining abstract notions of justice, for formal logic and for introspection were all effects of literacy.<sup>39</sup> It fundamentally changed the way people related to themselves, to each other, to their society and to nature, and made possible new kinds of social organization. The invention of print furthered this transformation of human nature. Mark Poster, following Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard, argues that television is having an effect just as dramatic:

The language/practice of TV absorbs the functions of culture to a greater degree than face-to-face conversations or print and its discursive effect is to constitute subjects differently from speech or print. Speech constitutes subjects as members of a community by solidifying the ties between individuals. Print constitutes subjects as rational, autonomous egos, as stable interpreters of culture who, in isolation, make logical connections from linear symbols. Media language - contextless, monologic, self-referential - invites the recipient to play with the process of self-constitution, continuously to remake the self in "conversation" with differing modes of discourse. Since no one who knows the recipient is speaking to them and since there is no clearly determinate referential world outside the broadcast to provide a standard against which to evaluate the flow of meanings, the subject has no defined identity as a pole of conversation.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time television has disorganized people's experience so that they can no longer relate their own lives and experiences to the world which television reveals to them, or situate themselves as having a place in this world. As Neil Postman put it, television has created 'a neighbourhood of strangers and pointless quantity; a world of fragments and discontinuities.'<sup>41</sup> To relate to the world through television amounts to 'amusing ourselves to death'.

The salariat along with the professions expanded rapidly through the 1950's and 60's in virtually every Western society without developing an independent class consciousness. This changed to some degree in the late 1960's as young members of the middle class developed a radical opposition to the ideology of the national bourgeoisie and to an intellectual culture subordinated to the capitalist economy and its State and military system. This was the New Left. However in their rejection of prevailing culture, and faced with the massive power of an expanding capitalist economy and its political institutions, most of the New Left were seduced into a life of hedonism and self-indulgence.<sup>42</sup> The intensification of hedonism in the late 1960's was both a consequence and a cause of the failure of the radical salariat to gain any significant political influence on society. This failure heralded the rise of the New Right, attacks on the welfare state and the decline of the salariat as a class, and correspondingly, the rise of a new fraction of the petite bourgeoisie, the service sub-class.

---

<sup>39</sup> For a summary of Ong's research, see his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London: Methuen, 1982.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information*, Cambridge: Polity, 1990, p.46.

<sup>41</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, London: Methuen, 1987, p.72.

<sup>42</sup> This is essentially the thesis of Alex Callinicos in *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

### ***The new service sub-class and their relation to the new bourgeoisie***

The new service sub-class consists of people engaged in presentation and representation, and in providing symbolic goods and services.<sup>43</sup> It includes not only people engaged in advertising and public relations, but also those engaged in providing medical and social assistance (in day-care centres, drug-abuse centres, race relations centres, marriage guidance bureaus etc.), and those involved in direct production and organization (as with youth leaders, tutors, radio and TV producers and presenters, magazine journalists). It is made up of people who rejected the self-discipline required of the salariat, or people who strove for, then failed to succeed in the traditional professions. These people have developed a habitus totally at variance with the habitus of professionals. People in the new sub-class are often engaged in efforts to *create* jobs suitable to their ambitions through professionalization strategies and through efforts to legitimate new licences and certifications. This often involves promoting a 'therapeutic morality' as a legitimating ideology. They often succeed, despite their deficient 'cultural capital,' by creating and selling new products, and by accumulating the 'social capital' of new contacts. In promoting themselves, this new cultural petite bourgeoisie encourage symbolic rehabilitation projects, giving cultural objects such as jazz and cinema a new status. This new petite bourgeoisie, sharing the internationalist consumer tastes of the new bourgeoisie, celebrating consumption as the end of life, have intruded into and increasingly subverted the hegemony of both the old bourgeoisie and the working class together with the patterns of classifications which had crystallized out of the confrontation between them, and subverted the emerging class consciousness of the salariat.

Members of this new sub-class are characterized by their 'decentred identities.'<sup>44</sup> Even when they are economically successful, they seldom identify with the occupations through which they make their living. Such decentred identities first emerged in Britain among the working-class young in the 1950's, and only developed among middle-class youth in the 1960's.<sup>45</sup> In both cases what made such identities possible was the extension of the period of 'liminality' between childhood, when people are constrained by their parents, and their absorption into responsible adult roles. The occupations of the new middle class effectively extend this liminality into adulthood. During this period of liminality, people are socially atomised, and this dissolves any buffering between them and the definitions of reality produced by the mass media. Television has been the most important mass medium in creating the postmodern habitus. Not only has the very nature of the medium influenced people's thinking, ways of relating to others, and self-conceptions, but television has assaulted the boundaries between the 'frontstage' and 'backstage' of fictional and non-fictional figures; it has given people greater access to information, augmenting their knowledge relative to authorities, and allowed people to see a far greater variety of forms of life than previously possible. It has encouraged a scepticism about any particular form of life, while encouraging experimentation with life forms. As Bourdieu observed of them: '[T]heir life-style and ethical and political positions are based on a rejection of everything in themselves which is finite, definite, final ... that is, a refusal to be

---

<sup>43</sup> The relationship between this class and postmodernism has been argued by Scott Lash and John Urry in *The End of Organized Capitalism*, p.292ff.

<sup>44</sup> As Scott Lash and John Urry have argued *ibid.* p.296ff.

<sup>45</sup> On this see Bernice Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981.

pinned down in a particular site ... Classified, déclassé, aspiring to a higher class, they see themselves as unclassifiable, "excluded", "dropped out", "marginal", anything rather than categorized, assigned to a class, a determinate place in social space.<sup>46</sup> Because of the extended liminality and the lack of any previous identity, the culture of the new petite bourgeoisie has been colonized by television images, and through their increasing numbers and strategic location as taste makers, have then been represented on television, creating a hyperreality in which imitations have been imitated to such an extent that 'the authentic' has disappeared entirely.

Members of this sub-class have subverted radical political action. They are concerned primarily with the existential and psycho-social meaning of people's lives. Taking their conceptions of themselves as open to modification, manipulation and transformation, there is a continual social construction or borrowing, legitimating and internalization of new expressive symbolic formulations. Presenting themselves as radicals, they have directed protest away from concern with economic and political justice into expressive forms which have no political effect. Recent social movements have had as their central concern the construction, interpretation and dissemination of new ideological models to facilitate the construction of more gratifying personal identities. This contrasts radically with feudal societies where honour required individuals to identify with and act according to their position in the social structure and to the constraints of the immediate situation, and to modernity in which individuals were expected to develop an identity, independent of particular roles, which would remain relatively permanent from adolescence to old age and make their behaviour more or less predictable, where honour was accorded to those who refused to modify their behaviour to accord with structural and situational contingencies. In the postmodern period, personal identity has become fluid as people transform themselves throughout their lives as they move from situation to situation. Consequently, as Robert Marx has noted, there is a growing disjunction between culture and the social order: '[F]or all the profound expressive cultural changes in the symbolic meanings and interpretations attached to core political institutions and role-statuses, neither the underlying political structure nor its institutional mechanisms and party organizations changed appreciably.'<sup>47</sup> Postmodern societies are characterized on the one hand by 'the bewildering rapid rates of change in the symbolic meanings, models, and interpretations that constitute the domain of expressive culture' and on the other by 'the stability, rigidity, and resilience to change of its basic institutional designs, structural patterns, and role-status relations.'<sup>48</sup>

The process by which such people now define themselves has been divorced from either a cosmology or a grand narrative in terms of which they can define their place in the world, and from efforts to uphold values and realize goals defined as objectively more worthwhile than others. Postmodern identities are defined primarily through emotional responses to the world. In place of social movements organized by an ideology designed to orient people for effective action, postmodern societies are characterized by 'ideological primary groups',

---

<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, [1979] tr. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984, p.370.

<sup>47</sup> John H. Marx, 'The Ideological Construction of Post-Modern Identity Models in Contemporary Cultural Movements,' in *Identity and Authority: Exploration in the Theory of Society*, ed. Roland Robertson and Bukhart Holzner, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, pp.145-189, p.162.

<sup>48</sup> John H. Marx, 'The Ideological Construction of Post-Modern Identity Models in Contemporary Cultural Movements,' p.162.

informal, unstructured collectivities which meet to discuss in a supportive, permissive context, common personal problems, feelings and experiences. Through these discussions these groups construct an expressive symbolic apparatus that publicly re-interprets dissatisfying and incomprehensible aspects of reality and generates new emotions appropriate to this redefined reality. New identities, which acquit individuals of responsibility for their problems, are constructed through such shared emotions - usually a sense of grievance, anger and indignation against some group or the whole society. By participating in a process of reality construction, members of these groups are made aware that institutional and role constraints are socially constructed structures which can be dismantled as easily as they were built, that all perspectives and viewpoints are relative, and that therefore the only absolutes, the only objectives worth striving for, which are possible of attainment, are within oneself. This vitiates any confidence that a new future can be constructed to overcome the evils of the present.

This new habitus has then been imposed upon others. Members of the new petite bourgeoisie have either risen from the working class or descended from the salariat or the old bourgeoisie, and look down upon all of these. They also have little regard for the asceticism, dedication and work ethic of the old intelligentsia. Obversely, they laud the cosmopolitanism and style of the new international bourgeoisie. The success with which they have imposed their habitus on others has largely dissolved not only nationalist bourgeois culture, but also the working class culture which gave working class people a sense of solidarity and which enabled them to act as an effective political movement. How has this been achieved? The culture of the new service class is centred on consumption and social discrimination rather than production and creativity. Postmodern culture does not unite people. It divides people. Through postmodern discourses, people struggle to define themselves as significant by struggling to define others as insignificant. It is under these circumstances that there has been a dissolution of a privileged discourse, a situation in which discourses struggle to legitimize themselves as privileged forms - not by rational argument but by the sort of promotion used to establish fashions in clothing. Most commonly, those defined as insignificant are the opponents of the new international bourgeoisie.

The association of the new petite bourgeoisie with the new, international bourgeoisie is not one of alignment. It amounts to the successful hegemony of the new bourgeoisie which has been able to subvert the efforts of the New Left to transform society by promoting the hedonism with which it was associated, promoting this and the new forms of life of those who failed or refused to enter the salariat or professions to undermine working class, traditional national bourgeois and traditional intellectual culture. The new bourgeoisie have been able to promote this destruction by gaining control over television stations, newspapers, journals publishing companies, and chains of bookstores, and virtually transforming the way the mass media is run.<sup>49</sup> They have selectively empowered those members of the new petite bourgeoisie promoting postmodern culture - supporting the integration of the aesthetic into the marketing of commodities in advertising, design and architecture, and the reduction of all cultural activity not immediately associated with the marketing of commodities to entertainment, or if this is not debasing enough, to 'amusements'.

---

<sup>49</sup> On this, see Bill Ryan, *Making Capital from Culture: The Corporate Form of Capitalist Production*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992.

## **The intelligentsia**

While postmodernism has been most used to characterize new developments in architecture, literature, film and art, its greatest impact is on the culture of intellectuals whose very existence is based on the assumption that culture is not merely relative, that there is a 'high culture' and that progress can be made in understanding, ways of living and social organization. The very existence of intellectuals is constituted by the ability of its members to uphold the reality of grand narratives which defines them as a vanguard. The Enlightenment attack on the cultural hegemony of the Church inaugurated a relatively unstructured elite of artists, writers and intellectuals who strove to replace the clergy as the ultimate arbiters in matters of belief, value and taste. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, universities and related research organizations became the institutional base for this Enlightenment elite, and intellectuals and cultural movements have had to gain recognition from such institutions in order to gain recognition of their credentials. These institutions are now losing their legitimacy.

The first cultural fields to lose their legitimacy were those based or anchored in the humanities departments of universities. Portents of the crisis in the humanities have been with us for some time. It was diagnosed in 1964 by Ernest Gellner, and his observations are so pertinent to understanding what is now called the postmodern condition that what he wrote then is worth quoting at length:

Language is the tool of trade of the humanist intellectual, but it is far more than that. Language ... is culture. ... The humanist intellectual is, essentially, an expert on the written word. ... A literate society possesses a firmer backbone through time than does an illiterate one. It is at least potentially capable of consistency. The literate intellectuals become the guardians and interpreters of that which is more than transient, and sometimes its authors. This role was one they once filled with pride. ... But this sense of pride is conditional on the fulfilment of the central task of this estate, which cannot but be one thing - the guardianship or the search for truth. If this is gone, only a shell remains. ... The question now is: how seriously does one now take the *cognitive* equipment of the *clerk*? The answer is, alas: not very much. ... The deprivation of the humanist intellectual of his full cognitive status has happened fairly recently. Signs and portents, in philosophy and elsewhere, can be traced very far back: but as a general and widely half-recognized phenomenon, it is very new, and has occurred within this century, and almost within the last few decades. The magnitude and profundity of this social revolution can scarcely be exaggerated.<sup>50</sup>

While this state of affairs was brought about by the loss of monopoly on literacy, there was still the assumption that literacy was important. With the rise of electronic media, the value of literacy itself is being brought into question. The position of humanist intellectuals is now even more precarious.

Philosophers have responded to this crisis in a number of ways. In the early years of the twentieth century efforts were made to legitimize philosophy by either defending the claims to knowledge of science, or, in the case of phenomenologists, by claiming to be a science. However little consensus was achieved, at least, not for more than a few years. Philosophy was characterized

---

<sup>50</sup> Ernest Gellner, 'Crisis in the Humanities and the Mainstream of Philosophy', J.H. Plumb ed. *Crisis in the Humanities*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964, pp.45-81, pp.71-73.

by revolutions in quick succession. With each revolution the previously reigning school of thought was condemned totally. There was no need for philosophers to concern themselves with the long history of their discipline, or even with what contemporary philosophers were doing in other countries. Philosophy had been effectively reduced to a sequence of academic parlour games, with the quest for wisdom virtually abandoned. Philosophy has since dissolved into a multiplicity of sub-disciplines, and schools of thought have multiplied at such a rate that they no longer succeed each other - they coexist. With rare exceptions - mostly German philosophers or philosophers aligned with German philosophy - these schools do not contend with each other; they dismiss each other. Anglo-American analytical philosophy specializing in language, logic and computer models of the mind, justifies itself by providing the means to develop new computer languages. Philosophy is taught in universities by anthologizing authors into snippets, and by fragmenting systems into piecemeal treatments of particular problems to fit in with the current sub-disciplinary boundaries, enabling people to avoid any confrontation between the systematic claims of great thinkers and their own ethical, political, religious or cosmological beliefs. Addressing the American Philosophical Association in 1987, Alasdair MacIntyre characterized the state of modern philosophy:

[I]n modern academic philosophy no issue, or almost no issue, is ever conclusively settled. ... [There is] no shared understanding of what philosophical rationality consists in ... Academic philosophy thus no longer provides the socially prescribed arena within which and by appeal to which systematic beliefs of various kinds, including political beliefs, are accorded or denied their title to rational justification. And its piecemeal character, its selective history and its inability to bring any issue of importance to agreed resolution all combine to make it intelligible that this should be so. ... [Philosophy] is, in the main a harmless, decorative activity, education in which is widely believed to benefit by exercising and extending capacities for orderly argument, so qualifying those who study it to join the line of lemmings entering law school or business school. The professor of philosophy ... stands to the contemporary bourgeoisie much as the dancing master stood to the nobility of the *ancien regime*. The dancing master taught the eighteenth-century expensively brought up young how to have supple limbs, the philosophy professor teaches their twentieth-century successors how to have supple minds.<sup>51</sup>

It is hardly surprising in these circumstances that philosophers have come to seriously doubt whether the subject can continue as a discipline,<sup>52</sup> and Richard Rorty, attacking philosophers' traditional concern with epistemology, has aligned himself with postmodernism and called for the reduction of philosophy to edifying discourse, to keeping the conversation going.<sup>53</sup>

The crisis in the humanities has been even more profoundly manifest in the study of literature. The study of vernacular literature began in Britain in the radical academies in the nineteenth century as an alternative to the Greek and Latin classics as a means to instil morality into students. It was promoted by Mathew Arnold and John Stuart Mill as a means to civilize the middle classes

---

<sup>51</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre, 'Philosophy: Past Conflict and Future Direction', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Supplement to Vol.61, #1, September, 1987, pp.81-87, pp.81-85.

<sup>52</sup> On this, and the state of modern philosophy generally, see Kenneth Baynes et.al. *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1987.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

in place of religious indoctrination. In this way a new discipline emerged which spread through the universities, and soon began to displace the classics as a means of defining the cultural elite. F. R. Leavis, who for twenty-five years, until his retirement from Cambridge in 1962, extolled the Great Tradition of literature, represented the high point in the history of this tradition. However by the end of Leavis' career, the study of literature was facing two crises. The first, superficial crisis was that the study of literature did not make anything explode or travel faster, and the powers of the time were not interested in much else. Secondly, and more fundamentally, the claim that literature civilized people and enhanced the quality of life, came to be seriously doubted. Such doubt disoriented academics in the discipline, and brought into question the category of literature itself.<sup>54</sup> In response to this, members of English departments intensified their interest in literary theory, turning to structuralist semiotics in an effort to turn the study of literature into a science. This effort was shortlived. Importing from France the deconstructionist techniques developed by the poststructuralists, increasing academics, confronting an influx of students from the new petite bourgeoisie contemptuous of 'high' culture, have capitulated, aligning themselves with popular culture against any effort to privilege one form of writing over another. The study of literature is now being transformed into cultural studies, extended to deal not only with popular fiction, but also songs, films, television and radio, and its proponents are engaged in a program of debunking the pretensions of high culture.

While the humanities appear to have succumbed to a joint assault by science and popular culture, it might still be claimed that science, the greatest intellectual achievement and ultimate point of reference of modernity, retains its privileged status. In the nineteenth century, science was differentiated from philosophy, and a number of thinkers struggled mightily to create a new priesthood of scientists in place of priests, and to reorganize education around science.<sup>55</sup> They were astonishingly successful. The demise of the humanities could be regarded as the final triumph of science. Surely it must now be recognized by everyone that scientists have access to truth in a way which privileges them over the pretensions of the humanities and makes them invulnerable to challenges from popular culture? In the last resort, doesn't almost everyone turn to scientific experts to resolve disputes?

Until very recently this was the case. But that scientists have some sure-fire way to the truth has been severely questioned, and this has affected the status of science in society. The efforts of logical positivists to draw a sharp distinction between science and non-science and to equate this with the distinction between knowledge and emotional expression, came under attack. To begin with, the attackers were merely trying to develop a more adequate notion of rationality to account for the complexity of science - and in some cases, to allow that ethics and aesthetics could also be rational. But the outcome of this attack was a general debunking of science, which came to be equated with ideology or religion. Paul Feyerabend arguing that science, with its claims to cognitive superiority and its hierarchical organization, had become a threat to democracy, quoted with approval Bakunin's warning against 'the reign of scientific intelligence, the most autocratic, despotic, arrogant and elitist of all

---

<sup>54</sup> See for instance Terry Eagleton, 'Introduction: What is Literature?' in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.

<sup>55</sup> In Britain, this movement was led by the X Club, consisting of Huxley, Tyndall and Spencer among others. On the X Club, see Ruth Barton, *The X Club: Science, Religion, and Social Change in Victorian England*, Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1976.

regimes.<sup>56</sup> Feminists then equated science with the ideology of patriarchy. Science has now lost its place at the centre of the education curriculum, and in USA religious views about life must be taught alongside scientific views. Young people no longer look to science for their conception of the world, and it can no longer be assumed that science is the reference point for understanding society's conception of its place in the world. A National Science Foundation survey in USA found that only 45% of Americans understand that the earth moves around the sun each year.<sup>57</sup>

This is not to say that the funding of science or the number of scientists has declined. In USA and elsewhere both have increased dramatically. But almost all of what is now called science is merely well organized research for the development of technology. Science is financed to augment military might or to produce saleable commodities. Research funds are allocated by States or corporations according to their potential to augment political and economic power, and any research sector unable to show how they can contribute to such power are doomed. As David Dickson pointed out in his recent study of science: 'The notion of scientists as independent scholars, motivated solely by a thirst for knowledge and unconcerned about the eventual utility of their results, has been banished for good.'<sup>58</sup> 'Scientific experts' still play a part in society. To give credence to any significant political action, especially where technology is concerned, it is necessary to refer to scientific experts. However scientific experts and the knowledge required to justify the views they are supporting are available to anyone with enough money. As Jean-François Lyotard argued: 'No money, no proof - and that means no verification of statements and no truth. The games of scientific language become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right.'<sup>59</sup> On any technological matter which becomes a political issue there will almost always be found scientific experts on both sides of the debate, with the majority of them being on the side with the most money. This prostitution by 'scientific experts' of their expertise has severely devalued their currency.

Associated with these developments universities are being fundamentally transformed. Thoroughly corrupted by the 'publish or perish' syndrome and by the pressure to lower standards to accommodate the higher proportion of young people going on to higher education, they are being reduced to extensions of high schools and technical colleges, valued by governments only insofar as they provide people with vocational training or produce technological knowledge, and by students only to increase their earning power. Arts and science faculties have lost status within universities - with good reason.<sup>60</sup> For the most part, undergraduate courses in arts faculties are being reduced to a form of entertainment and courses taught in the science faculties have been regeared to produce technicians. Within the arts faculties careerists have marginalised people driven by a quest for understanding; while as Paul Feyerabend noted of the science faculties: 'Most scientists today are devoid of ideas, full of fear, intent on producing some paltry result so that they can add

---

<sup>56</sup> See Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society*, London: Verso, 1982. Feyerabend quotes Bakunin in *Farewell to Reason*, London: Verso, 1987, p.22n.

<sup>57</sup> E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy*, (Australian Edition), Moorebank, NSW: 1989, p.vi.

<sup>58</sup> David Dickson, *The New Politics of Science*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, p.46.

<sup>59</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.45.

<sup>60</sup> It is not only universities in Anglophone nations which have fallen from grace. French and German universities are similarly afflicted. On this see the articles in *Telos*, No.81, Fall, 1989.

to the flood of inane papers that now constitutes "scientific progress" in many areas.'<sup>61</sup>

There are perhaps still two domains which have not been undermined by popular culture. Despite some efforts to gain democratic control over technology, it remains out of reach of the lay-person. The development of technology appears as a law unto itself to which the rest of society must adapt. More significantly, economics has not merely maintained, but increased its autonomy from popular culture. Until fairly recently people who were not economists were quite prepared to argue against the assumptions and prescriptions of economists. Now, while they might complain about economic conditions, reasoned disagreement with economic experts has almost disappeared, and those few economists who oppose mainstream economics have no audience apart from each other. The 'educated public' willing to make an effort to educate themselves and think about such issues is dissolving. With the field to themselves, economists have been able to dominate politics throughout the Western world, and in most of the remainder. Despite the incredulity towards all grand narratives, the grand narrative of economic progress as defined by economists has retained its dominating influence as a guide for political action by default. But then the economists are the ideologists of the new international bourgeoisie.

In this environment public intellectuals have all but disappeared. Today there are no intellectuals with the standing among the general public enjoyed by John Dewey, Niels Bohr, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Martin Heidegger or Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>62</sup> In USA the few remaining public intellectuals are now over sixty. Few academics today are intellectuals.

### ***The decentring of culture***

The environmental crisis, globalization, the decline of the West, and Anglophone countries in particular, the decline of the old classes and the rise of new classes, the eclipse of print media by electronic media and the collapse of the intelligentsia have all contributed to creating an incredulity towards grand narratives. But this incredulity towards grand narratives can now be seen as only the most obvious manifestation of what amounts to a fundamental cultural transformation, a decentring of culture. The decline of academia, and along with it, those whose credentials or 'cultural capital' had been legitimated by it, has left cultural production (outside technology and economic theory) without any organization. The 'cultural fields' which had slowly developed during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, transforming conflict between participants from a struggle between friends and foes to a struggle to ascertain truth and falsehood, have been dissolved. So, as Jim Collins has argued:

... 'culture' no longer can be conceived as a Grand Hotel, as a totalizable system that somehow orchestrates all cultural production and reception according to one master system. Both insist, implicitly or explicitly, that what we consider 'our culture' has become *discourse-sensitive*, that how we conceptualize that culture depends upon discourses which construct it in conflicting, often contradictory ways, according to interests and values of

---

<sup>61</sup> Paul Feyerabend, 'How to Defend Society Against Science', in *Scientific Revolutions*, ed. Ian Hacking, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp.156-167, p.165.

<sup>62</sup> This has been pointed out by Russell Jacoby in *The Last Intellectuals: American Intellectuals in the Age of Academe*, New York: Basic Books, 1987.

those discourses as they struggle to legitimize themselves as privileged forms of representations.<sup>63</sup>

Without an existing hierarchical order of established discourses and without universally accepted canons to which participants in cultural life can define their works, supportively or oppositionally, these can no longer be understood diachronically as responses to and efforts to go beyond established predecessors. First and foremost they must be defined and understood in relation to synchronic tensions, fragmented mass consciousness, and to multiple *zeitgeists*. While modernist texts, whether scientific, historical or literary, constructed a dialogic relation to previous texts in order to reject them as outmoded, postmodernist texts construct a *polylogic* relation to a multiplicity of 'already saids', in such a way that the relationship between past and present coding is based on interaction and transformation rather than outright rejection. This further justifies the appellation 'postmodern' as something radically different from the 'modern', and which prevents the postmodern being presented diachronically as simply that which succeeds the 'modern', which would make it another phase of modernity. As Andeas Huyssen has argued: 'Postmodernism at its deepest level represents not just another crisis within the perpetual cycle of boom and bust, exhaustion and renewal, which has characterized the trajectory of modern culture. It rather represents a new type of crisis of that modernist culture itself.'<sup>64</sup>

The decentering of culture has changed the nature of cultural productions. Postmodernism has frequently been identified with 'double coding' whereby cultural products communicate with two or more different audiences - the general population and an elite.<sup>65</sup> Having to recognize the demise of a homogeneous audience, or a structured, clearly delineated set of audiences whereby any cultural production could easily be situated in relation to a master code, producers of texts - books, buildings, works of art or whatever - must take into account that different audiences will understand and evaluate the work according to different and often irreconcilable assumptions. Texts must now be self-referential and relate themselves to other texts in order to position themselves within the different fields of discourse. But since these fields of discourse are themselves without any definite organization, texts must strive to create a model of these fields of discourse in order to impose some organization on them and achieve some control over the way they are received by audiences. Consequently no issue of any complexity can be dealt with by postmodern texts.

Such imperatives account at least in part for the different relationship to reality in postmodern texts. Modernist texts often highlighted the differences between perspectives on reality, and in doing so, undermined the sense of identity based on each perspective. The intention, whether reactionary or revolutionary, was radical - to pave the way for a more adequate grasp of reality and a more authentic identity. Postmodernist texts construct different realities, thereby undermining the sense of there being a privileged reality, or the sense of reality as such. The assumption of a reality which can be interpreted or misinterpreted, against which claims to knowledge can be measured, is itself brought into question, thereby acknowledging the validity of multiple sub-

---

<sup>63</sup> Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism*, New York and London: Routledge, 1989, p.xiii.

<sup>64</sup> Andrea Huyssen, 'Mapping the Postmodern', *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988, pp.178-221, p.217.

<sup>65</sup> This is how Charles Jencks characterizes postmodern architecture. See *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York: Academy Editions, 1982.

cultures and reaffirming the identities they construct - as much as any identity can be affirmed when no sub-culture is held to be more valid than any other. The notion that some people or some cultural productions are more authentic than others is rejected. With this decentring of culture, people have been deprived of the fixed reference points by which they previously oriented themselves. What they took to be unvarying components of their experience are no longer taken as natural facts of life, but as social constructs. As Katherine Hayles has pointed out, language, context, space and time, and selfhood no longer appear 'natural'. They have been 'de-natured'.<sup>66</sup>

To begin with, language has lost its transparent relation to the world. It can no longer be seen to be referring in any straightforward sense to an independent reality. As Jean Baudrillard has pointed out, signs now float free of referents, and people now consume signs.<sup>67</sup> Advertisers do not describe the functions of their products, but, drawing on Watsonian or Freudian psychology, attempt to create images, and people buy the images. At the same time the boundaries between advertising, art and reporting have become blurred. Art has been incorporated into advertising, and politicians no longer depend upon arguments to justify their programs, but advertise to sell themselves, their platforms, and the views about reality required to justify these. Television stations sell their news broadcasts with television personalities, who, as symbols, are regarded as more important than the news stories they recount. Television broadcasts are not accepted as reality, but as models, as simulations of reality which people in turn simulate, and then become models themselves to be simulated on the mass media, creating a hyper-reality without referent or authentic origins. This blurs the boundaries between the products of culture and everyday life. Advertisements have colonised social life to define reality and its significance, while at the same time reality has been depreciated and reduced to the status of social products. The world of advertisements have become more real than the world of everyday life, and people in everyday life must strive to imitate the world created by advertisements to be acknowledged as significant, to be taken as a meaningful part of reality.

Along with this transformation of language, contexts of communication have lost their quality of being a naturally fixed background. With the development of media technology, messages have been separated from their contexts. Information, 'understandable in itself', has supplanted stories, both told and written, undermining the legitimacy of personal experience.<sup>68</sup> The decontextualization of messages with new media technology has led to its reconceptualization as such through information theory so that it has come to appear natural to conceive of messages in this way. For instance, in biology the text, that is, the DNA contained in the nucleus of a cell, is now conceived of as so much information independent of its context, as something which can be separated and spliced with other texts and transferred to totally different contexts. The separation of messages from contexts has engendered a new form of social engineering, 'context control,' through which advertisers, politicians,

---

<sup>66</sup> This way of characterizing postmodernism comes from N. Katherine Hayles, 'Chaos and Culture: Postmodernism(s) and the Denaturing of Experience,' *Chaos Bound*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1990, Ch.10. The fullest study of postmodern culture revealing these features is Fredric Jameson's, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. The first chapter of this is a slightly elaborated version of his famous paper, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,' *New Left Review*, 146, July-August, 1984

<sup>67</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations' in *Selected Essays*, ed. Mark Poster, Cambridge: Polity Press, Ch. 7.

<sup>68</sup> This phenomenon was identified and brilliantly analysed by Walter Benjamin in 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov,' *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, N.Y: Schocken Books, 1969.

press barons and editors set out to influence the way messages are received by audiences. The effect of such developments on people's social experience is profound. Split between what Marshall McLuhan referred to as the global village created by the mass media and the intimate family circle, people live without a common context of shared activities and experiences to unite the different communities of discourse within which they participate, and the global village itself is fragmented. Video art can be taken as an attempt to come to terms with this destruction of context. As Katherine Hayles wrote of watching MTV:

Turn it on. What do you see? Perhaps demon-like creatures dancing; then a cut to cows grazing in a meadow, in the midst of which a singer with blue hair suddenly appears; then another cut to cars engulfed in flames. In such videos, the images and medium collaborate to create a technological demonstration that any text can be embedded in any context. What are these videos telling us, if not that the disappearance of a stable, universal context is *the context* for postmodern culture?<sup>69</sup>

With the denaturing of contexts, space and time have also been denatured.<sup>70</sup> Once originality was regarded as important. Originality implies an origin at some place and at some time. With the decontextualization of information, with the capacity for indefinite transformations and recombinations and reproductions of information, the notion of something being an original no longer makes sense. When things no longer have a place of origin, what do space and time mean? When music is produced by mixing sounds recorded at different places, films and television stories are produced by splicing film taken at diverse times in diverse places, when styles are taken from their original context and reproduced indefinitely with or without changes, when almost identical fast food shops, motels and hotels are reproduced throughout the world, when imitations are imitated and claimed to be better than the originals, what does location in space mean? At the same time, television has extended people's spatial horizons creating the global village; but in the process it has stressed impact at the expense of meaning, destroyed perspective and left people feeling helpless in relation to an undifferentiated mass of problems totally beyond their control. Rather than space being the ultimate reference point, spaces are produced with such bewildering complexity that they defy efforts by individuals to orient themselves within them. As Fredric Jameson has argued: 'postmodern hyperspace - has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position on a mappable external world.'<sup>71</sup>

Correspondingly, time has lost its meaning. Just as spatiality is extended but disorganized, so is temporality. People become aware of past forms of life and styles in the present, but the present is no longer interpreted as the outcome of the past, nor in relation to the future. People no longer orient themselves through intergenerational narratives. So while styles of the past are more than ever deployed in the present, people have almost lost their sense of history. Popular culture changes so quickly that to be current one must be futuristic, because to be merely current is already to be out of date. So the

---

<sup>69</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, p.272.

<sup>70</sup> The relationship between the changing organization of space and time in late capitalism and postmodern culture is brilliantly analysed by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, Part III and IV.

<sup>71</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.44.

future is already used up before it arrives. The present is then almost immediately relegated into a distant past where its significance is denied, where it is 'derealized'. Through such derealization, society has lost or abandoned its capacity to retain its own past. The sense of time derives from change against a constant background. But if there is no constant background to serve as a reference point for appreciating changes, time itself ceases to exist as a background against which life can be organized. 'Time' dissolves into disconnected intervals.

This undermines the possibility of people establishing stable identities and denatures of the experience of being a stable subject. There is an absence in people of a sense of personal history, of a sense of their lives as unfinished stories worth struggling to complete, integrated into the stories of their families, their communities, the organizations within which they work, and their society. Such an absence goes to the heart of modern culture, since it involves the dissolution of what since the seventeenth century it meant to be a person.<sup>72</sup> Thus it has been noted by Christopher Lasch that people nowadays take one day at a time, that selfhood, 'which implies a personal history, friends, family, a sense of place' becomes 'a kind of luxury, out of place in an age of impending austerity.'<sup>73</sup> Fredric Jameson, who is at pains to dissociate himself from Lasch, offers a similar, if more refined diagnosis of postmodern human existence. Following Lacan, he argues 'that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me; and second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still, of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time.' From this he concluded: 'If we are unable to unify the past present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life.'<sup>74</sup> When personal identity has dissolved, then also has the idea of a constant human nature underlying the variety of human modes of existence. It is then no longer possible to talk of human nature being suppressed, distorted or unrealized. There can only be differences, differences in each individual, different individuals and different societies.

This dissolution of the human subject is associated with not only the breakdown of grand narratives, but of all narratives. The linearity of narratives presupposes temporal development as people constitute themselves as identities through change. It also presupposes an indeterminate future that is made determinate in the present. In a postmodern world there is no place for the slow struggle to find and live one's destiny which is the core of narratives, whether these are lived or recounted. This underlies some of the most distinctive features of postmodernism. As Fredric Jameson pointed out: 'If, indeed the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold, and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult ... to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but "heaps of fragments" and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory ... precisely some of the privileged terms in which postmodernist cultural production has been analysed and even defended...'<sup>75</sup> Correspondingly

---

<sup>72</sup> The role of narrative in the construction of the modern identity has been revealed by Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, London: Verso, 1987.

<sup>73</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, London: Picador, 1985, p.15.

<sup>74</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.27.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p.25.

there is a the shift from a 'discursive' sensibility to a 'figurative' sensibility, that is, a shift from a sensibility which gives priority to words to a sensibility which gives priority to images, from one which gives a high value to formalisms to one which acclaims the banalities of everyday life, from one which promotes rationalism to one which contests it, from one which operates by distancing the spectator from the cultural object to one which operates through the unmediated investment of desire in the cultural object. Surfaces are celebrated, and the distinctions between essence and appearance true and false consciousness, authentic and inauthentic, as well as the distinction between the signifier and the signified, are rejected. All these changes are associated with the shift from what Freud referred to as secondary process, that is, the struggle to come to grips with reality, to primary process, the working out of desire.<sup>76</sup>

### ***The significance of postmodern culture***

The decline of grand narratives corresponds to the rise of popular culture; but it is not any popular culture. The cultures of non-Europeans, of rural societies and of the working class have seldom been more effectively silenced; at best, these have been reduced to a spectacle. It is the consumerist culture of the petite bourgeoisie of advanced capitalist countries as fostered by the new international bourgeoisie which has come to prevail. Members of this new petite bourgeoisie have failed to gain any significant political power while having gained considerable symbolic power, 'the power of constructing reality ... which tends to establish ... the immediate meaning of the world'.<sup>77</sup> They have acquired the power to impose their habitus upon others - so long as this serves the interests of the international bourgeoisie.

The rise and success of the new petite bourgeoisie was complementary to, and in part, was the condition for the rise of the new international bourgeoisie. The political failure of the salariat as a class was an almost inevitable concomitant of the emergence of the new international order and the rise of the new international bourgeoisie, since there is very little room for local political or economic power in a world dominated by transnational corporations and financial institutions. The failure of the New Left can at least in part be accounted for in terms of the immense power of international capitalism which they would have had to surmount. It can also be accounted for by the incapacity of the New Left, confronted by the environmental crisis, to envisage a realistic alternative future. But the seductiveness of a consumerist lifestyle made possible within advanced capitalist countries was also a factor. Essentially, young people in the late 1960's and the early years of the 1970's, chose, or were seduced into a life of self-indulgence, to abandon the kind of intellectual, political and economic commitment and hard work required to transform society in accordance with the ideals of the New Left.

Members of the New Left were enticed onto this path not only by the mass media, particularly the electronic media, but also by the mainstream of modernist high culture which represented the assault on all forms of external constraint and all forms of self-discipline as revolutionary activity. In this they

---

<sup>76</sup> On this see Scott Lash, 'Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a "Regime of Signification," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol.5, Numbers 2-3, June 1988, pp.311-336. This has been reprinted in Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>77</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'On Symbolic Power', *Language & Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, pp.163-170, p.166.

received considerable support from radical intellectuals, most of whom refused to even consider what the movement wanted or where their actions would lead, and who called for the intensification of contradictions without any effort to resolve them.<sup>78</sup> In a world where the products of people's labour had been to reproduce and reinforce a system which had subjugated most of the world's population and wrecked most of the world's environment, being self-indulgent and promoting self-indulgence in others was seen by many as the only way to change the world. Using the slogan 'the personal is the political' to identify an assertive self-indulgence with political activity, a new petit bourgeois 'intelligentsia' emerged to identify entertainment with culture and psychotherapy with intellectual life. Pierre Bourdieu has described the members of this intelligentsia:

Guided by their anti-institutional temperament and the concern to escape everything redolent of competitions, hierarchies and classifications and, above all, of scholastic classifications, hierarchies of knowledge, theoretical abstractions or technical competences, these new intellectuals are inventing an art of living which provides them with the gratifications and prestige of the intellectual at the least cost; in the name of the fight against 'taboos' and the liquidation of 'complexes' they adopt the most external and most easily borrowed aspects of the intellectual life-style, liberated manners, cosmetic or sartorial outrages, emancipated poses and postures, and systematically apply the cultivated disposition to not-yet-legitimate culture (cinema, strip cartoons, the underground), to every-day life (street art), the personal sphere (sexuality, cosmetics, child-rearing, leisure) and the existential (the relation to nature, love, death).<sup>79</sup>

Such people have seen themselves as opposing the destructive imperatives of capitalism; but far from being a threat to the existing order, they have reinforced the ethos of capitalism. Bourdieu went on to wonder whether 'the ethic of liberation is not in the process of supplying the economy with the perfect consumer whom economic theory has always dreamed of...'<sup>80</sup> Not only are such people intent on consuming the latest things, but as consumers they have isolated themselves from the constraints of collective memories and expectations which in the past had insulated people from the images of the high life produced by the mass media.

The pretense to an oppositional stance could not be sustained for long as this mode of existence permeated the entire community. While with an oppositional stance people could identify and exalt themselves as heroic opponents of the established order; without it, people could only define themselves in opposition to each other. It is to maintain exclusiveness, to present themselves as better than others while living powerless but self-indulgent lives, that people now consume symbols.<sup>81</sup> With postmodernism cultural practices symbols are severed from their association with ways of living. Groups differentiate themselves through selective appropriation of aspects of other cultures without concern for the forms of life of which these cultures were part. Works of art, including literature and architecture, are nothing but means to differentiate groups of people from each other. Original

---

<sup>78</sup> On this see Peter Dews, *The Logics of Disintegration: Poststructuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, London: Verso, 1987, p.130.

<sup>79</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, [1979] tr. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984, pp.370-371.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p.371.

<sup>81</sup> See Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1988.

artists, architects and writers are no longer necessary, or even useful, for this purpose. As people appropriate the outward characteristics of intellectuals to consume the status accorded intellectual life, people behave like artists to consume the mystique associated with creativity, or like political radicals to consume the aura of revolutionary traditions. Similarly they eat at sushi bars, dress like peasants, or meditate like Indian holy men. But always with a difference - they imbue their simulations with more style than the originals. Postmodern people are poseurs who assume superiority over the people they pose as, and the originals are devalued in the process. Eventually, as simulations are simulated, simulation becomes the whole of symbolic reality and symbols outside this realm are finally drained of significance, along with the forms of life with which they were associated.<sup>82</sup>

This brings us to the central feature of postmodern culture. This is the lack in people of a sense of personal history, the dissolution of time into disconnected intervals, and again, the incredulity towards grand narratives. At the root of this fragmentation is the disempowerment of people, and associated with this, the breakdown of genuine praxis. The associated severance of culture from the quest for an orientation for action and an orientation to live by associated with the consumer orientation of postmodernity accounts for the characteristic depthlessness of the postmodern sensibility, the celebration of surfaces, the rejection of the distinctions between essence and appearance, between true and false consciousness, between authentic and inauthentic, and between the signifier and the signified. For people striving to orient themselves for political praxis some consensus must be achieved on the nature of the world and on what are the ultimate goals worth striving for. Such people must make distinctions between what is true and what is false, and have means for adjudicating between conflicting beliefs in this regard. This must lead to reflection, and through this, efforts to create a master discourse which can relate and mediate between all other discourses. And it is not only Hegel who has concluded that the quest for this inevitably forces people to struggle for a totalizing perspective, and ultimately for a grand historical narrative in terms of which all other such perspectives can be comprehended and evaluated. As one of the world's leading analytical philosophers, Hilary Putnam, recently argued: 'I am saying that theory of truth presupposes theory of rationality which in turn presupposes our theory of the good. "Theory of the good", however, is not only programmatic, but is itself dependent upon assumptions about human nature, about society, about the universe (including theological and metaphysical assumptions).'<sup>83</sup> The more democratic a society, the less social order is based on force, fraud and manipulation, the greater the importance of arguments and therefore of totalizing perspectives and grand narratives. It is impossible for people engaged in political action to avoid making provisional commitments to one metanarrative or another, no matter how inadequate the alternatives, and to define their stand-point in relation to institutions of power, to people with power, and to their decisions and actions, in terms of such a metanarrative. It is through defining their place in the world in this way that people acquire a strong sense of history; of their place in history, of the past and the problems inherited from it and of the possibilities of overcoming these problems in the future. Postmodern culture is the culture of a society in which

---

<sup>82</sup> This is the argument of Jean Baudrillard who has also shown where such a culture must lead.

<sup>83</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1981, p.215. The unavoidability of narratives in the legitimation of such assumptions has been cogently argued by J.M. Bernstein, 'Grand Narratives', *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood, London: Routledge, 1991, pp.102-123.

politics has become a farce, where rational critique and protest have become impossible.

The postmodernist response to this is to make a virtue of and celebrate disorientation, the absence of any fixed reference points, the impossibility of representing the world, the breakdown of narrative coherence, and the absence of authenticity in a social and economic order in which disorientation and authenticity have become almost impossible. The commodification of life, depersonalization (the death of the subject) and the derealization of experience are savoured rather than struggled against, an attitude expressed in postmodern architecture, in art, and particularly in video art, which Jameson argues is the privileged index of the postmodern era.<sup>84</sup> While the modernists acclaimed the passionate engagement of individuals who refused to compromise their convictions, postmodernists laud the cool detachment of cynical opportunists who are able to exploit each situation as it comes.<sup>85</sup> But there is more than mere detachment in the postmodernist response to new circumstances. After having failed to gain political power, these people have come to embrace their lack of power to avoid taking responsible for their complicity in the destructive effects of a global capitalist economy. As Henry Kariel noted: 'For postmodernists, it is simply too late to oppose the momentum of industrial society. They merely resolve to stay alert and cool in its midst. Consciously complying and yet far from docile, they chronicle, amplify, augment it. They judge it as little as it judges itself. Determined to assail nothing, they are passionately impassive.'<sup>86</sup> Decrying all efforts to gain political power as the problem, they have handed over responsibility for their fate, and the fate of the world environment, to the economic rationalists, to the new international bourgeoisie and the international market. By embracing and celebrating their disorientation and powerlessness they are abasing themselves before and worshipping the unrepresentable power of the new global economy and the new information technology which makes this system possible, a system which now has the power through its environmental destructiveness to destroy the whole of humanity; as once people abased themselves before and worshipped the uncontrollable and unfathomable forces of nature whose power they were dependent upon for survival.<sup>87</sup> Postmodern architecture, art and literature express implicitly if not explicitly their respectful awe of the power of global capitalism.

Given this characterization of postmodern culture, its association with the rise of the New Right, with the age of Thatcher, Reagan and Bush, becomes intelligible. Postmodernists, often assuming the posture of radicals, although without their commitment to action, their unfashionable intensity, their 'seriousness', have not only disguised the lack of opposition to the rise of the New Right and to the globalization of capitalism, but have played a major part in undermining opposition to it. On gaining positions of influence or power they have served as loyal servants of the new international bourgeoisie. Social democratic political parties of many countries, Australia and New Zealand being the most notable examples, have put themselves entirely at the service of transnational financiers and corporations, and ostensibly radical social

---

<sup>84</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, Ch.3 'Surrealism without the Unconscious.'

<sup>85</sup> The centrality of cynicism in postmodernism has been revealed by Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, [1983], tr. Michael Eldred, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

<sup>86</sup> Henry S. Kariel, *The Desperate Politics of Postmodernism*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989, p.ix.

<sup>87</sup> As Jameson argues, op.cit. pp.34-38.

movements, infiltrated or dominated by postmodernist thinking and postmodern personalities, have done almost nothing to advance their causes. However there is more to postmodern culture than the pseudo-radicalism of a failed social class. Through its refusal or inability to adopt earlier cultural forms, the new service sub-class has become one of the most important actors, or non-actors, in late capitalist societies. Postmodern practices have exposed as social constructs the basic framework of assumptions on which Western civilization has been based. It is arguable that we now live in one of those rare instances in which it has become possible to fully understand the nature and limitations of the whole of European civilization.