

# Postmodernism as Pseudohistory

*Craig Calhoun*

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

As it has been cast so far, the debate has often been regrettably vague about both cultural and historical specificity, and relatedly problematic for practical social action. On the postmodernist side, in particular, a kind of pseudo-specificity is introduced by the use of the prefix 'post' and the proliferation of contrasts to putative modernity or modernism. Such contrasts sometimes point to significant variables differentiating social practices. They are seldom developed as very precise categories, however, or concretized in serious historical or cross-cultural analyses. Rather, the Enlightenment is evoked as though it were the archetype of a unidimensional and uncontested modernity. Or the non-Western world or Third World is posed as a critical vantage point on the West in an ironic new Orientalism, without consideration of the enormous internal heterogeneity of those constructs.

In the present paper, I want to question how much the genuinely dramatic cultural changes which are going on around us are a real departure from previous trends, and to the extent that they are, whether this is part of a social transformation sufficiently basic to warrant an argument that modernity is dead or dying. I will argue generally against the postmodernist view. Though changes are real and major, they do not yet amount to an epochal break. Indeed, many of them reflect continuing tensions and pressures which have characterized the whole modern era.<sup>1</sup> Underlying my account of

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the problems of the claim that postmodernity is upon us, is the counter-claim that the two basic organizing forces in modernity — capitalism and bureaucratic power — have hardly begun to dissolve. Rather than narrowing our notion of the modern in order to justify the use of the prefix 'post', I will argue that we need to incorporate the insights of postmodernist thinkers into a richer sociological approach to the entire modern era.

In the first part of the paper, I will very briefly and sketchily introduce the notion of a postmodern condition. Since this is a position argued by a variety of thinkers on somewhat different grounds, and since some scholars — like Foucault — are claimed as part of the movement though they never proclaimed themselves postmodernists, my sketch will inevitably conceal a good deal of complexity. I will also ignore a number of crucial topics in the debate over postmodernism. Two key issues, for example, are the difficulty postmodernist theories have in accounting for the genesis of novel forms of cultural productivity — in other words, an absence of dynamism; and their difficulty in finding a vantage point for comparative analysis (as distinct from mere celebration of difference and/or syncretism). Closely linked to the last is the difficulty of reconciling the normative positions of postmodernism (e.g. extolling the virtues of difference and condemning the vice of repressive normalization) with its generally relativist theoretical orientation. Performative contradictions abound as postmodernists issue authoritative pronouncements on the basis of theoretical positions which deny any non-arbitrary basis to authority. I have addressed these topics in two other papers (Calhoun, 1991a, 1991b).

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

### **The Postmodern Condition**

What then are we to make of the frequent declarations that we have entered a postmodern age? Is this something which has happened to architecture, but not to society? Or have cultural analysts noticed something which has eluded the attention of sociologists? A little belatedly, a self-declared postmodernist sociology is being forged, absorbing previous arguments — for example about new social movements, postindustrial society, and claims to the autonomy of cultural change (see, for example, Lash, 1990).<sup>2</sup> But I want to challenge its overall conceptualization, even while finding something of value in many of its specifics. In particular, I will argue that we need to free the insights of postmodernist thought from their embeddedness in a pseudohistorical conceptual framework. Where the insights are sound, they call for a changed sort of attention to many historical and cross-cultural topics, not only to the most recent changes in advanced societies.

Postmodernism is a confluence of several partially distinct trends: (1) perhaps with clearest meaning, postmodernism is a rejection of artistic modernism (such as the international style in architecture) in favor of freeing the aesthetic from the functional, putting signification, intertextual reference and self-reflexivity forward as independent goods. While architects like Venturi and Jencks have played a primary role in promoting the conceptualization of postmodernism, related changes are current and self-identified throughout at least the visual and dramatic arts (including cinema) and literature. (2) Postmodernism as a theoretical and/or critical position derives substantially from poststructuralism. This is a largely retrospective label for a series of French-led shifts in cultural (and psychological and social) theory, notably the critique of subject-centered reason, monological texts or readings, grand narratives, general truth claims and the normalization of Enlightenment rationality. Central players include Derrida, Foucault (a little ambiguously), Lyotard, Baudrillard and various American epigones. (3) Closely related to poststructuralism in many accounts is the postmodernist critique of 'foundationalism' in philosophy and theory. At a minimum, this is an extension of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian critique of metaphysics into an attack on all claims to an external standpoint for judging truth. In the work of Rorty, for example, a level of necessary theoretical indeterminacy is made the basis for a call to abandon repressive demands for certainty in favor of a 'liberal' toleration of diversity on even the most basic epistemological and

ethical points. In other hands, antifoundationalism becomes an attack on theoretical systematicity itself. (4) Finally, postmodernism includes sociological and political economic claims to identify a basic transition from 'modernity' to a new stage of (or beyond) history. These variously emphasize 'postindustrial', information or knowledge society as the new societal formation. A new centrality is posited for media, information technology and the production of signification (for example culture industry) as an end in itself. Key figures in this line of argument (notably Bell and Touraine, and popularizers like Toffler and Naisbitt) are not directly a part of the postmodernist movement, but their arguments have influenced it substantially. The four lines of influence are not strictly commensurate. In particular, the 'post' prefix may oppose modernism as an artistic movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, foundationalism as a feature of early modern science and Enlightenment discourse, modernity as an epoch of much longer duration, or the very construction of a progressive historical narrative such as those used to identify 'modernity' in the first place (primarily during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Nonetheless, the various strands of the phenomenon draw strength and significance from being intertwined (see the discussion in Harvey, 1989; Kellner, 1990).

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

self as bearer of the weight of 'modernist' subjectivity. If these are all to be embraced as part of the postmodern, then (a) the postmodern must be understood as part and parcel of the modern, and (b) the label must be seen as essentially misleading, perhaps wilfully so, perhaps simply conditioned by the general modern sensibility that the new is always better than the established.

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

The postmodernist critique (and the defense of modernity mounted by figures like Habermas [for example 1988b]) tends to equate modernity with the rationalist Enlightenment. But the Romantics were as modern and as new as the rationalists. Characters crucial to modernity — most notably Rousseau but also Goethe and some of the English Romantic poets — combined elements of both rationalism and romanticism in their writing and their lives. The individualism we identify as so central to the modern experience and modern society and culture was shaped by both romantic and rationalist notions, by Enlightenment modernism and the other side of modernism represented paradigmatically by Rousseau, Goethe and Nietzsche, but also, only somewhat more ambiguously, by Freud and Simmel (see Frisby, 1985 for an account of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin). The complexity of interplay across rationalist and romantic lines is important to grasp. Shelley is certainly a paradigmatic Romantic, yet we might recall that Shelley was drawn to Godwin for the very rationalism of his anarchist political theory even before he eloped with his daughter. The late eighteenth century in many parts of Europe and America saw versions of the circle of connections which knit the Godwins, Wolstonecraft, Shelley and Byron together. There may be an important battle between rationalist universalism and attention to the

irrational, between the value of the particular and the repressive, disempowering and deceptive side of individualism. But to equate that with a battle between modernity and its putative successor is to fail to recognize how deeply a part of modernity that whole battle, that whole frame of reference is. And this is only to speak of Western modernity.

The broad themes of postmodernism, then, are not new and do not mark any sharp break with modernity or modernism. What of the more specific claims postmodernism makes within the realm of social theory, most notably poststructuralism? Perhaps Derrida heralded this turn as much as anyone, publishing three important books in 1967.<sup>3</sup> But the poststructuralist turn was much broader than deconstructionism, and includes a number of figures — including Bourdieu — who are not amenable to the label postmodernist. This poststructuralism was not really announced at its birth; it appears only retrospectively in the careers of structuralists who decided that decentering the subject — a central structuralist move — did not require them to abandon critical reflection on the categories of thought. Structuralism had in a sense denied epistemology on the grounds that it could only be pursued in terms of a philosophy of the subject. The poststructuralists sought ways to do a sort of epistemology, an inquiry into knowledge, without basing themselves on such a theory of subjectivity.

The contributions of the poststructuralist tributary into the postmodernist current were first and foremost (a) the absorption of structuralism's critique of subject-centered thought, and (b) the argument that monological statements of truth — originary speech, in Derrida's term — were in some combination misleading, false and/or repressive. In varying ways, then, the poststructuralists showed the tensions within seeming truths, the difficulties involved even in seemingly ordinary understandings, the constant effort of construction involved in accepted truths, as well as the constant tendency of those truths to break down and reveal their internal inconsistencies and aporias. Some, like Bourdieu, made this crucially a social argument; the tensions involved in understanding derived not simply from textuality, but from interpersonal struggles and fields of power. For many others, materiality, physical embodiment and social relations were lost in treating all aspects of culture and human action as texts. In all versions, the poststructuralist move was for the most part an essentially theoretical shift, not a claim that anything in the external world had changed to necessitate a new theory.

Another sort of argument has been incorporated into the postmodernist position, however, which stems much more from claims about changes in the empirical world. This is the claim that we need a postmodernist theory because we live in a postmodern age. The proliferation of such labels was a particular feature of the 1970s and 1980s. Daniel Bell's (1973) and Alain Touraine's (1971) different accounts of postindustrial society marked early versions. The postmodernists posed much more radical claims about the implications of computerization, new communications media and related socio-technical changes. Bell (1973) had already joined Habermas and other thinkers in suggesting that the advance of information processing and automating technologies meant that labor should no longer be privileged (in the Marxist sense) as the basic source of value.<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard (1975, 1977, 1981), among others, has argued that the whole form of social organization based on production relations and power has given way to a society and economy organized on the bases of consumption and seduction, for example by advertising. In such a postmodern society, the sign becomes the autonomous source and form of value, the signifier is detached from the signified. The structure of relations which now matters is not that by which capital dominates labor, or centers of power grow and eliminate the territorial organization of power. Rather, the structure of relations which now matters is among signs. The representations are more real than the things represented. People are 'exteriorized' into a techno-culture of 'hyperreality' where significance replaces reification and we know only the simulacra of mass existence. Or, as Guy Debord put it in *Society of the Spectacle* (1983), the alienation of the commodity form is experienced to such a degree of abstraction that the commodity becomes a mere image detached from its previous ground in human labor or concrete use value. As a result, the critiques based on use value and concrete labor are rendered impotent.

But the positing of an epochal change is problematic. While there has undoubtedly been an increase in the role of advertising and the media generally, and while the management of consumption has been thrust to the foreground of practical business concerns, none of this seems to add up to a very conclusive case either that production has lost its basic importance or that signification has gained the status of self-production free from any need for creative subjects or material referents. This postmodernist argument against Marx depends on a rather rigid reading of *Capital* in which, among other

things, Marx is treated as having underappreciated his own argument as to the importance of abstraction in the commodity form through which labor is rendered into capital, in favor of a naturalistic (and therefore transhistorical) understanding of labor.<sup>5</sup> This issue, however, goes beyond a fight about Marxism. The claim that material production is no longer central to the organization of economic and social life is meant to reveal the postmodern age to be free from a whole series of constraints discussed in nearly every version of economic theory; it is meant to have liberated culture from material social determinations. Yet even on the face of things it appears false, mistaking the rising importance of information technology *within* capitalism for a basic transformation *of* capitalism, not just into a new phase but into something altogether different. No evidence is presented that capital accumulation is not basic to economic activity and social power today (though it may never have been as exclusively fundamental as some Marxists have claimed). And though industry employs a declining percentage of the population, this does not mean a decline in all measures of its importance. The very implementation of labor-saving technology requires an *increasing* capital investment, and the distributive (consumption, financial, etc.) orientation of business (which has been widely criticized in recent years by supply-siders and more conventional economists and business analysts alike) can still be understood as a response to the problem of utilizing productive capacity. Our cultural orientation, moreover, seems still to be very productivist and very much focused on the acquisition of material goods. Last but not least, the insight gained from focusing on movement away from productive industry — whether basic or minor — seems hardly able to make sense of any entire economy; at most it may have purchase on that portion of the international economy which is located in the rich — that is, OECD — countries.

Lyotard has more plausibly suggested that postmodernity 'is undoubtedly a part of the modern' (1982/1984: 79). Postmodernism in this view is a phase in modernism's constant push to negate the existent and produce the new. This makes sense (though it makes the label misleading). But Lyotard is not altogether consistent, for he also offers a suggestion of a different sort of basic historical change which provides a grounding for postmodernism's currency.

On this account, postmodernity suffers from a loss of meaning, or a meaningfulness which can only be repressively imposed, because the great legitimating narratives of modernity have been

exploded. Lyotard is hardly the only figure to stress this sort of argument. He gives it one of its most prominent expositions, however, suggesting that this is not just a possible intellectual stance but a basic social transformation: 'the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, parties, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction. And it does not look as though they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale' (1979/1984: 14). I have elsewhere tried to show the simple empirical falsity of this argument (Calhoun, 1991c), evident especially when one looks momentarily outside of the North Atlantic axis. Here it is enough to grasp that Lyotard is claiming that the world has changed such that a sociological analysis focused on these institutions or 'poles of attraction' can no longer adequately grasp the state of social life.<sup>6</sup>

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

But Lyotard and Baudrillard want to go further. Baudrillard (1977) suggests forgetting Foucault as an account still caught in modernity's grasp, just as Marx was (on his view) caught in capitalism's. Elsewhere (especially 1981, 1983), he declares the death of the social, the end of true social relations and their replacements by the simulacra of hyperreality. Lyotard is much more directly concerned with social arrangements, but he too wishes to break from Foucault. For him not only is the claim that society is a functional, systemic unity a spurious modern view, so is its main opposite, the view that society is a conflictual field of struggles held together by

power. Both of these accounts, on his view, represent unacceptable 'metanarratives':

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. . . . Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. (1979/1984: xxiii–xxiv)

It is first and foremost science which has challenged the hegemony of narrative, Lyotard (1979/1984: 25–6) suggests, because the pragmatics, the criteria of acceptance, are different for scientific and narrative knowledge. Yet, for a time it appeared that science might itself be appealed to within a great legitimating narrative of modernity. But this is not so: since 'science plays its own game it is incapable of legitimating the other language games'; in fact, 'it is incapable of legitimating itself' (1979/1984: 40). So, though it is powerful, science is ultimately just one more game in a world in which 'all we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species', just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species. Lamenting the 'loss of meaning' in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative (1979/1984: 26).<sup>7</sup> The postmodernist is called upon to 'wage a war on totality' (1982/1984: 82) because totality breeds terror. This much is reminiscent of Foucault. But where Foucault offered a historical account of this as a dimension of modernity, Lyotard's account is severed from any specific historical contextualization. Lyotard, moreover, tends to reduce the social almost entirely to the linguistic — 'the observable social bond is composed of language "moves" ' (1979/1984: 11), but then fails to introduce any account of how participants in different discourses can ever be expected to reach agreements or even mutual understandings (Calhoun, 1991b).

This raises the final basic postmodernist point, the importance of difference. This point is associated most especially with Derrida (though he develops it primarily in contexts other than the sociological; see, for example, 1978, 1982, especially 1–27). It is also one of the crucial themes drawn from Foucault's (especially 1977a) critical history of the repression of difference by normalizing discipline. I want to remark very little on this here (partly because I have addressed this issue in Calhoun, 1989 and especially 1991b), beyond indicating that I think it is the most valuable and defensible

of postmodernist arguments, though it is not defensible on postmodernist terms.<sup>8</sup> Those terms — starting with the rejection of all grand narratives without any search for a substitute ground for normative discourse — introduce a particularism so extreme that it ultimately, ironically, results in a decontextualization, an incapacity to place the particular in relation to other phenomena. A particularism so extreme — which is not, I think, what most postmodernists want but what a hastily espoused theory offers — cannot justify even the very value of difference with which it starts. There is something stronger in Derrida (see esp. 1967, 1972), a positioning of the importance of difference (or *differance*) within a dialogue with a philosophical tradition which asserts a monological truth. These assertions he deconstructively shows to conceal the play of hidden dialogicality. In doing so he offers a defense of the very complexity of thought itself such that truth or knowledge becomes something much more difficult than we have thought though not therefore something to be dismissed. Lyotard wishes also to show the agonistic element in all culture. But even Foucault and Derrida, let alone Lyotard, are left with a program of pure critique, showing the dragons which lie the way of modernism but offering no real analytic purchase on the problem of analyzing the transformation of power and social structure as it bears on practical action in the modern world.

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

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of postmodernist *theory* is its denial of a basis for critical judgment and moral responsibility, except as the arbitrary reflection of a tradition. This poses basic problems for its own attempt to take cultural difference seriously, since it precludes genuine learning from the Other. It opens postmodernist theorists (and political activists) who attempt to persuade others to the charge that either they are committing a performative

contradiction or they are simply exercising a will to power no more legitimate than any other.

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

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

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

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

Several key features are held to distinguish new social movements (NSMs).<sup>9</sup> (1) These movements focus on identity, autonomy and self-realization rather than material benefits, resources and instrumental goals. It is in this sense, in part, that these movements are said to stay largely within the realm of civil society rather than addressing themselves primarily to state or economic actors. (2) Mobilization for the NSMs is as much defensive as offensive and hence less negotiable than more abstract utopian social projects. (3) Membership cuts across class lines because socioeconomic categories are losing their salience. This is one link to the

postindustrial or information society argument. (4) Organizational forms are themselves 'work objects' of movements, which aim to be non-hierarchical with direct democracy as an ideal. (5) Membership is generally only part-time, with potential multiple and overlapping commitments. (6) Activities are generally outside the official legislative system and often use unconventional means. (7) In the new social movements, an attempt is made to politicize aspects of everyday life formerly outside of the political. (8) Finally, in the NSMs, there is less tendency toward unification under some larger umbrella form or still less a master narrative of collective progress (though this is disputed, with Melucci suggesting that there is virtually no such tendency and Touraine suggesting that this is a temporary transition and such a tendency could yet emerge).

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

There is without question a proliferation of social movements in the contemporary era, and the various key characteristics listed do give insight into them. But it is important to re-examine the historical claim of sharp novelty. The nineteenth and early twentieth century working-class movement (if it even can be described more than tendentially as a single movement) was multidimensional, only provisionally and partially unified and not univocal. It did not constitute just one collective actor in a single social drama. There was mobilization over wages, to be sure, but also over women and children working, community life, leisure activities, the status of immigrants, education, access to public services and so forth.

Relatedly, many different sorts of mobilizations have been claimed as part of class struggle, by organizers and analysts both. Thus not only wage laborers in industrial capitalist factories (the Marxian ideal type) but traditional craft and agricultural workers struggling to defend their occupations and communities joined in the struggles which are described as unidimensional by comparison to NSMs.

Perhaps most importantly, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and indeed not only then), a wide variety of social movements flourished. There were, for example, ethnic and

nationalist movements, which were never really suppressed by class as Melucci (1989: 89–92) suggests, but have ebbed and flowed throughout modernity. Religious awakening, revitalization and proliferation formed a major theme of the nineteenth century, as did anticlericalism and free-thinking. Anti-slavery or abolitionist movements were often closely linked to religion but were autonomous from any particular religious organization. Communitarianism, temperance and various dietary and lifestyle movements attracted hundreds of thousands of adherents in both Europe and America. Popular education was the object of struggle, especially in Britain, where free public schooling was not universal until very late. Last but not least, women's movements are hardly a unique invention of the late twentieth century, though they have perhaps had more strength and more success in recent years.

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

We need, in short, to broaden, enrich and improve our theory and conceptualizations, without leaping to a claim of epochal historical transformation. We need to see a continuous proliferation of movements, and a mixed and overlapping series of changes in background conditions. In the case of new social movements, at least, much of what is novel is only a quantitative increase in number and scale of movements, and the introduction of certain

new topics and tactics. All of these, moreover, are central trends of the modern era itself. There are some qualitative novelties in recent history, but so far these have not been sufficient to overturn basic organizational tendencies of the epoch. Capitalism, the nation-state form of political organization and bureaucratic structures of organization have been globalized, not superseded.

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

All this is not to say that nothing has changed, but that changes have been overstated and poorly conceptualized. The expansion of an organizational and technological infrastructure throughout the modern era has, for example, both enhanced state power and transformed it. Revolutionary potential, for example, is diminished in the West, largely because of the spatial deconcentration of power. Whether one wants to call the recent transformations of communist societies revolutions or not, it is important to see the extent to which they depended on the concentration of the institutions of power in capital cities and the underdevelopment of the infrastructures which have dispersed its application in 'more modern' societies. But the displacement of power from readily visible individuals into systemic organizations does not mean that there cease to be social relations of domination, that they no longer involve active subjects, or that power is not centralized.

Some of the sharpest breaks have come in the realm of culture with the increasing prevalence of a vision that reality does not make sense. Yet even here, we should be cautious about seeing this as totally new rather than newly prominent. David Harvey (1989) has provocatively analyzed the culture of postmodernism as a response to a systemic crisis (but not supercession) of capitalism. Fordist production methods have brought on a crisis of overaccumulation; this has called forth a search for new regimes of accumulation (as well as new, post-Fordist production relations). This search fosters new aesthetic movements. Harvey's argument is schematic and somewhat reductionist on the relationship of aesthetics to economics, but powerful in its account of a variety of recent phenomena not as evidence of the end of the modern era but as aspects of a shift in the internal organization of capitalism. It would be an error, though, to think that only capitalism brought a determining pattern to modern social and cultural transformations.

Underlying many of the important (but not fundamentally discontinuous) changes taking place in the contemporary world is the increasing split of systemic steering media and their large-scale organizations from everyday lifeworlds (Habermas, 1984, 1988a). Through propelled in many ways by each of the others, this is sufficiently important to be seen as one of the basic trends or patterns of the modern era, alongside capital accumulation and the centralization of power. The system/lifeworld split has profound implications for social action. It lies, for example, behind the ambivalence of modern culture between two equally disempowering visions. One is of a world out of control, one which doesn't make sense. The other is of a world all too controlled, but only by distant, hidden actors. Modern consciousness vacillates, I think, between the schizoid chaos of incommensurability (cf. Deleuze and Guattari) and an equally basic paranoid world-view. Both have roots in the basic split between the lifeworld experiences which give life its basic meaning and the systemic steering (and its byproducts) which upsets the order of the lifeworld but is poorly grasped, indeed obscured, by the conceptual framework of the lifeworld.

### **Conclusion**

That centralization of power and capital accumulation through exploitation continue as basic features of the contemporary era calls for a normative response which is hard to give on postmodernist foundations. Because these processes are also increasingly systemic

and removed from the everyday discursive grasp of the lifeworld, it is also important that a critical *theory* be developed through which to understand them. It is not enough to rely on play, intuition and ordinary experience.

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, and most importantly for this paper, the postmodernist

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

Among other tasks, any good critical theory must offer a plausible account of the specificity and variation of historical cultural settings for human action. At least superficially, this involves one of the strengths of postmodernist thought. Conversely, failure to attend to this has been one of the central weaknesses of mainstream, especially US-dominated, sociology. Even followers of more historically oriented traditions, moreover, have sometimes been tempted to seek universal reach by dehistoricizing and deculturalizing key concepts. Many Marxists, thus, treat labor as a trans-historical, universal category rather than one specific to capitalism. Of course, this undermines the strength of Marxism's own core analysis of capitalism. Similarly, other theorists, recognizing cultural and historical diversity, have attempted to overcome its more serious implications by subsuming it into a common, often teleological, evolutionary framework. Unlike biological evolutionary theories, which stress the enormous qualitative diversity within the common processes of speciation, inheritance, mutation, selection and so forth, sociological theories have generally relied on claimed universal features of all societies — like technology, held by Lenski et al. (1990) to be the prime mover of evolutionary change — to act as basic, transhistorical variables.

Sociology has been impoverished by its relative neglect of the work of Foucault, Derrida and others of the major thinkers who have contributed to postmodernism. Their work offers both specific insights and important general emphasis on themes of difference and the problems of subject-centered thought. But even these valuable contributions are undermined by overstatement. And in postmodernist thought (for which amalgam neither Foucault nor Derrida can be held responsible) they come with a great deal of problematic baggage.

I have concentrated in this paper on trying to show how the common opposition of Enlightenment rationalism to its postmodernist rejection (or of Habermas to Lyotard) distorts our understanding. The apparent historicity of the opposition of modern to postmodern obscures the extent to which this debate is the latest working out of tensions basic to the whole modern era. We need richer,

more complex understandings of actual history.

Similarly, I have tried briefly to suggest the advantages of recognizing some of the historical continuities in patterns of social action as well as of intellectual debate. The production of 'new social movements' thus needs to be seen as a continuous feature of modernity, not a sign of postmodernity. More generally, the basic tendencies which have characterized the modern era have not been reversed. Capital accumulation, the centralization of power and the split between system and lifeworld all proceed apace. Shifts in the specific workings of 'time-space distancing' (to follow Harvey, 1989 and Giddens, 1990 in using this common but inelegant phrase) are very important. Rearrangement of spatial relations of production, extension and intensification of market relations, and severing of place from space all are having powerful impacts on the contemporary world. They are not, however, reversals of the most basic tendencies of modern social organization. It is important that we reserve sociological claims for the end of modernity to transformations which do involve such basic changes.

## Notes

A previous version of this paper was presented to the session 'Beyond Polarization: New Strategies of Theoretical Discourse', World Congress of Sociology, 9-14 July 1990, Madrid, Spain.

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

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

3. Those of us in the English-speaking world, especially in sociology, have been a bit behind the Parisian fashions in this regard. Just as we were assimilating structuralism, especially beyond the dominant influence of Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, and therefore including Althusser, Poulantzas, etc., there was a new turn in dominant intellectual fashion. This was the move beyond structuralism by some of its leading, mostly younger, figures. Lacan and Derrida are perhaps the most paradigmatic thinkers; in different ways both Foucault and Bourdieu made the same sort of move in relation to structuralism.

4. I have criticized such a view in Calhoun (1991a). It is particularly disturbing coming from Habermas, where it marks a willingness to accept systems-theoretical

accounts of economic activity without attempting to dereify them to see the role of human action behind production even where self-regulating systems coordinate it, and to see the production of knowledge as itself a form of creative activity — labor, if you will, though perhaps in a way posing problems for many orthodox Marxist accounts of the labor theory of value.

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

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

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

8. Derrida's absolutizing of the notion of difference tends among other things to remove the human actor and the concrete social relationship from the discourse. In these respects, Levinas's (1986) approach may be preferable, with its primary stress on the other and on the centrality of ethics.

9. This account is based most especially on Melucci (1988), Touraine (1977, 1981, 1985, 1988) and Cohen (1985). See also Klandermans et al. (1988), Offe (1985), Eder (1985) and Habermas (1984). The last three present views closer to critical theory (and to the present paper) than to the postmodernist assimilation of the idea of new social movements, with its exaggerated notion of a historical break. Just as the present article was completed, Kenneth Tucker (1991) published a useful examination of the claims of new social movement theory (primarily in its 'critical theory' versions) which makes similar points with reference to late nineteenth-century French examples.

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**Craig Calhoun** teaches Sociology and History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His latest book is *Beijing Spring: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China, 1988* (California, 1993).