

6

## THE 1980s

### Theorizing the postmodern condition

#### INTRODUCTION

Up till the early 1980s the debate on postmodernism remained almost exclusively confined to architecture and to the arts, even if some of the critics involved were more than willing to diagnose a new *Zeitgeist*. But all of that would change dramatically in the course of the 1980s when postmodernism began to engage the serious attention of professional philosophers and of leftist critics of a more traditional persuasion than that of Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, and others. Between 1981 and 1984 postmodernism became an indispensable concept in theories of the contemporary - to borrow from the subtitle of Steven Connor's book on the postmodern.<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Richard Rorty definitively put postmodernism and postmodernity on the theoretical map. The contributions of Habermas and Jameson mark the long overdue participation of the traditional left in the debate, Baudrillard emerges as the champion of the radical left, and Lyotard and Rorty, in spite of their important differences, paradoxically come to represent a domesticated postmodernism, a safe and respectable postmodernism to which even liberal humanists, although they might not share all its premises, cannot very well take exception without giving the appearance of puritanical intolerance.

The first indication of the new direction that the debate would take - and simultaneously a major impulse to that reorientation - was the article that the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas published in *New German Critique* in 1981. Titled 'Modernity versus postmodernity', the article translated the speech Habermas had given the year before in Frankfurt at the occasion of being

The Idea of  
the Postmodern  
in History  
by  
Hans Reuten

awarded the City of Frankfurt's Adorno Prize. Habermas's speech was provoked by the attacks on cultural modernism by Daniel Bell and other neo-conservatives and by the even more violent attacks on modernity – and in particular the rationality that was held responsible for the ills of modernity – that were part and parcel of the French poststructuralism that had taken the intellectual world by storm in the course of the 1970s. In his speech Habermas sought to defend the still unrealized potential of the Enlightenment. The most radically anti-rational exponent of the poststructuralism that had caused Habermas's wrath was Jean-François Lyotard, who even if Habermas never mentions him is generally seen as his major target.

At the time, Lyotard was hardly known in the US, although he had published a number of articles in, for instance, *Yale French Studies* and *Semiotext(e)*. But one of his links with the American critical scene would be of great importance for the history of the debate. In November 1976 he had attended 'The International Symposium on Post-Modern Performance' organized by the Center for Twentieth Century Studies of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, surely one of the first-ever conferences to refer to the postmodern in its title. It is tempting to think that the keynote speaker, Ihab Hassan, did actually make him aware of the term's potential right then and there. Lyotard's reference in the printed version of his own paper to what he at that point clearly saw as Hassan postmodernism – 'the theatrical, critical, artistic, and perhaps political inquiries which make up what Ihab Hassan calls "post-modernism"' (Lyotard 1977: 95) – certainly suggests as much. (Hassan paid back the compliment of quotation in his 'The critic as innovator: the Tutzing statement in x frames' of 1977.)<sup>2</sup> In any case, around the mid-1970s Hassan was one of the very few to use the term consistently in print and Lyotard has openly acknowledged his debt to Hassan (Lyotard 1984c: 85).

It is one of the ironies of the history of the debate that *La Condition postmoderne* was not translated until 1984. The irony is compounded, moreover, by the way that translation was embedded between a rather dismissive introductory foreword by Fredric Jameson, who in the meantime had entered the debate with 'Postmodernism and consumer society' (1983), and an appendix that must have been the source of serious confusion. That appendix, called 'Answering the question: what is postmodernism?' was a translation of Lyotard's 'Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que

le post-moderne' of 1982, which instead of the 'postmodern condition' has aesthetic postmodernism as its subject and at first sight has not all that much in common with the earlier essay. (An earlier translation of 'Réponse' had appeared in Ihab and Sally Hassan's collection *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities* of 1983, but Lyotard's impact obviously dates from after the publication of *The Postmodern Condition*.) As the upshot of all this one of the major players of the 1980s made a belated and somewhat unfortunate entry into the game. (As a further complication, the book that had paved the way for *La Condition postmoderne*, a set of dialogues with Jean-Loup Thébaud entitled *Au Juste* (in English, *Just Gaming*) wasn't translated until 1985.)

Similar vicissitudes befell another major force in the debate as it unfolded in the course of the 1980s, the work of Lyotard's one-time associate (in the *Socialisme ou barbarie* group) Jean Baudrillard. Originally a sociologist, Baudrillard had in the course of the 1970s gradually abandoned classical – and leftist – sociology in favor of an apocalyptic and increasingly apocalyptic theorizing that turned out to have great appeal for the American critical left. Like Lyotard, Baudrillard had made earlier appearances upon the American scene, but it was only when *October* translated one of his articles in 1982 and especially after *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* and *Simulacra* (which includes the famous 'The precession of simulacra') were published in 1983 that his name was made as an important theorist of the postmodern.

Because of their respective translation histories, a historical account of Lyotard's and Baudrillard's contributions to the debate is by no means a straightforward matter, especially not if one wants to respect the inner logic of their work's development. (In Lyotard's case that logic is almost completely obscured by the way in which his work has become available in English. His *Economie libidinale* of 1974 had to wait until 1992 before it was published integrally.) Habermas presents much less of a problem; he is, moreover, relatively marginal to the debate, given his insistence that modernity is still an 'incomplete project',<sup>3</sup> and his assertion that what Lyotard calls the postmodern is not much more than a throwback to Nietzschean irrationalism, in other words, an anti-modern rather than post-modern phenomenon.

The work of Richard Rorty and Fredric Jameson has for obvious reasons not been dogged by translation problems. Like Habermas, Rorty cannot very well be considered a fully-fledged theorist

of the postmodern. At a number of occasions Rorty has advanced the idea that his version of traditional American pluralism is what postmodernism is (or at least should be) all about. Relaxed and affable in an avuncular way, Rorty has undoubtedly struck a responsive chord in large numbers of mainstream critics, but he remains, as we shall see, a theorist of American pluralism as a *Weltanschauung* rather than one of postmodernity.

Fredric Jameson is not avuncular, but he certainly has come to occupy a central position in the debate. After 'Postmodernism and consumer society' of 1983, Jameson produced a steady stream of articles that theorized various aspects of the postmodern, always from a traditional Marxist point of view, although gradually incorporating - or perhaps paying lip-service to - the poststructuralist critique of Marxist totalization in his work of the later 1980s. Jameson's work is, with Hassan's pioneering effort, the most significant American contribution to the debate and the first serious attempt to fully contextualize the postmodern, that is, see it in terms of (global) political economy. Later attempts to come to terms with a postmodernism that manifests itself as much in the socio-economic and political sphere as in the cultural-philosophical sphere, such as David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1989), invariably take their departure from Jameson.

This and the following chapters will deal with this international cast. I will begin with a brief discussion of Habermas, not so much because of his importance as a theorist of the postmodern, but because his philosophical project, which can only be sketched in the most general terms here, provides a constant and formidable background of which all postmodern theorizing cannot help being aware. The presence of Habermas looms in the background, even if he is not invoked.

### JÜRGEN HABERMAS AND POST-RATIONALIST MODERNITY

As I have noted earlier, the left's engagement with the postmodern was initially not a fruitful one. When it finally did enter the discussion, it was the avant-gardist left rather than its more traditional counterpart, which preferred to keep its distance.

This curious vacuum gave Jürgen Habermas's 'intervention' of 1981, the publication of his 1980 Adorno lecture in *New German*

*Critique*, its special, trail-blazing character. Habermas does not only offer a lucid and provocative account of modernity and modernism, he also articulates clearly what from a left-liberal perspective is ultimately at stake. But before we arrive at a discussion of 'Modernity versus postmodernity' we must look briefly at the intellectual position that had made Habermas the obvious target of Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne*.

Central to Habermas's thought is that, in spite of admitted disasters, the Enlightenment, the emancipatory project of modernity, must not be abandoned. Unlike most poststructuralists of the 1960s and 1970s, Habermas is not prepared to see a monolithic rationality as the sole cause of the ills of modernity. Like them, he is wary of 'the snares of Western logocentrism' (1985: 196), that is, of a 'foundationalism that conflicts with our consciousness of the fallibility of human knowledge' (193; note, however, Habermas's non-poststructuralist reasons for his wariness), but he insists that for political reasons we cannot dispense with rationality or with a philosophy that seeks to defend (non-foundationalist) rationalism. Defending philosophy against the irreverent attacks of Richard Rorty, he remarks that '[t]he stubbornness with which philosophy clings to the role of the "guardian of reason" can hardly be dismissed as an idiosyncrasy of self-absorbed intellectuals, especially in a period in which basic irrationalist undercurrents are transmuted once again into a dubious form of politics' (195). Habermas's problem, then, is to define and to argue the plausibility of a rationality that distinguishes itself from the rationality denounced by the poststructuralists and that is not transcendent in the sense that it is foundationalist, but yet transcends the limitations of time and place. Such a rationality, although inevitably subject to change over time, must have a 'unifying power' that will enable a workable consensus. Without such a rationality, emancipatory, that is, leftist politics become an illusion.

Now Habermas is of course not unaware of the obstacles in the way to what in his massive *The Theory of Communicative Action* (originally 1981) he calls 'communicative reason'. There is, first of all, the problem of the three 'cultural value spheres' that Max Weber, following Kant, distinguished. Each of these spheres - the theoretical (science), the practical (morality), and the aesthetic (art) - has its own inner logic that cannot be easily reconciled with those of the others. Contrary to the hopes of the Enlighten-

ment, these spheres have become increasingly differentiated, to the point where they are now 'separated from each other institutionally in the form of functionally specified systems of action' (199). We are faced, therefore, with 'three different forms of argumentation: namely, empirical-theoretical discourse, moral discourse, and aesthetic critique', three different 'rationality complexes' (207) that have their own, different, institutional embeddings and have, moreover, become virtual monopolies of coterie experts. Far from informing and enriching everyday life, as the Enlightenment expected, they have increasingly distanced themselves from the 'life-world'. A further complication is that under the regime of 'capitalist modernization' the empirical-theoretical, or cognitive-instrumental, rationality complex has so clearly come to dominate and marginalize other modes of knowing. It has, moreover, more and more developed into a mercenary means-end rationalism. It is this rationalism, Habermas agrees, that fully deserves the poststructuralist charges, but to equate modernity with such a narrow means-end rationalism is to seriously misread its project.

In order to reconnect these rationality complexes at the level of the life-world and to counter what he calls the 'colonization' of the life-world by instrumental rationality, Habermas develops his concept of 'communicative reason' or 'communicative rationality'. *The Theory of Communicative Action* argues that the structure of language itself, its procedural rationality, offers us the means to arrive at a form of communication that is not strategic, that is, does not serve other interests than those of perfecting itself, of creating absolutely unimpeded communication. In this imagined 'ideal speech situation' communication will 'no longer be distorted', in Christopher Norris's words, 'by effects of power, self-interest or ignorance' (Norris 1985: 149). For Habermas, who like his opponents rejects intuition and metaphysics in defining what is reasonable, a universal rationality that is latently present in the procedures that structure argumentative discourse can be brought to light 'through the analysis of the *already* operative potential for rationality contained in the everyday practices of communication' (196). Following French theory, albeit at a safe distance and with wholly different intentions, Habermas, too, gives language an absolutely central place. As Thomas Docherty has put it, in Habermas 'Marxism has taken "the linguistic turn"' (Docherty 1993: 3).

The notion that language offers formal procedures for adjudicating differences – that is, competing truth claims – and can thus cure the ills of our one-sided modernity, leads Habermas away from what he sees as a typically modernist, subjectivistic, 'philosophy of consciousness' towards a philosophy of intersubjectivity, that is, of communication and consensus (a 'non-reified everyday communicative practice' is 'a form of life with structures of an undistorted intersubjectivity' (210)). Such a consensus is of course predicated upon a general willingness to accept communicative rationality. It rests, therefore, not only on that rationality's scientific status, but also on individual acts of social solidarity. It 'requires a democratic context in which anyone may question the argumentative claims of anyone else, so long as each party aims at consensus and agrees to concur with positions that he or she cannot refute' (Poster 1989: 23). Habermas's intersubjectivity is thus all-inclusive in that the only ones who are excluded by his procedural approach are those who exclude themselves by rejecting its procedures, that is, communicative reason. The desirability of an intersubjectivistic consensus built upon communicative reason marks Habermas's distance from the deconstructionist avant-gardists (and their supporters, such as Lyotard) of the previous chapter. For Habermas anti-representationalism can indeed have emancipatory aspects in that it may serve to trigger changes that will bring us closer to the ultimate consensus that communicative reason has enabled, but it can never be an end in itself. On the contrary, the permanent representational crisis of the deconstructionists will never lead to the consensus that Habermas envisages and thus effectively blocks the implementation of the left-liberal politics that he advocates, that is, the completion of the project of modernity. Habermas mobilizes an utopian representation that is ultimately enabled by a quasi-transcendental communicative rationality against the attacks on representation by a deconstructionist avant-garde, for whom emancipation depends precisely on the anti-representational impulse. Progress comes about by untiring attempts to achieve an ever more enlightened consensus on the basis of reasoned debate, not by way of a permanent crisis that refuses to resolve itself. As Richard Rorty has put it: 'Abandoning a standpoint which is, if not transcendental, at least "universalistic," seems to Habermas to betray the social hopes which have been central to liberal politics' (Rorty 1985: 162).

To be sure, Habermas is not the only contemporary thinker who refuses to give up on the 'unifying, consensus-creating power of reason' (197), but his undisputed stature as a philosopher makes him the most formidable of those who believe in what one might call a post-rationalist modernity. He was, therefore, the natural target for the attack by Jean-François Lyotard that I will discuss later in this chapter.

### HABERMAS AND POSTMODERNISM

'Modernity versus postmodernity', the title under which Habermas's Adorno lecture of 1980 appeared in English, is a densely packed piece. It presents an analysis of (aesthetic) modernism, it defends that modernism against 'neo-conservative' detractors (such as Daniel Bell), it gives an explanation for the 'failure' of the surrealist revolt, and it ends with an overview of anti-modernists and their positions, ranging from the 'old conservatives' to the 'neo-conservatives' by way of the 'young conservatives'. Even this short outline should make clear that Habermas brought a new intellectual dimension to the debate. By way of reminder: when Habermas presented 'Modernity versus postmodernity' as a lecture in New York, in March 1981, the American discussion of the postmodern encompassed William Spanos's Heideggerian postmodern, the all-inclusive but elusive postmodernism of Ihab Hassan, the architectural postmodernism of Charles Jencks and Robert Stern, the attack on representation by the deconstructionist avant-garde, and the dismissive and irritable attitude of the traditional left, as exemplified by Gerald Graff's collection *Literature Against Itself* of 1979. Habermas's 'intervention' had the welcome effect of widening the intellectual and historical scope of the debate and of substantially adding to its depth. Even if he himself never took part in it, Habermas cleared the way for the serious engagement of the traditional left with the postmodern that came under way in the course of the 1980s in, for instance, the work of Andreas Huyssen and that of Fredric Jameson.

The importance of 'Modernity versus postmodernity' lies in this historical role, rather than in any theory of the postmodern that it offers. As my outline has made clear, the postmodern is only marginally present in Habermas's qualified defense of modernism. But even that defense, with its focus on the historical avant-garde, is of interest to the debate on the postmodern, as

would somewhat later be Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), on the 1974 German original of which Habermas partly draws.

'Modernity versus postmodernity' opens with a strategic maneuver that from an Anglo-American point of view must be decidedly surprising: it locates the spirit of modernism exclusively in the avant-garde and its nineteenth-century precursors. 'The spirit and discipline of aesthetic modernity assumed clear contours in the work of Baudelaire. Modernity then unfolded in various avant-garde movements, and finally reached its climax in the Café Voltaire of the Dadaists' (1981: 4). This avant-gardistic modernism (or aesthetic modernity, as Habermas prefers to call it here) 'understands itself as invading unknown territory', a 'yet unoccupied future', and discloses in its very celebration of dynamism a 'longing for an undefiled, an immaculate and stable present' (4-5). After noting the recent revival of this avant-gardist impulse in the art of the 1960s - which he, then, does *not* see in postmodernist terms - Habermas defends it against the accusations of 'hedonistic motives' leveled against it by Daniel Bell in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. In Habermas's reading, or perhaps it is better to speak of misreading, Bell makes the mistake of holding the 'adversary culture' responsible for a dissolution of the Protestant ethic that in truth is caused by the very processes of modernization that Bell supports: 'protest and discontent originate exactly when spheres of communicative action, centered on the reproduction and transmissions of values and norms, are penetrated by a form of modernization guided by standards of economic and administrative rationality' (7-8). Habermas sees the split between social modernization and modernist culture as a reactive defense against the increased penetration of the life-world by 'economic and administrative rationality'.

What is more, he sees aesthetic modernity (avant-gardist modernism) as engaged in an attempt to enable a return to the project of modernity as it was originally conceived. That project, as formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment,

consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The

Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life.

(9)

In Habermas's analysis of modernity, the project has foundered because of the absolute domination of 'objective science' under capitalism; the empirical-theoretical, or cognitive-instrumental, rationality complex (called 'functional rationality' in his more recent work), has marginalized all other modes of cognition and has thus effectively thwarted the hoped-for 'rational organization of everyday social life'. Following Peter Bürger's lead, Habermas argues that the avant-garde, and in particular the surrealists, in trying to bridge the gulf between art and everyday life sought to bring about a reintegration of that which under the pressure of functional rationality had been differentiated. To do so, the avant-garde saw itself forced to first break out of the self-imposed isolation that had served to protect art against the ever more threatening encroachment of functional rationality and forced too to divest art of the aura (in Walter Benjamin's sense) that had served the same purpose. But the avant-gardist revolt was doomed to fail. As Habermas puts it, 'when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow' (10). When the protective shield is dropped, the futility of artistic intervention is revealed. Apart from that, even if successful, the 'surrealist revolt would have replaced only one abstraction' while true emancipation can only be based on simultaneous revolutionary action in all three domains: 'A reified everyday praxis can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements. Reification cannot be overcome by forcing just one of those highly stylized cultural spheres to open up and become more accessible' (11). Needless to say that such an overall revolution and the ensuing general de-reification do not seem to be on the cards for quite a while and that as a result the deconstructionist avant-garde of the late 1970s and early 1980s is bound to suffer a fate similar to that of its predecessors.

Still, the original project of modernity should not be aban-

120

doned. To give up means to hand over modernity to those who will abuse it, that is, to those who will reify one of its spheres and 'aestheticize politics' or, alternatively, 'replace politics by moral rigorism' or 'submit it to the dogmatism of doctrine' (11). Contrary to what Lyotard and other poststructuralists have argued, these phenomena, although all too real, historically, should not be identified with modernity as it was originally conceived, and should not lead us 'into denouncing the intentions of the surviving Enlightenment tradition as intentions rooted in a "terroristic reason"' (11).

As I have noted above, Habermas distinguishes between three different conservative positions: the 'premodernism' of the 'old conservatives' (R.R. Leavis, although Habermas does not mention him, perfectly fits the bill), the 'anti-modernism' of the 'young conservatives' (Foucault, Derrida, and their followers), and the 'postmodernism' of the 'neo-conservatives', that is, Daniel Bell and others (13-14). To begin with the neo-conservatives, these at first sight rather unlikely postmodernists accept the finality of the separation of the spheres of science, morality, and art from each other and from the life-world, and they accept the ascendancy of functional rationality (at the expense of morality) on the level of social organization (politics). Since, from Habermas's point of view, they have thereby chosen to give up the project of modernity and have effectively moved beyond it, they are the only true postmodernists in sight.

The young conservatives, a category that includes Foucault and Derrida, have, by contrast, not moved beyond modernity at all. Heeding the call of Nietzsche, they 'recapitulate the basic experience of aesthetic modernity', claiming 'as their own the revelations of a decentered subjectivity, emancipated from the imperatives of work and usefulness' (13). In a passage that suggests the early Lyotard and Deleuze/Guattari rather than Derrida - with Foucault hovering in between - Habermas asserts that the young conservatives

remove into the sphere of the far away and the archaic the spontaneous powers of imagination, of self-experience and of emotionality. To instrumental reason, they juxtapose in manichean fashion a principle only accessible through evocation, be it the will to power or sovereignty, Being or the dionysiac force of the poetical.

(13)

121

Four years later, in a footnote undoubtedly prompted by the fierce criticism that this characterization of the poststructuralist effort had provoked, Habermas still stood by his original analysis: 'They all take from Nietzsche the radical gesture of a break with modernity and a revolutionary renewal of pre-modern energies, most often reaching back to archaic times' (1985: 229). By then, moreover, his contention that poststructuralism replayed modernist tunes with a somewhat radicalized score had found influential supporters such as Andreas Huyssen.

In 1981, however, Habermas's historical positioning of the poststructuralist enterprise and his reading of poststructuralism as an anti-progressive force did not make much of an impression. Neither did 'Modernity versus postmodernity' have much impact in terms of its analysis of the postmodern; a critical milieu for which postmodernism had in the meantime become equated with radical politics had obviously little use for a redefinition in terms of technocratic conservatism. The essay, however, made very clear in which ways what was left of the project of modernity was endangered and suggested that an engagement with the forces of anti-modernism was a moral duty for those who wished to save that project from oblivion. Moreover, 'Modernity versus postmodernity' provided a kind of solid backdrop, an old-fashioned norm against which other efforts to define the postmodern or to develop a postmodern politics could be measured. As for instance Linda Hutcheon's model has already suggested, in the later 1980s and early 1990s postmodernism developed more and more into a dialogic space intellectually bounded on the one side by Habermasian consensus – that is, representation – and on the other by the radical dissensus – or anti-representationalism – proposed by Lyotard. That anti-representationalism will be discussed in the following section.

#### MULTIVALENCE AND POLYPHONY: JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD

Presenting Lyotard's position – or, rather, positions – is no straightforward matter. Doing justice to his trajectory prior to his sudden American fame would at least require a survey of his work of the early 1970s, *Discours, figure* (1971), *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (1973), and *Economie libidinale* (1974). But that would give a false impression of his role in the debate on the postmod-

ern, which has its proper beginning in 1984 when *La Condition postmoderne* of 1979 appeared in English. It is only after 1984 that Lyotard's new Anglophone readership was led to his earlier work, in which they found a substantially different Lyotard, who, according to some, is more postmodern than the later Lyotard of *La Condition*.

Since 1984 Lyotard's authority has been invoked in two separate attempts to come to terms with the postmodern that are substantially different in their intellectual premises. The first bases itself on *The Postmodern Condition*, the second on the earlier work. There is, moreover, the not inconsiderable influence of Lyotard's notion of a 'postmodern sublime', first proposed in 'Answering the question: what is postmodernism?' of 1983. That postmodern sublime deserves separate treatment, even if its theater of operations remains limited to the arts. However, since the impact of Lyotard has its proper beginning with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition I* will leave the chronology of Lyotard's intellectual career for what it is and begin this brief discussion of his work with *The Postmodern Condition*.

#### THE POSTMODERN CONDITION: A REPORT ON KNOWLEDGE

As its subtitle indicates, *The Postmodern Condition* is not so much a study of postmodernity *tout court*, but rather a study of postmodern knowledge, or, as Lyotard puts it in his preface, 'the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies' (Lyotard 1984c: xxiii). Although he has indeed some things to say about the world under postmodernity, there is little, if anything, that is new here. His remarks on late twentieth-century social developments follow mostly the familiar scenario of the postindustrial society as sketched by Alain Touraine, Daniel Bell, and others, the scenario in which information replaces the manufacture of material goods as a central concern in the most advanced economies.<sup>4</sup> This 'computerization of society' (67) will affect the nature of our knowledge. It is not very clear how exactly our knowledge will change, but Lyotard offers the prediction that 'the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language' (4). Knowledge, moreover, has become 'an informational commodity'; science has been forced to abandon its original integrity

and has become an instrument in the hands of power (46). As in Habermas's analysis, in Lyotard's account of modernity instrumental rationality has come to dominate other forms of reason. But that is virtually all he has to say about the socio-political aspects of knowledge under the regime of postmodernity – a knowledge not to be confused with postmodern knowledge, as will become clear below. The social and the political are seemingly relegated to the background, even if the criticisms leveled at postindustrial capitalism occasionally remind us of Lyotard's former, but since long abandoned, Marxist orientation.

Lyotard's point of departure is the demise of what he terms 'metanarratives': 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives' (xxiv). Those metanarratives or 'grand' narratives are, broadly speaking, the supposedly transcendent and universal truths that underpin western civilization and that function to give that civilization objective legitimation, a term that Lyotard borrows from Habermas and that will turn out to be *The Postmodern Condition's* key concept. All of this is wholly in keeping with the general, textualizing thrust of French theory of the 1960s and 1970s. Building upon the later Wittgenstein Lyotard suggests that these metanarratives have been replaced by a great number of 'language games'. These language games range from Wittgensteinian 'models of discourse', that is, various forms of utterance – denotative, performative, prescriptive, etc. – that all follow their own specific set of rules, via the discourses that are employed by social institutions and professions, to full-scale narratives (for which he also uses the term *petit récits* or little narratives). Such narrative language games can accommodate elements such as 'deontic statements prescribing what should be done . . . with respect to kinship, the difference between the sexes, children, neighbors, foreigners, etc.' (20). In other words, narrative language games can even underpin whole cultures. However, because of their narrative status such language games can have only limited social and historical validity, or, in Lyotard's terms, legitimation, even if to those who live inside them they seem inevitable and natural ('Narratives . . . define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do' (23)).

Lyotard is of course aware that practically all metanarratives have since long been unmasked as fictions, even if they have not

necessarily lost their popular appeal because of that. One language game, however, still tenaciously clings to its special status. Modern science has successfully managed to safeguard its aura of transcendence. It has done so, Lyotard argues, by privileging the language game of 'denotation' to the exclusion of all others. Scientific knowledge sees itself as standing outside and above all language games, that is, outside and above narration. But that, Lyotard argues, is an untenable position. Science, too, can only find legitimation through narrative: 'Scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all' (29).

Lyotard's real object in *The Postmodern Condition* is to expose the legitimation of science and thus the transcendent status of scientific knowledge as belonging to the realm of narrative. In Lyotard's analysis, the modern pursuit of knowledge is characterized by the way it legitimates itself through a metadiscourse that makes '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' (xxiii). There are two major versions of this 'narrative of legitimation': a political one that we have inherited from the French Enlightenment and a philosophical one that we have inherited from German idealism. In the political version the pursuit of knowledge is justified, in Axel Honneth's words, 'by way of a philosophy of history which construes the history of the species as a process of emancipation'. The 'legitimizing instance' here is 'the moral principle of universal freedom'. In the philosophical version, legitimation is provided by 'a philosophy of history which construes the process of history as a realization of Reason in the sciences'; here it is the principle of universal knowledge that functions as the legitimizing instance (Honneth 1985: 151).

Lyotard argues that, first of all, such legitimations have lost their power: 'Speculative or humanistic philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimization duties' (41). He does not explain why that should be the case, except by a vague reference to internal erosion, nor does he convincingly argue why the loss of transcendent legitimation should be so damaging to science (in fact, it is not difficult to see that it isn't). But his real target is not science itself, or its transcendent status, but the principle of transcendent



legitimation itself. It goes without saying that the utilitarian, capitalist, legitimation by way of performativity, 'the best input/output equation' – the instrumental reason which for both Habermas and Lyotard has virtually displaced the theoretical reason that sees the discovery of 'truth' as the goal of science (46) – is wholly unacceptable. And so he turns to Wittgenstein for 'a kind of legitimation not based on performativity'. Non-performative, immanent legitimation is what the postmodern world is all about (41). As Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson put it in a discussion of Lyotard's relevance for feminist theory, 'in the postmodern era legitimation becomes plural, local, and immanent. . . . Instead of hovering above, legitimation descends to the level of practice and becomes immanent in it' (1988: 87). Narrative is thus for Lyotard the inevitable source of all legitimation, and therefore of all value and truth.

Under the new, postmodern, dispensation a basically modern science that seeks to legitimate itself through appeals to metanarratives still survives, even if it has meanwhile succumbed to the performativity principle, that is, become merely instrumental. Next to it we have now, however, a postmodern science that sees itself as a language game and finds its legitimation in its own avant-gardist strategies:

Postmodern science – by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, 'fracta,' catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes – is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown. And it suggests a model of legitimation that has nothing to do with maximized performance, but has as its basis difference understood as paralogy. (60)

It is this postmodern science that more generally stands for the entire 'postmodern condition'. Whereas modern science worked towards stable, timeless representations of the world, postmodern science seeks to be expressly anti-representational. In other words, it seeks to prevent consensus, which is, indeed, exactly what it from Lyotard's point of view must do, unlikely as that

may seem. Arguing that Habermas's promotion of consensus – 'an agreement between men, defined as knowing intellects and free wills . . . obtained through dialogue' – is 'based on the validity of the narrative of emancipation' (60), Lyotard suggests that Habermas is wrong in identifying emancipation with an ultimate consensus. For Lyotard, consensus is only 'a particular *state* of discussion, not its end' (65; emphasis added). In the field of science the end is paralogy – 'a move (the importance of which is often not recognized until later) played in the pragmatics of knowledge' (61) – and in other fields the ends are similar moves that seek to contribute to diversity, uncertainty, and undecidability. It is not that Lyotard does not believe in the necessity of political emancipation, it is just that he expects it to be realized through dissensus, not through Habermasian consensus. As he put it in an interview published practically simultaneously with *The Postmodern Condition*: 'the pedagogical task, once stripped of its trappings, that of the great narrative of emancipation, can be designated by one word: an apprenticeship in resistance' (1984b: 18). Four years later he was equally explicit:

The real political task today, at least in so far as it is also concerned with the cultural . . . is to carry forward the resistance that writing offers to established thought, to what has already been done, to what everyone thinks, to what is well known, to what is widely recognized, to what is 'readable,' to everything which can change its form and make itself acceptable to opinion in general. (Lyotard 1988b: 302)

For Lyotard, consensus is the end of freedom and of thought; it is dissensus that allows us to experience freedom and to think, that is, to extend our possibilities. Whereas for Habermas emancipation follows a route that leads via temporary consensus to an ultimate consensus, for Lyotard emancipation depends on the perpetuation of dissensus, that is, on a permanent crisis in representation, on 'an ever greater awareness of the contingent and localized – the unstable – nature of all norms for representing the world' (Herman 1993: 163). Like the deconstructionist avant-garde, Lyotard advocates a radical anti-representationalism.

## Postmodern language games

As I have just suggested, Lyotard's anti-representational postmodern science stands for the 'postmodern condition' *tout court*. Let us return to the 'heterogeneity of language games' (xxv) - I have already indicated their diversity - that constitutes the field of the social under postmodernity. These language games are engaged in constant struggle, if not against each other, then against themselves:

to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics. This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win. A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of invention. . . . Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrases, of words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language on the level of *parole*. But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary - at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language or connotation.

(10)

Communication, instead of establishing rational grounds and working towards perfection in Habermasian fashion, will always be a struggle. This view is wholly incompatible with what Lyotard calls Habermas's 'belief . . . that humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularization of the "moves" permitted in all language games and that the legitimacy of any statement resides in its contributing to that emancipation' (66). Contending that '[c]onsensus has become an outmoded and suspect value' (66), and dismissing Habermas's emancipatory legitimation, Lyotard replaces consensus with his 'general agonistics' in which the moves that contribute to the game in question are those that serve to keep it going (while additionally bringing joy and pleasure to the players). In such discursive moves the experimental and the political are identical, as the (scientifically) experimental and the political were identical in the moves of postmodern science. As a consequence, the only moves that are not permitted are those of 'terror': 'By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him' (63). Terror, which leads to enforced con-

sensus, stops the free flow of the game and thus effectively cuts short its political potential. Since 'invention is always born of dissension' (xxv), there will be no 'invention' under conditions of terror. Such inventions, which are born, in Kenneth Lea's phrase, of 'the anarchic, creative play of desire' (Lea 1987: 90), belong to the realm of postmodern knowledge, whose 'principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralysis' (xxv).

It will be clear that Lyotard's version of the postmodern condition is not without its problems and those in favor of a more traditional emancipatory politics have been quick to articulate them. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson sum up the debilitating effect of Lyotard's principle of heterogeneity on traditional politics: 'Lyotard insists that the field of the social is heterogeneous and nontotalizable. As a result, he rules out the sort of critical social theory that employs general categories like gender, race, and class' (1988: 89). Moreover, what about the vexing problem of justice in a world of heterogeneous language games? Lyotard is not unaware of it and hastens to tell us that 'justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect.' However, since consensus *is* suspect, '[w]e must arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus' (66). It is not only that the heterogeneity of language games leads to what Lyotard elsewhere calls a 'multiplicity of justices', justice, like everything else in his postmodern world, 'consists in working at the limits of what the rules permit, in order to invent new moves, perhaps new rules and therefore new games' (Lyotard 1985: 100). In Lyotard's universe of language games, norms and values are always created and re-created through discursive intervention and are never given.

Lyotard's conception of justice conforms to the general experimental anti-representationalism of the postmodern condition, except, of course, in the absolutist ban on the elimination of rival players from a game. Although this meta-rule involves him in contradiction - it is clearly not subject to experimentation - it is also clearly necessary for the viability of his experimental/political model. As Steven Connor has pointed out, this meta-rule brings him closer to Habermas than he probably would want to be:

Lyotard seems to be offering a universal discursive norm which is very similar to that offered by Habermas, namely,

that all subjects and groups of subjects shall be permitted access to discourse, and no subject or group of subjects shall be hindered by compulsion, whether internal or external to discourse, which will constrain or prevent such access.

(Connor 1992: 114)

In the final analysis, both Habermas and Lyotard would seem to pursue a left-liberal politics. What keeps them apart is the respective routes that must lead towards that end.

#### Language games and liberal pluralism

Let me return to the reception of *The Postmodern Condition*. It was immediately assimilated by 'theory', as the various sorts of avant-garde criticism and (pseudo-)philosophizing that one finds in American Departments of English are nowadays collectively called. However, what went into that process of assimilation as a variety of French poststructuralism came out as an innocuous version of American pluralism. For the large majority of his American readers Lyotard's 'incredulity toward metanarratives' served as welcome additional evidence that such large-scale ideological constructs as, say, patriarchy, capitalism – the metanarrative according to which emancipation will follow from the free operation of the market – or the supposed superiority of the white race, fatally lacked legitimation. More in general, Lyotard's language games served as an effective weapon against all totalizing pretensions, with the advantage of apparently leaving the home base of the attacker (as often as not a pragmatic liberal humanist) safe and intact. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's reading of Lyotard sums it all up:

In a sense, Lyotard's celebration of plurality replays the moves of liberal pluralism and empiricism. His 'justice of multiplicities' is similar to traditional liberal pluralism which posits a plurality of political subjects with multiple interests and organizations. He replays tropes of liberal tolerance by valorizing diverse modes of multiplicity, refusing to privilege any subjects or positions, or to offer a standpoint from which one can choose between opposing political positions.

(Best and Kellner 1991: 174-5)

This is indeed how *The Postmodern Condition* was widely read and

why it made postmodernism eminently safe for the middle-of-the-road critic who abhors radicalism of any kind. On this reading, postmodernity only means more business as usual. But it is a one-sided reading that is unfair to Lyotard, especially if it goes accompanied with accusations of neo-conservatism. What such readings of *The Postmodern Condition* leave out is its radically anti-representational stance and its emphasis on restless experimentation in every conceivable field. Instead of a comparatively complacent liberal pluralism, Lyotard promotes a radically revolutionary ethos that is that of the modern avant-garde. As Fredric Jameson already pointed out in his foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard's postmodernism has a good deal in common with 'modernism as its first ideologues projected it – a constant and ever more dynamic revolution in the languages, forms, and tastes of art' (Jameson 1984c: xvi). There is, moreover, Lyotard's dismissal of the subject, which is unthinkable in the liberal pluralism that Best and Kellner describe. For Lyotard, 'moves' in a language game are not the intentional actions of autonomous subjects, but come about as agents act upon the prompting of desire. Indeed, in his next book he would drop the term 'language game' because of its subjectivistic overtones:

it seemed to me that 'language games' implied players that made use of language like a toolbox, thus repeating the constant arrogance of Western anthropocentrism. 'Phrases' came to say that the so-called players were on the contrary situated by phrases in the universes those phrases present, 'before' any intention.

(Lyotard 1984b: 17)

#### THE POSTMODERN SUBLIME

'Answering the question: what is postmodernism?', originally published in 1982, was included by Ihab and Sally Hassan in their *Innovation/Renovation* collection of 1983, but it only began to attract wide attention after its inclusion as an appendix in *The Postmodern Condition*. In the essay Lyotard resolutely marks his distance from much of what passes for postmodern art. Achille Bonito Oliva's 'transavantgarde', for instance, is accused of a 'cynical eclecticism' in its attempts to go beyond – and simultaneously to suppress – the historical avant-garde while plunder-

ing and recycling that same avant-garde's achievements. Such eclectic postmodernism (which also includes Jencks's postmodern architecture) has accommodated itself to the 'power... of capital' and is

the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. By becoming kitsch, art panders to the confusion which reigns in the 'taste' of the patrons. Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the 'anything goes,' and the epoch is one of slackening.

(334-5)

But if postmodern eclecticism is a debased and false form of art, so is postmodern representation, the return to the figurative. Representational art is impossible since modernity has already revealed the 'lack of reality' of reality' (336). It has already confronted us with the impossibility of representation, with the unrepresentable: modern art 'present[s] the fact that the unrepresentable exists' (337).

In trying to find an answer to the question how painting can make visible what is unrepresentable, Lyotard turns to Kant: 'Kant himself shows the way when he names *formlessness*, the *absence of form*, as a possible index to the unrepresentable' (337). This is the strategy of the historical avant-garde in its attempts to present the unrepresentable. In that strategy Lyotard distinguishes two modes that shade into each other: a nostalgic one (German Expressionism, Malevitch, de Chirico) and one that emphasizes 'the increase of being and the jubilation which results from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other' (339). The latter mode, which includes Braque, Picasso, Lissitzky, and Duchamp is close to - and indeed sometimes overlaps with - the postmodern. Although 'Answering the question' sees the postmodern as part of the modern, it also makes a crucial distinction. Both modern and postmodern aesthetics are aesthetics of the sublime, equally concerned with the unrepresentable. The modern sublime, however, is a nostalgic sublime, and its form 'continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter

for solace or pleasure' (340). It cannot shake its longing for the merely beautiful. The postmodern, avant-gardistic sublime

puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.

(340)

The postmodern sublime is Lyotard's radical anti-representationalism in the aesthetic field. The enemy is once again consensus, because consensus can never lead beyond the beautiful (to speak of beauty is to invoke norms) and because it actively prevents the experience of the sublime. As Lyotard put it a few years later, '[w]ith the sublime, there is no criterion for assessing the role of taste, and so everybody is alone when it comes to judging' (1986: 11). The sublime evokes a 'contradictory' feeling that is 'deep and unexchangeable'. Lyotard's art of the sublime is thus an art of negation, a perpetual negation, since the rules that sublime works of art will in spite of themselves establish must always again be broken. Like postmodern science, and like his discursive moves, Lyotard's postmodern aesthetic is based on a never-ending critique of representation that should contribute to the preservation of heterogeneity, of optimal dissensus. The sublime does not lead towards a resolution; the confrontation with the unrepresentable leads to radical openness.

This turn towards Kant, and especially towards the Kantian sublime, generally characterizes Lyotard's work of the 1980s, although it is a Kant who, in Lyotard's reading, takes on a curiously proto-postmodern shape. This is a Kant of 'language games (which, under the name of faculties, [he] knew to be separated by a chasm)' and a Kant who 'knew that the price to pay for [transcendental] illusion is terror' (1983: 341). There is, however, no major new departure in that more recent work. *Le Différend* of 1983, translated in 1988, drops the 'language games' and replaces them with 'regimes of phrases', as we have seen, because Lyotard feels that such terms as 'game' and 'player' might suggest intentionality and a liberal humanist concept of the subject. Apart from this, Lyotard introduces the notion of 'the differend' (*différend*), which he defines as 'a case of conflict between (at

least) two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments' (1988a: xi). Such differends are of course the lifeblood of Lyotard's postmodern universe and should under no condition be forced to resolve themselves into consensus. Proper respect for the differend guarantees that all potential players (to use the discarded terminology for another moment), no matter how marginal in a given language game, are allowed to make their moves, that is, participate in the agonistics of the game, and are not prematurely silenced.

### DESIRE

Let me now look briefly at Lyotard's work of the early 1970s. As I have pointed out above, with the exception of a number of essays from *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* of 1973 that work has only become available in the later 1980s, and a complete publication of *Economie libidinale* had to wait until 1992. The early Lyotard, although in no way as influential in the debate as the Lyotard of *The Postmodern Condition*, is, however, a major presence in some recent theories of the postmodern. The sociologist Scott Lash tells us that his

conception of postmodern de-differentiation via an aesthetics of desire was . . . in large part dependent on Lyotard's work. Little of this draws on Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. . . . The work in which Lyotard is the most valuable about postmodernism is, I think, his earlier work, in which he does not directly address the topic at all.

(Lash 1990: 174)

If we follow Lash in globally distinguishing between two major camps in French post-fifties theory, a Saussurean one that emphasizes language and structure (the early Barthes, Lacan, Derrida) and a Nietzschean one that emphasizes power and desire (Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari), then Lyotard is unique in his reorientation from the latter to the former. The general drift in the late 1960s and early 1970s was from the linguistic position to a position that highlighted power and desire. Lyotard, however, went against the grain, although never the whole way. One of the most ardent champions of desire in the early 1970s, he began to frame desire in language games in his dialogues with Thébaud

of 1977-8, arriving at the position outlined in *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979.

But the Lyotard of the early 1970s was, in Lash's phrase, 'unchallenged as "the metaphysician of desire"' (90) and thus as one of the most radical enemies of reason: 'Reason and power are one and the same thing. You may disguise the one with dialectics or prospectiveness, but you will still have the other in all its crudeness: jails, taboos, public weal, selection, genocide' (Lyotard 1984b: 11). This is the Lyotard for whom instrumental reason, under the regime of capital, has succeeded in gaining control over language and over representation. It has succeeded in doing so by privileging 'discourse' at the expense of 'figure' - in other words, through the repression of desire and its manifold manifestations. Drawing on Freud's concept of libidinal economy, Lyotard argues that under capitalism the flow of libidinal energy, the primary process, is continually thwarted by the secondary process which involves 'transformation and verbalization' and bows to a reality principle and to the demands of an ego that are ultimately constructed by capital. Let me quote Albrecht Wellmer's lucid summary of Lyotard's position:

for Lyotard, subject, representation, meaning, sign, and truth are links in a chain which must be broken as a whole: 'The subject is a product of the representation machine, it disappears with it.'

Neither art nor philosophy have to do with 'meaning' or 'truth,' but solely with 'transformations of energy,' which cannot be derived from 'a memory, a subject, an identity.' Political economy is transformed into libidinal economy, liberated from the terror of representations.

(Wellmer 1985: 340)

It is the free flow of desire, especially as it manifested itself in art (in the widest sense of the term), that once guaranteed an authentic communication that the capitalist regime, under which desire is structured and controlled by language, has made impossible.

Lyotard first fully outlines his philosophy of desire in *Discours, figure* of 1971, but presents its most radical version - Best and Kellner speak of 'a highly aggressive Nietzschean philosophy of affirmation' (1991: 148) - in *Economie libidinale* of 1974. In *Economie libidinale* Lyotard embraces desire in all its possible manifes-

nothing but *initiatives* or events, in whatever domain they may occur.

Ihab Hassan, 'The critic as innovator: the Tutzing statement in x frames,' *Amerikastudien* 22, 1: 55.

3 The Adorno lecture of 1980 was reprinted in Hal Foster's *Anti-Aesthetic* (Foster 1983a) under the title 'Modernity - an incomplete project'.

4 In a note Lyotard mentions Touraine's *La Société postindustrielle* of 1969 and Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* of 1973.

tations. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, who offered a similarly Nietzschean philosophy in their *L'Anti-Œdipe* of 1972 (trans. 1985), Lyotard celebrates desire even in its negative manifestations. Deleuze and Guattari set desire as an essentially positive force, but are not unaware that positive forces can be appropriated for negative ends. *Economie libidinale*, however, throws all caution to the wind in its tireless promotion of unconstrained and undirected libidinal energy. In this period Lyotard is very close to the celebration of vitalism that Gerald Graff saw in the American counterculture of the 1960s, witness this passage from an essay originally published in 1973:

Here are the 'men of profusion', the 'masters' of today: marginals, experimental painters, pop, hippies and yippies, parasites, madmen, binned loonies. One hour of their lives offers more intensity and less intention than three hundred thousand words of a professional philosopher. More Nietzschean than Nietzsche's readers.

(1979: 53)

This sums it all up: raw experience and amoral energy are privileged at the expense of reflection and intention.

It is perhaps somewhat unfair to highlight a position that Lyotard has in the meantime publicly repudiated, although there are clearly important continuities between the work of the early 1970s and *The Postmodern Condition*. However, as I have just pointed out, Lyotard's early work has given rise to one of the most interesting sociological accounts of the postmodern, that of Scott Lash, which I will discuss later, with other sociologies of the postmodern. But let me first turn from Lyotard's avant-gardistic postmodern condition to other accounts of a fully-fledged postmodernity.

## NOTES

1 Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (1989).

2 [t]he main point is this: art... is becoming, like the personality of the artist himself, an occurrence without clear boundaries: at worst a kind of social hallucination, at best an opening or inauguration. That is why Jean-François Lyotard enjoins readers to abandon the safe harbour offered to the mind by the category of 'works of art' or of signs in general, and to recognize as truly artistic