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Postmodernism and Critical Theory

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- 17 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Different: Phrases in Dispute* [1984], trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 28.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 19 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [1790], trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- 20 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* [1988], trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- 21 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
- 22 See particularly Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* [1979], trans. Brian Singer (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).
- 23 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, 1985).
- 24 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 29.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 26 See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).
- 27 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 28 See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique*, 22 (1981), pp. 3–14.
- 29 See Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Altermodern', in Nicolas Bourriaud, ed., *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), pp. 11–24.

2 POSTMODERNISM AND CRITICAL THEORY

GEORGES VAN DEN ABBELE

Postmodernism is most readily defined as the set of responses – cultural, political, intellectual – to the perceived failures of modernism both as a vanguard aesthetic movement and as a general ideology of human progress forged in the fires and bellows of the industrial age. Given the sheer diversity of modernism itself, though, the various postmodernist responses to it from the mid-1970s to early 1990s are themselves variable, even paradoxical and contradictory. The corresponding term, 'postmodernity', applies to the socio-historical situation in which the discourses and practices of modernity, based in the ideals of the Enlightenment, are understood to have been superseded. And while this reputedly new epoch is best realized in a post-industrial America that also happens to be the primary locus for the cultural trends and intellectual debates associated with postmodernism, the theoretical inspirations for its analysis as *simultaneously* an aesthetic and a historical break – that is, as a fundamental change in social reality – are principally drawn from the writings of a number of French thinkers whose works are commonly grasped under the rubric **poststructuralism**, and more generally, that of critical theory. If the term poststructuralism, evokes the names of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard (the philosophers most identified with the name and concept of the postmodern), as well as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the broader term, critical theory, harkens back to an even earlier moment, that of the Frankfurt School for Social Research and the likes of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse. Interestingly, both of these intellectual movements evolved primarily in *reaction to* the perceived failures of preceding schools of thought. In the case of the Frankfurt School, critical theory thought to expand beyond the narrow economic determinism of traditional Marxism by uncovering and analysing the entire world of lived experience and culture, including aesthetics, which had previously been treated as a mere superstructural reflection of the economic infrastructure of modes and relations of production. In the case of poststructuralism, as the very name declares, the reaction was to the reputedly universalizing and scientific tendencies of classic **structuralism**. Where structuralism, as a theoretical approach inspired by linguistics and anthropology, insisted on finding commonalities, identities and recurring, self-replicating 'structures', poststructuralism emphasized disparities, irremediable **differences**, fragmentation and un-selfsame heterogeneties. But as movements that were themselves disparate in form and

more readily defined negatively by what they were reacting to, both classic critical theory and poststructuralism already contain the germs of postmodernism by their critical recycling of earlier ideas, just as postmodern art cites previous forms of visual or plastic expression. Indeed, postmodernism as both a trend and an object of analysis within the broadly defined field of critical theory draws much inspiration from contemporary developments in the arts. As for what we mean by critical theory writ large, that would encompass the wide array of theoretical, interdisciplinary work in the humanities and social sciences based primarily in the contributions of the Frankfurt School and the various structuralisms while drawing also and heavily upon the older legacy of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx and Ferdinand de Saussure.

Although instances of the term 'postmodern' can be dated back as far as the nineteenth century (see 'Preface'), it came into prominence in the 1970s with the debates in American architecture over the limits of the International Style and its rejection by the likes of Robert Venturi, Paolo Portoghesi, Robert Krier and others.¹ Though the Centre Pompidou (Beaubourg) – completed in January 1977, designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano – is considered by some to be a tribute to late modernism rather than a full-blown expression of postmodernism, it well illustrates key features and concerns of that architectural tendency. Rather than concealing its functional aspects (support girders, heating ducts, water pipes, etc.) under a geometrically clean design, Beaubourg overtly and colourfully flaunts them, exhibiting them to view in a kind of exoskeleton that likewise broadcasts the Centre's proclaimed reinvention of museum and library space. The cohabitation of an open-stack library (exceedingly rare in France), flexible exhibition spaces, cinemathèque, coffee shop and so on were meant to make Beaubourg a truly congenial hub of cultural and social interaction. The colourful 'inside-out' design of the building also marks a ludic departure from the stark geometry and forbidding impersonality of high modernist functionalism. A carnivalesque celebration of the arts made public rather than a sombrely respectful and exclusivist cathedral in the eyes of its proponents, Beaubourg represents for its detractors a dangerous pandering to the pressures of mass cultural consumerism and a surrender to the increasing commodification of art in the late twentieth century. Interestingly, this very debate – revisited, for example, in the controversies over I. M. Pei's pyramid entrance to the Louvre built in 1989 – and an increasing unease with any sure distinction between high and low art, count among the harbingers of postmodernism.

In the arts more generally, postmodernism has come to designate the rejection of high modernism and its paragon, abstract expressionism, by movements as diverse as Pop Art, Photorealism and Trans-avant-gardism. Inspired most dynamically by the example of Marcel Duchamp (a retrospective of whose work, incidentally, served as the Centre Pompidou's opening exhibit), the postmodern style typically features allusion, pastiche, humour, irony, a certain populism and kitsch as well as a resurgent classicism, even a distinct tradition-

alism; in other words, an eclecticism as shocking as its formulations remain unpredictable. What such gestures reject is the high seriousness of modernism, its universalist aspirations that deny local traditions and customs, and the elitism of the artist's vanguard status (as historically 'ahead' of the uncultured masses). In the literary realm, for example, one sees the esoteric *nouveau roman* with its experimentalist programme give way before the populist playfulness of a Georges Perec.

For the postmodern artist, there is no longer anything new about modernism's incessant quest for the 'new', merely the tired assertion of the contemporary as the sole defining gesture of the modern. Instead, postmodernism indulges in a volatile mix of the old with the new, what Charles Jencks has termed 'double-coding', a concept able to describe an enormous variety of contemporary phenomena from neoclassical influences in the visual arts, to 'retro' fashions, to the nostalgia film and the technique of 'sampling' in hip-hop music.² Rather than claiming absolute novelty as modernism did, postmodernism takes a special pride in manipulating the cliché, the citation, the allusion or the ready-made object, as the very material of its artistic production, as the occasion for its iconoclastic experiments in cultural recycling.

At the same time, this plethora of artistic and cultural responses to modernism has come in turn to be understood by many as a sign of some new socio-historical reality in the wake of a post-industrial world (such as theorized by Daniel Bell)³ where the classic economic forces of production and industrialization have made way for a service, information and consumer-orientated economy. Postmodernism thus names a **paradigm shift** from the low-tech realm of smokestacks and locomotives to the high-tech world of silicon chips and digital communications. Whether this brave new world represents a break with capitalism or merely a new phase of it remains a source of tremendous discussion and dissension among critical theorists of the postmodern, who are eager to draw correlations between the artistic revolt of postmodernism and our possible entry into a new period of history and a new type of social organization. Postmodern critical theory thereby reopens the old debates about the status of the avant-garde, with various thinkers taking a variety of positions on the degree to which cultural postmodernism is either a reactionary effect of postmodernity, or a radical critique of it.

Within the specific context of critical theory, a frequent topic of debate was whether a given thinker, movement or set of ideas was to be understood as truly postmodern or merely modern. Innumerable academic conferences in the 1980s featured panel discussions or roundtables whose participants either championed or contested the attribution of postmodernism to the subject at hand. Perhaps the grandfather of such debates was the long-running intellectual feud between Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas, a debate which actually had nothing to do with picking sides in the modernist/postmodernist divide but with reassessing the political import of postmodernist theory itself. For Lyotard, the horrendous legacies of the twentieth century (world wars, concentration camps, genocide,

totalitarian regimes of various stripes) motivated an 'incredulity' about the utopian promises of modernism and its eschatological grand narratives (whether liberal or Marxist) and thus the need for a fundamental change of perspective along the lines of the postmodernity practised in the arts. Habermas vigorously rejected this viewpoint, arguing to the contrary that the horrors of modern times were not the fault of modernism as a system of thought based in Enlightenment ideology but the ongoing proof that these Enlightenment ideals have yet to be put into action or even given a chance. Thus, the divergence of thought between Lyotard and Habermas is as much an argument over the historical legacy of the Enlightenment as anything else. And it is perhaps not surprising that this clash between two intellectual titans drew mightily from their respective studies of the eighteenth century. For Lyotard, this meant his critical immersion in the works of Immanuel Kant as a kind of postmodernist precursor of post-Marxist political practices (cf. *Enthusiasm, Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, various 'notices' in *The Differend*).⁴ For Habermas, the response followed from his seminal historical study of the development of civil society in the eighteenth century (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*).⁵ While both authors' works represent in their respective ways the culmination of the intellectual and theoretical trajectories each represents, both also point to a future of critical theory in the wake of the postmodernist debate, namely the movement away from high theory toward various forms of historicism, cultural study and identity-based political analysis.

Part of this post-theoretical tendency can already be perceived in the more pessimistic side of the modernity/postmodernity debate that emphasizes the inexorable commodification of artistic production within a media-driven society characterized by a consumerist fascination with images. This is the world Guy Debord has famously called the 'society of the spectacle', a society where reality itself comes to be 'derealized' through the virtualities of image production and circulation, epitomized by the ubiquity of the television screen and computer monitor.⁶ What is meant by this derealization of social reality is that what were once the shared personal experiences of work, family or community have come increasingly to be supplanted by the virtual experience of commonly consumed images via television, cinema, Internet and so on. Under postmodern conditions (but as Walter Benjamin also foresaw, under modernism itself), the commodification of art dovetails with the aestheticization of commodities: that is their advertising appeal as well as occasional designation as works of art: Duchamp's urinal, Warhol's soup can. For thinkers steeped in Marxist theory, such as Lyotard or Fredric Jameson, this world where images take precedence over their reference in reality represents the final triumph of global capitalism, not merely because of the contemporaneous collapse of communism but, more profoundly, by the extension of marketplace logic from the strictly economic realm of manufacturing into the most intimate corners of cultural and psychological life. Everything can be commodified, bought and sold under postmodern conditions, including all forms of creative expression from emotions to signs to art, hence

too the volatile transmutation of elitist and popular art forms into each other. In Jameson's well-known formulation, postmodernism is thus 'the *cultural logic* of late capitalism'.⁷ Alternatively, there are those, such as Jean Baudrillard, who see the reformulation of contemporary society around the immateriality of endlessly self-referencing images or 'simulacra', not as a new phase of capitalism but as the utopian entry into some completely different world, not organized by production, but by some alternative, variously and rather obscurely theorized by him at different moments in his career as 'symbolic exchange', 'seduction' or the 'fatal strategy' of objects.⁸

Many of the terms and themes of postmodernist thought are readily familiar from poststructuralism: heterogeneity, free-floating subjectivity, difference, dispersal, pluralism, discontinuity, indeterminacy and so forth. But whereas poststructuralism developed such concepts by way of a critical interrogation into the conditions of possibility of identity formations, that is, by way of its deconstruction of Western forms of idealism, postmodernism translates poststructuralist ideas into both an intellectual *pari passu* – the ubiquitous celebration of difference for its own sake – and the elements putatively descriptive of the current historical state of post-industrial society.

Certainly, the most famous attempt to grasp together the aesthetically celebratory and historically descriptive sides of postmodernism is Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, which is itself rather disingenuously presented as a 'report on knowledge' for the Quebec Ministry of Education. Eschewing the nicety of the distinction between cultural postmodernism and socio-historical postmodernity, Lyotard uses the single term 'postmodern' to refer to both as the specific 'condition' of our times.⁹ In *The Postmodern Condition*, what is called the 'postmodern age' corresponds, on the one hand, to the advent of a specifically *post-industrial* society in Bell's sense and, on the other, to a generalized loss of faith in the 'grand narratives' of modernism that had seen the West through its heyday of industrialization, colonization and capital accumulation: whether Enlightenment rationality, liberal democracy, industrial progress or dialectical materialism. All these narratives, Lyotard argues, are modelled on the traditional Christian idea of redemption to the extent that they understand historical process in terms of an endpoint (the triumph of freedom and reason, a classless society, etc.) that will retroactively give meaning and legitimacy to all the toils we must undergo to get there. It is the organizational security of this overarching eschatology that has ceased to function within a postmodern world. The only remaining criterion of legitimacy in the state of globally triumphant capitalism is that of pure efficiency, or what Lyotard calls 'performance'. This rather pessimistic situation of contemporary humanity is what Lyotard terms the 'postmodern condition', and a phenomenon whose intellectual, aesthetic, pedagogical and socio-political consequences the philosopher takes as his or her task to elucidate.

Not that postmodernism constitutes itself therefore simply and self-righteously as a critique of the postmodern condition, for in a world where

performance becomes the only criterion of legitimization, criticism, as Lyotard argues, becomes no longer an alternative but itself a part of the system to the extent that the latter solicits and recaptures criticism to bring about improvements in its own efficiency. The inspiration, then, for postmodernism is less frankly denunciatory than strategically *dissimulative* in the Nietzschean sense, less accusatory than ironic, and Nietzsche is thus the philosophical figure who looms large over the postmodern enterprise. And, if anything marks the intellectual crisis of postmodernity – indeed what most saliently names the outrageousness of its dilemma – it is the disappearance of critique as the principal weapon in the intellectual's arsenal. For 'critique' remains inexorably ensnared in the sediment of the modernist grand narrative as the liberatory gesture Kant famously describes of enlightened thought freeing itself – and by extension all of humanity – from the shadows of superstition, fanaticism, repression or ideology. But if the end of criticism is merely to improve by reform the system it criticizes, to make it more 'efficient', to make it 'perform better', then the intellectual is no longer in the utopian position of the radical outsider but unmasked as a prime beneficiary and advocate of the system itself. In France, this particular crisis of the intellectual also dates back to the mid-1970s with the so-called *nouveaux philosophes* (such as André Glucksmann or Bernard-Henri Lévy) who sparked controversy less for the content of their ideas than their self-promotional skills as darlings of the media.

Part of the 'incredulity' towards grand narratives that defines the postmodern condition is also the loss of faith in the hermeneutics of depth associated with them that taught how to reveal the essence behind appearances, the timeless below the transitory, or the inside behind a deceptive exterior. For French thought still reeling from the *événements* of May 1968, this critique of 'critique' is specifically directed against the hermeneutics of Marxism and psychoanalysis, the suspicion being that the critical revelations of the psychoanalyst, liberating the analysand, merely enforce the straitjacket of normality (as argued most trenchantly by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*).¹⁰ As for Marxian ideology critique, its analysis of the capitalist extraction of surplus value from human labour would produce not its overcoming but its mirror image, thus surreptitiously advancing the interests of capital even while offering an accurate 'descriptive theory' (Baudrillard's *Mirror of Production*).¹¹ At its best, the depth analysis that reveals what lies repressed below the social or psychological surface finds but another surface of repression, and beyond that never anything more than the dissimulations of the will to power. The 'incredulity' ascribed by Lyotard to those great narratives comes from the disabused recognition that there cannot be a final cure to repression any more than that a revolution can resolve all social inequities.¹² Indeed, the rejection of teleological modes of thinking is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism and a characteristic that distinguishes it from every modernism, which all share a common faith in the attainment of a project yet to be realized: if we all work hard enough, we can all be millionaires, or bring about a communist utopia or a true democracy and so

on. Politics under postmodernism turns away from such projects for an ideal society (whatever the ideal might be) and espouses the resistance of refractory causes or identity groups: ecologists, feminists, gay rights activists, minority politics of all kinds, as well, it must also be said, as ultra-nationalists, neo-fascists and the like. For many, the decline of the traditional political parties and concomitant splintering of the electorate also mean the triumph of politics as spectacle and the pervasive sense that media and image manipulation determine success at the polls.

Where postmodernism and critical theory meet, the classic hermeneutics of depth have also given way to a concern with surfaces, inspired by semiotics' insistence on the externality of the signifier, and exemplified by the slippery play of citations that leaves the text unchanged but saying something very different from itself – the moment of deconstruction, where as Derrida himself states in *Of Grammatology*, there is always the risk that 'the ultra-transcendental text will so closely resemble the precritical text as to be indistinguishable from it'.¹³ The deconstruction of identity is ascetically and methodically pursued throughout Derrida's corpus, as if to mourn, Rousseau-like, the loss of ideal identity in an era when such identities have reputedly ceased to function. In Deleuze, the Platonic hierarchy of model over copy that founds the Western ideality of identity and the 'corrupt double' that is representation is overturned by a non-hierarchical concept of mimesis understood as the serial repetition of simulacra without origin or end, that is, in Nietzschean terms, as the eternal return of the same as different. Instead of the rooted primacy of the model over its derived and implicitly deformed copies, the relations between simulacra are as multiple as they are transversal, 'rhizomatic' rather than 'arboreal', to use Deleuze's vegetative metaphors. *A Thousand Plateaus*, with its complex, multi-layered network of cross-referencing sections, is explicitly presented by Deleuze and Guattari as an attempt to philosophize rhizomatically.¹⁴ For the epistemological nihilist that is Baudrillard, the endless network of signs endlessly referring to other signs with no referent in sight is not just a philosophical conclusion but the postmodern actuality of a media-saturated society where any semblance of reality disappears into what he calls 'hyperreality'.¹⁵ Far from simply decrying this situation, the Baudrillardian intellectual can only ironically assume and affirm it. The philosophical question then turns around finding the most appropriate modes or genres with which to write, hence the experiments with theory written as fiction, travelogue or autobiography: Baudrillard's *America* and *Cool Memories*; Derrida's *The Post Card*; Lyotard's *Pacific Wall*, *The Postmodern Explained to Children* or *Postmodern Fables*.¹⁶ And so the postmodern eclecticism of the arts, its ironic use of citation and allusion, the double-coded use of traditional forms, come to inform the very way critical theory itself is thought and written in the wake of postmodernity.

But this is to return then to the vexed relation between an aesthetic practice and a historical period. Do critical theorists and post-functional architect simply reflect different aspects of a common postmodern predicament? Are they

both unconsciously bound by the cultural logic of late capitalism? Or, does postmodernism itself, in a typically postmodern gesture, turn around and bite the very concept of period which sustains theoretically its conceptualization? Is the postmodern turn a real historical break or just its simulation?

Not to take these questions seriously would indeed be to buy back into the familiar, disciplinary narrative of art history as the progressive development through the ages of a humanity whose historical periods are synonymous with aesthetic moments: Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Romanticism and so forth. And at the end of the line, modernism, which would be an aesthetic movement defined only by its *not* being whatever precedes it. But then, what would something coming after modernism be – a post-modernism – if not both like modernism and not like it, like it on account of its *not* being like it, not like it on account of its being like it?

The oddity is that the *absolute* historicization that defines modernism leaves us strangely unable to think in historical terms. Such is indeed how Jameson defines postmodernism in the famous first sentence of his *Postmodernism*, that is, 'as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place'.¹⁷ Such assertions that postmodernity is a periodization that isn't, find uncanny echoes in Deleuze's longstanding meditation on the sense of Hamlet's pronouncement that 'the time is out of joint' – another instance where citation serves the purpose of postmodern thinking. For Lyotard, the postmodern is rejected as a period altogether, it being not the chronological sequel but the radicalization of the modern, in the root sense as its *condition* of possibility: 'A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern'.¹⁸ Whichever version of this issue we take, periodicity would, thus, seem to be subject to an ineluctable recursiveness under postmodern conditions, such that the very concept of period is called into question at the same time that the widespread view that we have entered into some, new historical epoch must itself be acknowledged and explained at least as a societal phenomenon, if not as a historical reality.

Another approach to the question might be to return to our initial proposition, that postmodernism is itself the set of responses (not necessarily uniform or even compatible) to the perceived failure of modernism. That failure, if we again recall Lyotard, is the impossibility (or at least, our no longer believing in the possibility) of its following through on the promise of a universalizing end to history (call it progress, revolution, enlightenment or what have you) in which we would all find our place. Such grand narratives presuppose a single history, History with a capital H rather than different histories, rather than the chronological polyrhythms that actually scan and punctuate our own daily lives and that of our society, and that differentiate our lives from life elsewhere in that same society as well as in other societies. The failure of modernism, in this regard, would not necessarily be in forgetting this actuality but in actively seeking to repress it. Despite postmodernist theory's claim to the unrestrained proliferation of differences in our world, it can well be argued that the forces of

globalization, or late capitalism (to use Jameson's term, following Ernest Mandel)¹⁹ are in fact making the world less and less different, imposing uniform standards and homogeneity worldwide in a way not unlike that International Style of architecture Venturi and others so fervently rejected. In other words, is the increasing sense of temporal change and social diversification in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic world but the glitzy epiphenomenon of a globe increasingly brought under the reins of a single market? But, then, would this apparent triumph of capitalism worldwide not also grant a new urgency and possibility to cultural forms of resistance (in a post-communist context devoid of socio-economic alternatives), marking those allegedly superficial differences as the only possible site of contestation? And given the French intellectual contribution to defining postmodernism, there is little reason to be surprised that French resistances to the terms of the GATT agreements in 1994, for example, were all on the level of *cultural* resistance and preservation (i.e. protests for French cinema, music, etc.).

It may be that postmodernist critical theory needs to make more of a case for difference rather than merely assuming it, as Baudrillard so blithely appears to do, that it grasp the responses to postmodernity not as themselves theoretically uniform but as themselves different, reflective of the perhaps *pre-modern* differentiation between aesthetic trends and historical changes. That it face what ultimately still remains unthought, *malgré tout*, in the use of a category like postmodernism, namely that aesthetics and history, like time itself, may be radically 'out of joint'.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
- 2 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 6th edn (London: Academy Editions, 1991), p. 12.
- 3 See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (London: Heinemann, 1974).
- 4 Jean-François Lyotard, *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History* [1986], trans. Georges Van Den Abeele (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* [1991], trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Berkeley, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); and *The Different: Phrases in Dispute* [1983], trans. Georges Van Den Abeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
- 5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962], trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
- 6 See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
- 7 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

8 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Boss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983); *Symbolic Exchange and Death* [1976], trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993); *Seduction* [1979], trans. Brian Singer (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); and *Fatal Strategies* [1983], trans. Philip Beitchman and W. G. Niesluchowski (London: Pluto, 2008).

9 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979], trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

10 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* [1972], trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (London: Athlone Press, 1984).

11 Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* [1973], trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1975).

12 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.

13 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 61.

14 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

15 Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 2.

16 Jean Baudrillard, *America* [1986], trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988), and

Cool Memories [1987], trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1990); Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* [1980], trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Jean-François Lyotard, *Pacific Wall* [1975],

trans. Bruce Boone (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990), *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982–1985*, trans. Don Barry et al., eds Julian Peñanis and

Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), and

Postmodern Fables [1993], trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

17 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. ix.

18 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 79.

19 See Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975).

3

POSTMODERNISM AND POLITICS

IAIN HAMILTON GRANT

Ever since postmodernism hit the cultural news-stand, it has been incessantly interrogated as to its politics. With its ‘anything goes’ pluralism and its delirious celebration of difference, with reality, according to Jean Baudrillard – to many, the ‘high priest of postmodernism’ – ‘no longer what it used to be’, what grounds remain for a politics necessary to counter the widespread and manifest injustices that remain in our postmodern world? Surely any prospect of tackling endemic terrorism, the horrors of the military-industrial-entertainment complex, the invasion of Iraq, religious and political persecution or Chinese tanks crushing the bodies of protesting students, is given up in advance by any movement that, like postmodernism, renounces the modern ideals of universal freedom, equality and rights, without proposing any alternatives?

In many ways ‘postmodern politics’ is a problem peculiar to the history of postmodernism in the English-speaking world, where the term first arose in the world of art and architecture. Once postmodernism had reached a certain critical mass, it became irresistible to academic interests, and the path it then took shifted from the arts to politics and philosophy, from which something known loosely as ‘postmodern theory’ began to emerge. The various elements from which theoretical postmodernism emerged were almost exclusively, however, fragments of French philosophy. It is to some extent a consequence of this speculation or free trade in theories divorced from their historical, political and philosophical contexts that the question of postmodern politics has appeared to be so open and, therefore, to host an apparently endless range of debates.

Two questions may therefore be asked. First, what impact has postmodernism had on politics in what Richard Rorty called the North Atlantic bourgeois community, and second, what are the politics that inform the philosophy imported from France to this community in the guise of postmodern theory? The answers to both of these questions are linked through one of the very few continental philosophers to have directly addressed postmodernism. Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* crops up in virtually every discussion of every aspect of these debates, so that his self-confessed extreme simplifications have assumed a definitive character with regard to postmodernism.² With this text comes an entire history and an entire politics – one that is generally replicated in all the European theorists who supply the resources for postmodern theory.

Before addressing this history directly, however, it is necessary, given the