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## LYOTARD AND THE POSTMODERNITY DEBATE

IAN MARK ERICKSÓN

### ABSTRACT

Contemporary advanced industrial societies are increasingly computerised, and knowledge is now a major stake in the worldwide competition for power. Jean-François Lyotard argues that such societies are postmodern, having rejected the principal doctrines of modernism. Lyotard's book, The Postmodern Condition, proposes that social theory must change to reflect the arrival of postmodernity. This has generated a debate in social theory between advocates of modernity with its liberalising potential, represented in this thesis by Jürgen Habermas, and the advocates of postmodernity, principally Lyotard, who argue in favour of an antifoundational approach to postmodern society.

In this thesis, three main areas of Lyotard's investigation of postmodern society are analysed in detail, and in the context of the debate between modernists and postmodernists. The three topics are culture, language and the organisation of society. The postmodernity debate highlights the options available to contemporary social theory, and the ways in which recent changes in social organisation have affected social theory.

LYOTARD AND THE POSTMODERNITY DEBATE

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M. A. THESIS

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Mark Erickson

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## INTRODUCTION

In one sense, all societies have entered the post-modern period, for none has escaped the impact of the new technologies. At the same time, societies differ significantly in the degree to which they have faced the challenge of modernity and in their access to the options the postmodern period offers.

Amitai Etzioni, 1968

Over twenty years have passed since Amitai Etzioni first introduced the concept of 'postmodernity' to sociologists in his book The Active Society. A functionalist account of the contemporary world, Etzioni equates postindustrial society with postmodern society, and identifies the main cause of the passing of the modern age as the rapid transformation of the technologies of communication and knowledge (Etzioni, 1968: vii). Etzioni's choice of the term 'postmodern' is an important one. The use of a word that suggests the end of the modern is in itself a statement of lack of confidence in the modern, whether this is brought out explicitly or not. And as we shall see below, the growth of the use of computers and information technology is a key factor in Jean-François Lyotard's theory of the postmodern.

In the period between Etzioni's prediction of the arrival of the active postmodern society and the present day, a debate has taken place between those who see modernity as the only feasible way of organising, analysing and understanding social life, of whom Jürgen Habermas is the principal exponent, and those who consider modernity to be a failed project, one that must be replaced with a new form of explanation and understanding through the concept of postmodernity. The principal 'postmodernist' considered here is Lyotard, although other

antifoundational theorists, Alastair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty, who are broadly sympathetic to the postmodern perspective are also included in this text. This thesis is a contribution to the analysis of the debate between the modernists and the postmodernists concerning the language, culture and organisation of social life.

In Chapter One, a summary of the ways in which the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' are deployed in recent social theory is given, and an outline of the key text in the postmodernity debate, The Postmodern Condition, by Jean-François Lyotard. This chapter introduces the main themes that are discussed later in this thesis.

Chapter Two looks in some detail at Lyotard's analysis of language in postmodern society. Lyotard's entire thesis of postmodernity rests upon his assertion that metanarrativity is no longer viable, and that it must be replaced with narrativity as the principal mode of legitimate communication in society. This assertion can only be fully understood by examining Lyotard's reasoning and methodology in detail, and placing it in the context of theories of narrativity.

Chapter Three examines Lyotard's analysis of postmodern culture, and compares this to the descriptions of postmodernism offered by cultural theorists. This chapter aims to evaluate whether or not modernism has been replaced with a new cultural paradigm.

Chapter Four focusses on the 'postmodernity debate' in social theory. The construction of a social theory to explain social and political action in postmodernity has proceeded in three main directions. Lyotard offers an anarchist (or as he terms it 'pagan') strategy for social theory, and for political action. Habermas suggests a reinstatement of the project of modernity, to provide a general liberalising programme for

the whole of society. Rorty takes a middle line between these two, proposing an anti-foundational version of liberalism by which local autonomy will enhance the way of life of people in postmodern society.

In the final section of this thesis, an assessment is made of the changes to both social theory and society that may occur as a consequence of the debate about postmodernity, and postmodernism.



## CHAPTER ONE

### MODERNITY VERSUS POSTMODERNITY

What is postmodernity? ...*Prima facie* postmodernity may be characterised as the 'post' of whatever 'modernity' is taken to be.

W Hudson, 1989.

I have not defined Modernism; I can define Postmodernism less.

Ihab Hassan, 1975.

The definition of postmodernity is problematic, for the simple reason that the definition of modernity is also problematic. This is compounded by the fact that 'postmodern', unlike most other recent academic concepts, has a wide-spread usage outside the academic world (Featherstone, 1988: 195). To circumvent some of the confusion that arises from the various usages of 'postmodern', it is necessary to look at the different ways in which it is applied, and the different ways that the 'modern' versus 'postmodern' opposition is used.

It is possible to distinguish three main ways in which the generic terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' are articulated in the social sciences (Featherstone, 1988: 197). Firstly, to designate a particular periodisation that has taken place, or will come about: modernity versus postmodernity. Modernity can be understood to be the period that Western societies entered at the time of the Enlightenment. As this new periodisation, and the different perspective on knowledge that was a product of the Enlightenment, established itself in Western thought, modernity became an overarching project for the rationalization of all of

society. For Jürgen Habermas, the principal characteristic of modernity was initially a new consciousness of time (Habermas, 1987b). For Michel Foucault, the cornerstone of modernity was the embedding of the philosophy of the subject into the unified project of knowledge (Foucault, 1970). The Enlightenment, characterised by the unification of knowledge based upon the principles of rationality and Reason, and made visible through the usage of a scientific mode of explanation, laid the foundations for contemporary thought. Postmodernity is used in this context to designate the failure and abandonment of this project. The work of Jean-François Lyotard is the central text to highlight the failure of the project of modernity, but the decline of the project is well documented. Foucault's The Order of Things charts the rise and ultimate failure of a subject centred philosophy (Foucault, 1970). The problems of reflexivity, as seen in the work of such disparate authors as Nietzsche, Derrida and Wittgenstein, are traced by Lawson to describe the 'postmodern predicament' of the abandoning of scientific rationality (Lawson, 1985). In the case of this modern:postmodern opposition, the criticism of the project of modernity is followed by the hypothesisation of a new epoch, namely postmodernity, although it is important to note that such critiques need not imply the arrival of a postmodern epoch. The work of Foucault, although one of the foundations of the postmodernists attack on modernity, does not mention the possibility of a postmodern epoch, but does describe the ways in which the human sciences will change as modernity changes, and the Enlightenment project fades away.

Secondly, we can distinguish between postmodernism and modernism: this is a distinction of styles of cultural production, although we should note that this distinction admits a range of meanings. The

modernism:postmodernism distinction is not restricted to what is generally termed culture, although this opposition was generated, in part, by a new stylistic movement in architecture (Jencks, 1977). The attempt to replace modernism with postmodernism reaches out into all forms of human cultural endeavour: critics have hailed postmodernism as being the new paradigm of writing (Waugh, 1984), of philosophy (Hudson, 1989), of painting (Lyotard, 1989). The distinction of a common denominator for these new cultural forms is not simple: briefly stated, the issue of reflexivity is frequently used as the marker for such postmodern products. The application of the label 'postmodern' to cultural products has become more common in recent years: it is possible that we are witnessing a conflation of a new style of criticism with contemporary avant-garde cultural production to produce something called 'postmodernism', an assertion that will be investigated in chapter three below.

The third main distinction between the modern and the postmodern is that of modernization versus postmodernization. This can be considered to be a subset of the first distinction (modernity:postmodernity) when we look at what a modernization process entails. The increase in science and technology, and the increase in importance of scientific explanation is equated with a modernization process (Habermas, 1971). The modernization of society extends from the growth of science into all realms of social life, concomitant with the rationalization of social life, thus linking it to the project of modernity (Habermas, 1987a). This modernization process is again a unified project, which encompasses all of society. Opposed to this is the prospect of a postmodernization, where the problems of the modernization process are brought into sharp relief, and strategies are proposed to oppose this. This mainly centers on the

problems of participation in political life, where societal modernization through the growth of capitalism has stifled public debate about the course that society is taking. It also centers on the idea of the over-technicalization of society through the growth of the use of computers and the control of information technology by a minority. The attempt to come to terms with this process is the postmodernization that is implicit in the work of Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984). Lyotard proposes the liberation of all knowledge and information in society by opening up computer databases to all people. Society will thus be able to communicate on the basis of equal access to knowledge.

This brief survey of the oppositions posited by writers between the generic terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' points up the difference between the deployment of the two terms. The project of modernity is the subtext to theories of modernization and modernism: modern theory in general has a subtext of universalism, where attempts are made to provide explanations for all aspects of the social world. Modern social theory also contains aspects of utopianism: writers describe the universal salvation of humankind through a variety of doctrines and strategies, either secular or religious<sup>1</sup>. In social theory, the principle exponent of 'the modern' examined in this thesis is Habermas: he offers a coherent programme for the transformation of society based upon an altered version of the project of modernity. Habermas discusses the work of Lyotard, classing him as a 'neoconservative', as, for Habermas, the denial of the liberalising project of modernity is a reactionary and retrograde step. Habermas and Lyotard hold, for the most part, diametrically opposed views: a comparative analysis of their theories serves to illuminate each others recent work, and shows the depth of the postmodernity debate. The main exposition of Habermas's theory is given in chapter four below.

The usage of 'the postmodern' signifies the opposite of the modern: the idea of unified, general theories that outline strategies for the progress of society have been abandoned in favour of theories promoting the notion of difference and pluralism. Postmodernism tends towards fragmentation: theories of the postmodern share a common rejection of the modern, but do not share any other common theme, apart from the rejection of common themes. Thus, Jean Baudrillard's recent analysis of contemporary culture in the United States (Baudrillard, 1988), while describing a postmodern cultural form, suggests no underlying theme in any of the cultural products he sees. The only link between the various artefacts is that they are not constrained by a formal theory to find means of expressions of ideas: the theme they share is one of absence. American society, according to Baudrillard, displays an absence of culture, absence of beauty, and absence of substance. This leaves the critic with the problem of defining what constitutes art and culture. For Baudrillard, contemporary American society displays a culture with no substance, only image (Baudrillard, 1988).

The themes briefly outlined above are all discussed more fully in the main body of this text. They are all contained, explicitly or implicitly, in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Lyotard's main treatise on the subject of postmodernity, which was published in France in 1979 as La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savior. This book will act as the focus for the analysis of postmodernity given in this thesis: it is the only sustained treatment of the origins of, and possibilities announced by, the entry of Western societies into postmodernity. The publication of the English translation of The Postmodern Condition in 1984 started a debate in the social sciences

which focussed on the main arguments put forward by Lyotard. Lyotard's text is thus a useful starting point for the discussion of the 'postmodernity debate' in social theory, as Lyotard is both a participant in, and the precursor of, that debate. A brief outline of Lyotard's theory of the postmodern will allow the reader to identify these main arguments, and also place The Postmodern Condition in the larger context of Lyotard's *oeuvre* and social theory as a whole.

Lyotard's field of investigation is knowledge in advanced industrial societies. These societies are characterised by the rapid growth of computer systems and information technology; this technological transformation will have a major effect on knowledge, particularly in research and the transmission of learning. Unlike Hudson or Hassan (see supra: 1), Lyotard is able to produce a strong definition of both the modern and the postmodern at the beginning of The Postmodern Condition. Lyotard identifies a condition, which he terms postmodern, that is common to all advanced industrial societies, and is characterised by a crisis of narratives. This crisis has altered the ways in which knowledge operates in societies.

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

The crisis of narratives is at the heart of the postmodern condition; the results of this crisis are far-reaching according to Lyotard.

Narratives are the language of everyday life, the medium through which all social interactions are carried out. Narratives require no external legitimation, yet they are devalued in society in favour of the discourse of science and politics, forms of language that require external legitimation by reference to metanarratives. The collapse and increasing incredulity shown towards these metanarratives places science and politics in crisis, and could be a potential force for the liberation of narratives. The decline of metanarratives and the operation of narratives is the key theme throughout The Postmodern Condition, and is the yardstick by which Lyotard measures postmodernity.

The legitimation of discourse faces a crisis when the primary tool of legitimation, that of appeal to metanarrative, ceases to be believed. Science and government, which are, according to Lyotard, linked by the same kind of language, have to find alternatives to their modern forms of legitimation. In the case of science, this transformation is made by science finding legitimation through paralogy. In the case of government it is made by recourse to terror. Paralogy, which is, for Lyotard, a form of reasoning based upon the local consensus particular to a language game, replaces legitimation in the sciences based upon appeals to a grand narrative. Terror is the possibility of removing someone from a language game by silencing them permanently.

Lyotard introduces the concept of performativity to describe the form of legitimation in postmodernity that is based upon concrete results. It is the condition that must be met by research and education: proof of an argument rests upon the argument showing that it can be useful to the generation of wealth (Lyotard, 1984: 45). The desire for wealth, rather than the desire for knowledge, has become the principal requirement for technological research: a strong link between science and capital is

implied by this. Performativity, according to Lyotard, is spreading through all aspects of social life, deposing moral or aesthetic legitimation. A useful analogy to this process is the spread of *zweckrational* action, at the expense of *wertrational* action, described by Max Weber. The postmodernity process reduces *zweckrational* action to just one goal: the creation of wealth.

The criteria of performativity has changed the form of political discourse that is present in society. As metanarratives have declined, politics have looked elsewhere for the justifications for political action: performativity has begun to replace moral and social arguments. Culture, in turn, has also taken on the criteria of performativity, as the metanarrative of modernity has waned. In his discussion of culture, Lyotard sees the power of capital displacing aesthetic concerns: postmodern culture is a celebration of the popular and the kitsch.

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. But this realism of the 'anything goes' is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield. (Lyotard, 1984: 76)

The Postmodern Condition, although wide-ranging, is the application of one particular hypothesis to a number of specific issues. The hypothesis is that metanarratives are treated with increasing incredulity in postmodern society, and the decline and disappearance of metanarratives leaves a vacuum which must be filled with something else for society itself to remain coherent. The specific issues to which Lyotard applies



his hypothesis reduce to three main areas of postmodern crisis: the operation of language in society; the role of culture in a postmodern society; and the organisation of social and political life in postmodernity. Each of these topics is discussed in this thesis, to test Lyotard's hypothesis, and to compare it to other social and cultural theorists writings on similar issues.

CHAPTER TWO  
POSTMODERN LANGUAGE

In this chapter I intend to look at Lyotard's discussion of the nature of language and the ways that it is used in contemporary (or, as Lyotard claims, postmodern) society. The concept of language is central to Lyotard's postmodernism, and is in itself an indicator of the difference between anti-foundational and foundational theory<sup>2</sup>. Lyotard's use of the concept of narrativity is not restricted to his 'postmodern' work: it is a line of argument that he has pursued for some time (Lyotard, 1978; Lyotard, 1981), but it only reaches maturity in The Postmodern Condition, and Just Gaming. In the case of The Postmodern Condition, the role of narratives and narrativity are central to the change from modernity to postmodernity.

When we describe the world around us to ourselves or to each other, there are a variety of modes that our language can operate in, which vary according to the use to which we intend to put our description. The two principal forms of description are science and narrative, and they are deployed in text or conversation as scientific and narrative discourse. Ironically, the term scientific discourse appears to be self-explanatory, in that a scientific form of description is easily recognised by its style alone. Narrative discourse is not as simple a term as scientific discourse to define as it describes a huge variety of language actions; here it is necessary to distinguish factual narrative descriptions and factual narratives from fictional narrative descriptions and fictional narratives, or what are more commonly called stories and

story telling. Although these forms are linked, in this chapter it is factual narratives and narrative descriptions that will come under the closest scrutiny, and the speech acts that these take place in will be termed narrations. Everyday life is effectively a series of narrations taking place between participants in conversations, readers of texts, and when people talk to themselves. (The irony in this initial problem of definition will become clear through the course of this chapter.)

There is an imbalance between science and narrative. Rather than the two forms of discourse being used to describe different things, scientific discourse is considered to be the form of description in society; it has become, since the Enlightenment, the superior form of description for both social and natural phenomena, invested with a degree of truth and legitimacy that is denied to narrative discourse. In recent years, however, a number of social theorists have attempted to redress this imbalance, arguing that although scientific discourse may be very good at providing descriptions of the natural world in precise and clear ways, it is not a suitable medium to explain social and political phenomena. Narrative discourse is suited to this task as it is the way that we describe not only the social and political world to ourselves as interactants within it, but also the way that we will explain science and scientific discourse to ourselves. Further, unlike scientific discourse, narratives are not invested with truth from the form that the utterance takes, or from the location of the speaker in a particular institution. Narratives are judged true or false from their content alone, and derive meaning not from other statements made earlier, but from their use in the play of language in everyday life and conversation. The move to reinstate narrative discourse in social theory comes from an anti-

foundational trend in such theory, and in this paper the work of Hayden White and Alasdair MacIntyre will be discussed before looking in detail at the work of Jean-François Lyotard on the subject of narrative discourse. Lyotard, rather than restricting his argument in support of narrative to the operations of social investigations, makes the narrative:science opposition the central tenet of his thesis of postmodernity; it is the catalyst that has precipitated the entry of Western industrial societies into postmodernity. Rather than trying to challenge Lyotard's entire thesis on postmodernity I propose in this chapter to challenge the idea of two exclusive forms of discourse at work in society. In this way I hope to show that Lyotard's uptake of Wittgenstein's language-game theory jeopardises the whole thesis of postmodernity and forces the reader into performing a radical reconstruction of Lyotard's work which, at best, can only be partially successful.

White, MacIntyre, and Lyotard all conclude that narratives are central to the workings of the human sciences, but arrive at these conclusions by very different paths. The prominence that they give to the opposition between science and narrative suggests ways in which the human sciences can proceed in postmodernity, if we take postmodernity to be the epoch where the absence of criteria of judgment becomes critical. The self-legitimizing structure of narrative discourse, as opposed to the external legitimation needed for scientific discourse, allows the extension of knowledge in ways that would be impossible within a scientific or foundational epistemology.

#### Narrative versus science

Vico noted, in his Third New Science of 1744, that the grammarians of

his time were fond of distinguishing a 'proper' language of prose from an 'improper' language of verse, and went on to show that this was 'a common error' (Vico, 1982:226) <sup>3</sup>. A similar distinction is made by the positivists of modernity who divide the two main forms of discourse of our time, scientific and narrative, into a 'good' and a 'bad' form. Science has been seen as the form of explanation for all phenomena, both social and natural, and narrative as a form of discourse that will suffice for everyday life, but is in general too far removed from the exactitude of scientific discourse to count as explanation. This distinction is also a 'common error', and the promotion of scientific discourse at the expense of narrative discourse has rightly come under assault from a number of different directions. Most prominent of these is the work of Jean-François Lyotard, whose The Postmodern Condition has caused a wide-ranging debate in the field of social theory. Before moving to a detailed discussion of aspects of the work of Lyotard, it will be useful to consider the contribution to the cause of narratives in the history of the human sciences made by Hayden White, and Alasdair MacIntyre in philosophy.

Before embarking on this discussion of the variety of roles played by narratives in the human sciences, it may be useful to define a few terms. The human sciences, when analyzing language, are concerned with the form of speech and writing called discourse. We can distinguish discourse by showing what it is not: it is not pure fiction, or straightforward logical demonstration (White, 1978: 2). Narratives are stories that relate phenomena, but they are not just descriptions for they exhibit a specific structure. Thus 'The king died and the queen died' is a description or an account, but not a narrative, whereas 'The king died and the queen then died of grief' is a narrative: the narrative relates a series of events together and gives them, at the very least,

an order. Narratives do this without invoking a set of laws (Roth, 1988: 1). This defining characteristic of narratives puts them in direct opposition to scientific explanation, which relates discrete events together by the use of laws, and then goes on to invoke yet further laws from this. The form of language called discourse can be divided into two realms, narrative and scientific, and narrative can be further divided into fictional and non-fictional. Here we are concerned with non-fictional narrative discourse and scientific discourse, and the different relationship each has with the human and natural sciences<sup>4</sup>.

The position of scientific discourse in the human sciences is an unnatural one, and is the result of the Enlightenment movement towards positivism and empiricism. Vico, although associated with the Enlightenment, is representative of the final phase of medieval and renaissance philosophy, a tradition which saw that the effective analysis of speech and writing had to be based upon the classical conception of rhetoric, that is, one taken from the writings of Aristotle. The rhetoricians of Vico's time and earlier considered the understanding of discourse to be a programme of elucidatory techniques, whereas Enlightenment thinkers, using Bacon's conception of science as a starting point, saw no need for such methods. The rise of science, and its accompanying precise language and logic, replaced the rhetorical mode of analysis by scientific analysis; an approach based upon observable phenomena, rule governed methods, and hard results about the world. Rhetoric stands in direct opposition to logic, and the success of logic could be measured in terms of the demise of rhetoric and the disappearance of philology through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Humanism was defeated in the academic world by formalism and empiricism, yet it is this tradition that has been resurrected in the

late twentieth century in particular by Hayden White (White, 1975, 1978 & 1981). It has also prompted the concern with the narrative structure of contemporary discourse, and contemporary methods of explanation, in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1977 & 1981), Jean-François Lyotard (1984 & 1985) and Richard H. Brown (1987). These writers' reasons for attempting to understand the underlying form of discourses are both critical and elucidatory: elucidatory in the sense that the means for assessing validity in a text can be sharply increased by an understanding of the persuasive devices writers employ to evidence an argument; critical in the sense that once the underlying form is displayed, a whole variety of problems, previously unnoticed, associated with textual practice are brought to light and remedies for explanatory clarity can be suggested. This can be seen in the ways that White, MacIntyre, and Lyotard use narrative to construct, respectively, analyses of texts as narrative discourses, the analysis of the individual in society as a set of narratives, and the construction of a social theory based upon language pragmatics. We shall look at the first two of these uses of narrativity in the human sciences briefly, before looking in some detail at Lyotard's social theory of postmodernity.

When we seek to make sense of such problematic topics as human nature, culture, society, history, we never say precisely what we wish to say or mean precisely what we say. Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or, what amounts to the same thing, the data always resists the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion out of them. (White, 1978: 1)

The failure of the human sciences to come to terms with this problem is at the root of Hayden White's attempt to re-introduce the Vician tradition of rhetorical analysis, and in particular, the methodology of 'troping'. Troping is simply the way that figures of speech will be used in discourse to act in a non-literal way. White uses this as a tool in human science analysis for two reasons.

First, to look at the ways that the human sciences use language, and deploy rhetorical figures to construct theories and put across ideas and opinions in convincing ways. White makes an interesting discovery in his Tropics of Discourse. In analyzing rhetorical structures that a variety of unrelated texts employed he shows that there is a major underlying form that is followed to emplot the material into a narrative. It is again from Vico that the fourfold stages of troping are taken. Metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, are progressive stages in the rhetorical development of an argument. In addition, they correspond, according to White, to the dreamwork mechanisms suggested by Freud in his Interpretation of Dreams, and the four stages of the cognitive development of the child suggested by Piaget. E.P. Thompson's study of the English working class charts the rise of class consciousness since the eighteenth century, a shift from early metaphorical consciousness and a desire for liberty, to the ironic phase of self consciousness visible in the late nineteenth century. In turn, this reflects the way that Marx used the tropical structures to mark the stages in a diachronic process of the rise of capitalism. These writers use a particular technique for emplotting material into their narrative: this is mirrored in much of the material itself.

Second, White is concerned about the status of the human sciences. The narrative structure of these disciplines effectively relegates them



to a second-class position in describing the world. We may be unable to have a properly scientific knowledge of human nature, but we can have the kind of knowledge that reflects human consciousness in its writings. White uses the examples of art and literature to illustrate this; they can show us aspects of human consciousness through narrative that we find difficult to express in any other way.

Tropical analysis of discourse achieves a number of things, most important of which is to provide us with a classificatory scheme that allows comparison of the structure rather than the contents of different texts. It is obvious to say that Marx and Freud proffer different theories in terms of their respective contents; such a finding is not very useful, and as White points out, flies in the face of the practice of discourse.

...the discourse is intended to *constitute* the ground whereon to decide *what shall count as a fact* in the matters under consideration and to determine *what mode of comprehension* is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted.

(White, 1978: 3)

To discover that the structure Marx and Freud both deploy is similar is pertinent to an understanding of the cultural conditions of their theory production, and may reflect a whole variety of things. For example, is the fourfold trope common to all discursive entities that attempt theory construction, and if so is it an innate characteristic of human consciousness?

White's analysis of the varieties of discourse and their use of narrative, although sophisticated, is not particularly wide-ranging, and within the human sciences goes on to focus on history. White uses scientific language as a marker to measure, for example, the realism of

historical accounts, but does not challenge the status of this scientific language itself. The superiority of scientific discourse to narrative discourse is implicitly upheld by his work, even though White uses the anti-Enlightenment standpoint of rhetorical analysis as the starting point for his work.

Alasdair MacIntyre also expresses opposition to the Enlightenment (MacIntyre, 1981 & 1988), but unlike White, he does take up the issue of the status of scientific discourse. In his analysis of narrative and narrativity he presents a strong challenge to the supposed superiority of scientific over narrative discourse. MacIntyre's investigation of narrativity has three main aims:

- 1 To show that narrativity is the principal way that we describe the social world to ourselves, but that this method invariably leads to contestability.
- 2 To show that the difference between scientific explanation and narrative explanation is one that arises from the nature of narrativity, and not from the subject matter that these respective forms may deploy.
- 3 To show that narratives, as well as being constitutive of the speech of our everyday lives, are also the way that our lives are ordered by ourselves.

(These three aims appear, respectively, in three recent works by MacIntyre; The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts; Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science; and After Virtue. I will briefly discuss each of these in turn.)

Although MacIntyre's reworking of Gallie's thesis of essential contestability does not include specific reference to narrative

discourse, we can read The Essential Contestability of Some Social Concepts as being concerned with the way that narrative structures operate in social science and everyday social debate. MacIntyre describes the opposition between scientific accounts, based upon observation of natural phenomena, and accounts based upon beliefs and opinions. Questions about the natural world can be given definite and uncontested answers, but the social world cannot be described in such unambiguous ways due to the open texture of the concepts available to describe it.

Beliefs are partially constitutive of at least some central social institutions and practices, and such beliefs always involve some version of a concept of the institution or practice in question. There is no parallel to this in the established natural sciences. (MacIntyre, 1973: 3)

Where does this leave the social practice that we call social science? It is an amalgam of concepts and the techniques for their deployment, coupled to a way of ordering the social world.

The behaviour that is captured by the concept of a political party or a family or an army or a social class is itself behaviour informed by the concept in question. (MacIntyre, 1973: 3)

If we apply this idea to the activities of social science we find that the concepts that social science uses make up, in part, the way that a social science sees the world; more specifically the way that a social scientist sees the world and constructs accounts about it. As such, the accounts that social science puts forward, its narratives, will always have a degree of contestability that is dependent upon the concepts being used, the definitions that these concepts are given, the

way that they are deployed, and the attitude of the social scientist. MacIntyre points out that contestability can be overcome through the use of power, although he does not offer examples of how this could be done, or what form of power is required, but the contestability of the social sciences in their present form cannot be overcome.

From the tentative conclusions of the essential contestability thesis, MacIntyre goes further into the question of narratives; in his reworking of Thomas Kuhn's scientific revolutions thesis (MacIntyre, 1977), he looks at the way that a scientific community will restructure itself between paradigms through the vehicle of an epistemological crisis. An epistemological crisis is the state of affairs where the relationship of 'seems' to 'is' becomes confused (MacIntyre, 1977: 453).

When an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative which enables the agent to understand *both* how he or she could intelligibly hold his or her original beliefs *and* how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them. The narrative in terms of which he or she first understood and ordered experiences is itself made into the subject of an enlarged narrative. (MacIntyre, 1977: 455)

MacIntyre uses Galileo as an example of this. The conflict between Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomy led to a flourishing of instrumentalism, and a block on extension of any theory. Galileo resolved this crisis by rewriting the narrative which constituted the scientific tradition of his time in his work. The narrative of the scientific tradition, with its concomitant notion of a continuous history is the location for truth and reason in the sciences. Science is not another form of narrative discourse, although at times it has to use the methods of narrative to effect essential restructurings, but it is wholly

reliant upon narrative for its meaning, as this meaning arises from the story that science tells about itself. Scientific revolutions, in the original Kuhnian sense of the term, proceed not by restructuring the puzzles facing scientists, but by a revolutionary reconstitution of the tradition that science works with. The legitimacy of scientific discourse does not reside in the subject matter of science so much as in the narrative expounded with it, or implied by it, that contains the tradition, history and reason of science. It is surprising that MacIntyre does not term this additional, but unseen, component of scientific discourse *metanarrative*.

The third aspect of MacIntyre's uptake of narrativity is his understanding of the way that people make sense of their lives as a whole, and with its emphasis on the practices of everyday life and the bases for the analysis of such, it is effectively a sociology. In After Virtue MacIntyre wants to show how the virtues of antiquity, and indeed our whole conception of morality, has fallen into disarray through the course of modernity. There are ways to reinstate the virtues, and one of these is through the device of narrativity, or rather a recognition of the importance of narrativity in our lives.

With intelligible actions as the base point for analysis, MacIntyre shows how we construct narratives about ourselves, and about others, by placing episodes, events and actions in the context of a set of historical narratives. This orders our reality and makes it meaningful.

...we render the actions of others intelligible in this way because action itself has a basically historical character. It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for

understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told - except in the case of pure fiction. (MacIntyre, 1981: 211)

As with the narratives of fictions, the narratives we construct of our everyday lives, and the various roles that we will play as a consequence of this, have a beginning, a middle, and an end. We become the subjects of a narrative that runs from our birth to our death, and we are co-authors of the story; co-authors with all the other actors that we interact with and who can affect the way that our lives unfold. Society can be seen as an interlocking set of narratives, embedded within each other; we are accountable to our own narrative, as the subject of it, and we all share the same degree of accountability.

Such an account of life as narrative is not new; Goffman proposed much the same notion of the self in society, as did Nietzsche<sup>5</sup>. What is different about MacIntyre's account of the self is his prescription for returning morality and unity to human life, and the virtues to society.

The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest.

(MacIntyre, 1981: 219)

What is it that we should direct our quest towards? The quest should be for the good life for man, and the good life for man, according to MacIntyre, is the life spent in seeking the good life for man. Only the virtues will enable us to understand what this is.

Narratives have become devalued in our society and our methods for understanding society through modernity due to the hegemony of science and logic, to the extent that, in the words of Richard H. Brown, they have become 'an endangered species' (Brown, 1978: 3). The work of White and MacIntyre shows some of the ways that the human sciences

have, in recent years, attempted to reinstate narratives as a useful tool for the analysis of social life, and for the analysis of accounts of social phenomena. White shows us that narratives are useful for the human sciences to reinterpret its accounts in a historical context. MacIntyre shows the importance of narratives for science, for ourselves, and for the reinstatement of morality and justice. All these themes appear, in somewhat different forms, in Jean-François Lyotard's account of postmodern society, and in his methodology for understanding postmodern social life.

Lyotard's social theory is a critique of the failure of standard foundational social science accounts to fulfill its promise of technical solutions to social issues<sup>6</sup>. Lyotard's study of the condition of knowledge in postmodernity is based upon the identification of a crisis of narratives in society, and this crisis, which is effectively a misunderstanding of the role that narrative plays in society, is the defining characteristic of a postmodern society.

#### Jean-François Lyotard and narratives in postmodernity

Lyotard considers the social world to be a world of stories; there are the everyday stories, narratives, that we use all the time to describe the world around us in our own terms. There are also the stories that we are told by the representatives of social institutions, such as the government in its various manifestations, and the scientific community. These are 'true' stories - or rather stories that the narrator expects us to believe because they are charged with a particular status due to the context that they are set in, and due to their reliance upon another 'true' story implicit in the discourse. Lyotard calls these 'metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). His aim is to show through his

work on the epistemological configuration of postmodernity, that there is a crisis in narratives, and, further, that standard accounts of the social world, (accounts based upon a scientific methodology and epistemology) are no longer useful for describing social reality. For Lyotard, postmodernity rests on the way narrative structures operate in society; his characterisation of society is wholly based on 'language games' (Lyotard, 1984: 10).

Lyotard's the Postmodern Condition, the central text in the postmodernity debate, is primarily concerned with the conflict between the 'modern' and the 'postmodern', the role which they play in the operation of knowledge in society, and the ways that that knowledge is deployed in discourse.

I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii)

Lyotard characterises all foundational approaches as being based on appeals to external justifications (metadiscourse/metanarrative) which are not part of the everyday operation of language. We will return to this point in analysing Lyotard's view of science and politics as closely related language games through their similar structures and methods (in the above quotation it should be noted that Lyotard is using 'science' in its broadest sense, i.e. knowledge). It is enough to say, for the moment, that Lyotard believes that metanarrative is that which gives science, and government, their status, and that this apparatus has become redundant



due to developments in knowledge and social life. Postmodernity is thus:  
...incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv)

This dichotomy, of the modern and the postmodern, is used throughout The Postmodern Condition to look at the way that society works. Social cohesion can be hypothetised in two broad ways according to Lyotard; one right and one wrong. The wrong way to do it is what Lyotard calls 'the modern alternative' (Lyotard, 1984: 11); this approach rests on representing society as an organic whole, a self-regulating system, to use Parsons' terminology (Parsons, 1969); or to see it as divided into two great classes, to use Marx's terminology (Marx & Engels, 1969). These two views, the functionalist and the Marxist, have dominated sociological theory throughout modernity, and Lyotard describes these ideas as 'optimistic' (Lyotard, 1984: 11). They are wrong because the positing of knowledge as either functional or critical is quite simply inaccurate as an account of contemporary society. Much better, according to Lyotard, is the postmodern perspective that takes into account the way that knowledge is structured around our ways of talking, our forms of discourse (Lyotard, 1984: 14).

The postmodern perspective is based on a view of language games as the social totality, such that the idea of the dissolution of the social bond, alienation, or the disintegration of the social aggregate becomes absurd;

Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. (Lyotard, 1984: 15)

Lyotard suggests that society is nothing more than a vast number of

language particles passing through particular points, and from this position Lyotard can proceed to look at the operation of language games in society. Pursuing Foucault's identification of discourse as the operation of power and knowledge (Lyotard, 1984: 9)<sup>7</sup>, Lyotard looks at knowledge in language games and concludes that there are two sorts of knowledge manifested in discourse; scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge. Knowledge;

is what makes someone capable of forming 'good' denotative utterances, but also 'good' prescriptive and 'good' evaluative utterances'. (Lyotard, 1984: 18)

All language games have to be legitimated in some way for them to be deployed in society. The language pragmatics of everyday life are based on narrativity and are self-legitimizing; they require no appeal to external criteria (metanarratives) and Lyotard's position here is close to the ethnomethodologists in terms of our common understandings of the language of everyday life (Garfinkel, 1967). There is consensus in each particular social circle over what counts as the relevant criteria that will describe what knowledge is; this is what constitutes the culture of a people.

Narratives ... determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. Thus they 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. (Lyotard, 1984: 23)

Opposed to this is the pragmatic of scientific knowledge. When talking about scientific knowledge, Lyotard is making reference to the language game of science, but also wants to draw wider conclusions from this analysis.

The point is that there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics: they both stem from the same perspective, the same 'choice' if you will - the choice called the Occident. (Lyotard, 1984: 8)

Two points pertain here; Lyotard is making the same move as Feyerabend makes in Against Method in linking science to politics (Feyerabend, 1978: 295-309), indeed he is using Feyerabend's 'style' to give legitimacy to his own argument. The other is the oblique reference to the Enlightenment project, a theme important to the discussion of The Postmodern Condition. Scientific knowledge is deployed in a variety of ways; teaching, research, explaining scientific knowledge and achievements to the non-scientific community. Scientific language uses the same principles as narrative language in practice, i.e. they are both composed of statements and governed by rules. But science requires specific things from its language, and this is where it differs from narrative knowledge. The denotative statement must be retained and privileged above all other statements, otherwise 'truth' becomes free-floating and particular to context (as in narrative games in the social world). Lyotard characterises the game of science as, '...a diachronic temporality, that is, a memory and a project.' (Lyotard, 1984: 26) as opposed to the narrative game which is synchronic. The reference always belongs to the present even though we may think it belongs to the past. But the diachronic nature of the science game is an artificial construction that is always changing in respect to the 'memory content'. The presuppositions of science remain constant but the presuppositions dictate what counts as the memory. In short, the memory and presuppositions determine the boundaries for legitimate science<sup>a</sup>.

### Language games

At this point, Lyotard's thesis about the distinction between narrative and metanarrative runs into trouble. Central to Lyotard's thesis of narrativity is the concept of 'language-game'; in both The Postmodern Condition and Just Gaming Lyotard uses this concept to indicate the basic unit for the analysis of discourse. If we take discourse to be the actuality of language operation, then the form of discourse can be abstracted from this; for Lyotard this form will be either narrative or metanarrative. In both cases the discourse will proceed through the operation and deployment of language-games. Lyotard acknowledges a debt to Wittgenstein for his method of language analysis through language-games. However, this transfer of concepts between Wittgenstein and Lyotard is by no means a simple one; indeed I will argue here that Lyotard misconstrues Wittgenstein to the extent that the reader must make a radical reconstruction of the whole of Lyotard's language analysis to maintain a degree of intelligibility in the rest of Lyotard's theory of the postmodern. Even when such a reconstruction is carried out, the result is only partially successful in providing a backup for Lyotard's intention, namely his criticism of metanarrativity.

Part of the problem that appears in Lyotard's usage of Wittgenstein stems from an over literal interpretation of 'language-game'. In many ways it has been unfortunate that translators of Wittgenstein's work have translated *Sprachspiel* as 'language-game'. This 'direct' translation does not convey the full meaning of the German term and, due to this reductionism, it presents the reader with a false sense of Wittgenstein's conception of the nature of language. *Sprach* is generally translated as language, tongue, speech, talk, but *Spiel* is translated in *Sprachspiel* as

a game, whereas *Spiel* can also mean a match, or play in general, the slackness or play of a piston or valve, the action of muscles, child's play, scope, a plaything, and, most significantly, the manner of playing a musical instrument. The point that this illustrates is that rather than being a simple concept, of players taking up positions in relation to each other (the 'received version' of language-game), *Sprachspiel* can also be seen as a much more nebulous phenomenon; a play of forces, or an 'atmosphere' rather than a series of moves that can be observed. *Sprachspiel* does exist for Wittgenstein, but not in the way that Lyotard, and other neo-Wittgensteinians seem to think. Wittgenstein does not make this concept easy for his readers; at times he treats language-games as concrete phenomena, at other times he uses the concept, quite obviously, as a metaphor, or a diminished easily appraised version of 'real' language;

We can also call think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games 'language-games' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the process of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'. (Wittgenstein, 1958 §7)

Wittgenstein does go further than just defining primitive language, or nursery rhymes as language-games, but always to bring out the nature of our language, not to reduce our language to a set of rules, and a space to deploy these in, that will follow a pattern which we can then call a

'language-game'. It is useful to, at times, think of language as a game: this does not mean that it is a game. Lyotard disagrees, and treats Wittgenstein's idea of *Sprachspiel* as being literal;

...every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game.

(Lyotard, 1984: 10)

Lyotard shifts his perspective on language-games in Just Gaming: from a literal interpretation of Wittgenstein to a hyperrealist interpretation. He wants to point out the differences between prescriptive and denotative utterances, or in the terminology of The Postmodern Condition, metanarratives and narratives;

JFL: ...When I say: There is no common measure, it means that we know of nothing in common with these different language games. We merely know that there are several of them, probably not an infinite number, but we really do not know. In any case, the number is not countable for the time being, or if it is, it is so provisionally at best. (Lyotard, 1985: 51)

This is quite a bizarre suggestion; even if we do treat every utterance as being a move inside a language-game, the possibility of classifying such games is absurd; every language-game remains unique for the simple fact that the rules, and meanings, are constructed by the interactants through the course of such a game. This is a central tenet of Wittgenstein's, that the meaning of a word is determined by its use (Wittgenstein, 1958: §139).

Lyotard, to prove his thesis, must show that narratives and metanarrative based discourse are separate things, and although he shows that they operate in different ways through their different subject matter, he tries to strengthen this by suggesting a complete break between the two forms of discourse;

There is, then, an incommensurability between popular narrative pragmatics, which provides immediate legitimation, and the language game known to the West as the question of legitimacy - or rather, legitimacy as a referent in the game of inquiry. (Lyotard, 1984: 23)

The idea of incommensurability is a particularly powerful one; it suggests a complete breakdown of ties between the discourse of institutions and that of the population in a society. There is simply no longer an understanding possible between the people who speak in one form of language-game with those who speak another. Lyotard is suggesting the dysfunction of language for society as a whole. But how can this be possible, and without the majority of the population noticing it? According to the schema that Lyotard has constructed for himself, it is possible to see language-games as discrete entities that can be observed and systematically catalogued. It is a fairly simple extrapolation to then suggest that these language-games operate by rules so different from one another that no 'translation' between them is possible. Apart from, I hope, showing above that this a major distortion of Wittgenstein's original idea of *Sprachspiel*, surely the result of this situation would be that we are talking completely different languages (or possibly even private languages)? The only possible situation of mutual untranslatability is in the case of two separate foreign languages, and even then, only when certain topics are used. To suggest that it is only a few people, notably Lyotard, who have noticed this, is untenable: this may not be Lyotard's intention, but he gives us no evidence to show that it is not.

We can perform a reconstruction of Lyotard's notion of incommensurability at this point to bring about a partial resolution of

the problems highlighted in his thesis so far. This will also show what Lyotard intends from his discussion of incommensurability. The discourse of the scientists and decision-makers in society is a particular 'dialect', peculiar to a restricted community, but not so restricted as to make this a private language, nor to make it impossible to 'translate'. The dialect will display the form of life that the community shares, and this is informed by the 'metanarrative' that all the practitioners of the dialect share, and have faith in. If metanarrative utterances can be a dialect of the general form of language in society, then could it not be the case that we can invert this, to see the general form of language as a dialect of a more precise language?

If we accept this reconstruction, we may find that the differences between the two forms of knowledge in society are not so great as would first appear;

Narratives ... determine criteria of competence and/so illustrate how they are to be applied. Thus they define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they themselves are part of that culture, they are legitimated by the very fact that they do what they do. (Lyotard, 1984: 23

Our distinction between narratives and metanarratives, with a much diminished version of incommensurability, is harder to make. Both are now a part of culture, and both are self legitimating, as the metanarrative component of science/government discourse is no longer external, and may not even be held exclusively by the practitioners of that community. We can keep Lyotard's idea of a unity of language particles in society, but qualify it by suggesting that at least one dialect is being used by a significant section of society. We should also bear in mind the possibility that there may be more. If we move back to the notion of the



tyranny of one form of discourse being privileged over another, we can see that Lyotard has done nothing to show why this is so, and has indeed done the reverse; he has displayed in his own text the privileging of one form of dialect (narrative) over another (metanarrative), both of which should be treated as equal, because they are both manifestations of a common culture, and without being able to make a truth claim about this, there are simply no grounds for either hierarchy. It would appear that what Lyotard would like is for the dialect of the majority of the people to be the dominant form of language, and for other forms to serve that majority. Again, this is not what he intends (see chapter 4 below). What is Lyotard's intention is to show how judging without criteria can be achieved, and he applies this to show that the treatment of the language-game of science as being 'true' is harmful to society.

JLT: But what are you saying? I think, I find, I estimate, therefore I judge?

JFL: Absolutely. I, judge. But if I am asked by what criteria do I judge, I will have no answer to give. ...What I mean is that anytime that we lack criteria, we are in modernity, wherever we may be, whether it be at the time of Augustine, Aristotle, or Pascal. The date does not matter. (Lyotard, 1985: 15.)

JFL: No, we judge without criteria. We are in the position of Aristotle's prudent individual, who makes judgments about the just and the unjust without the least criterion. (Lyotard, 1985: 14.)

The narrative knowledge game does not rely upon its metaprescriptions, i.e. its rules of operation, to give it legitimacy, whereas, according to Lyotard, the knowledge games of science and

government do. But there is an interlinkage between the two sorts, indeed there must be for the prescriptive utterances of the decision-makers to be heard;

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. (Lyotard, 1984: 29)

This is the point where scientific 'dialect' is translated/interpreted into ordinary language, but this means that science loses its truth, for this remains located in the practitioners' belief in their metanarrative. Truth now resides in consensus, or rather in a commonly shared belief that scientific discourse, even when in narrative style, should be considered true. This is the point that Lyotard, playing Aristotle's prudent individual, wants to make. This is the social custom, if we may call it that, that must be broken for society to achieve communicative clarity and freedom.

So the question of distinguishing a true story from a false one becomes redundant in postmodernity; there is no way of performing such an operation - one can simply distinguish better stories from worse ones. But this leaves us with two major problems, namely; How do we assess the writings of Jean-François Lyotard? And how can Lyotard justify his own account when it is neither based upon metanarrative, nor purely scientific descriptions?

If we are indeed living in a postmodern culture then we will have difficulty in assessing the validity of Lyotard's writing without access to the criteria of judgment associated with a metanarrative based analysis. If we are still in modernity then we have no problem. However,

even Jürgen Habermas, a trenchant critic of Lyotard, finds it difficult to deny the existence of a new range of cultural phenomena that can be described as postmodern and that have changed the environment that social theory ostensibly operates within (see below: chapter 2). Habermas is quick to add that this is probably only a momentary aberration from the Enlightenment course (Habermas, 1981). According to Lyotard's own schema, an author has only two ways of convincing the reader that her thesis is a good one. She can either make specific reference to a metanarrative, or use the persuasive powers of rhetoric which carry no knowledge of their own. It would seem to be likely that Lyotard would choose this second path; he has, after all, devoted considerable energy to denouncing the 'terror' that results from the use of metanarrative. However, it is by no means clear that this is the case. Certainly, Lyotard uses all the persuasive powers of the text available to him; his descriptions of the two forms of knowledge are exaggerated to force home his observations of their differences; by describing them as incommensurable, which is by no means certain, he reinforces the theme of a complete breakdown of communication between two forms of discourse. He discounts his opponents' ideas by suggesting a possible case for them, and then showing its inconsistencies, as with his treatment of Habermas, (Lyotard, 1984: 65). But this is not enough to bring about the impact that a reading of The Postmodern Condition can provide. What Lyotard has done is to deploy his own metanarrative, one that is admittedly not of the form that he has been criticising in his work, but a metanarrative nevertheless.

Metanarratives provide legitimation for knowledge. The knowledge that Lyotard is proposing in The Postmodern Condition is not self-substantiating in that it cannot function when taken out of the context

of the textual setting it is located in. For this reason we cannot treat it as being a narrative in the way that Lyotard uses this term. It is not a discourse about everyday life that legitimates itself, but a commentary on that life, and a deep one at that. The pragmatics of narrative knowledge would allow Lyotard to make all the moves that he does in the text, but it is the text itself that is giving his narrative its legitimation. As we have seen, Lyotard is using a number of devices to bring about this legitimacy; he refers to other authors that can provide evidence to back up his argument, he uses rhetorical devices, such as his metaphor of 'terror', and he hides an 'agenda' beneath his discourse. This 'hidden agenda' is a metanarrative of nihilism, and it is constructed quite simply through the negation of all aspects of belief based knowledge, and expressed in the presuppositions that the author brings with him. Lyotard takes individuality and pushes it to its furthest extremes. He shows that it is only himself that can have the correct attitude to appraise the condition of knowledge in society, and that this knowledge, or more particularly, institutionalised knowledge, is extremely damaging to society. Totality must be destroyed, the unrepresentable is the positive, the representable, conversely, is negative. Differences are good, similarities are bad. An underlying theme is probably inescapable in any text, particularly one concerned with the nature of the social world. Lyotard's underlying theme is one of negation, and is also his metanarrative. If he were reading anyone else's text, he would point to the presuppositions of the author and shout 'metanarrative!': we should not be so foolish as to believe that a book denying metanarrative does not in fact contain one.

CHAPTER THREE  
POSTMODERN CULTURE

In this section I will outline Lyotard's conception of postmodern culture, followed by a brief overview of the principle manifestations of 'the postmodern' in the cultural sphere (as defined by the 'postmodernists' themselves), and the defence of modern cultural production offered against the postmodernists. I will show that there is a strong disparity between the cultural world's use of the term 'postmodern' and that of the Lyotard, who most critics claim is the main thinker of the postmodern movement. In part this disparity arises from an inappropriate labelling process. It also reveals a lack of understanding of the implications of the abandonment of modernity by cultural producers, who do not look further than their own cultural production when studying modernism or postmodernism. Finally it shows the need for new terms of reference and new modes of description in the rapidly changing cultural sphere of Western societies.

Jean-François Lyotard and Postmodern Culture

Although Lyotard defines postmodernity as 'incredulity towards metanarratives', he does give other indications of what constitutes postmodern culture. In formulating the bounds of postmodern culture Lyotard examines the ways in which modern art has been produced; he then proceeds to sketch in some of the features of a postmodern culture. Lyotard is not concerned with the ways in which we can abandon modernism (the style/culture) but rather with the ways in which modernity (the periodisation) is declining, and the reasons for this. For Lyotard, the style of our culture is a consequence of a whole variety of

individual methods, not the result of dicta being passed down. It is the increase in these individual methods, their proliferation, and an escape from the artist adhering to any particular theory that characterises postmodern cultural production. Lyotard makes a distinction between postmodern and antimodern cultural production, suggesting that it is the postmodern which is better suited to the contemporary culture (Lyotard, 1984: 76). However, he is dismayed that the modern alternative with its prescribed aesthetic criteria will be abandoned completely. Proliferation in styles implies the abandonment of organising criteria.

Eclecticism 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. (Lyotard, 1984: 76)

We will see below that these traits can be considered by some to be positive, and the release of, for example, architecture from the constraints of the International Style has been widely hailed as a great success. Lyotard sees these changes as yet another indicator of postmodernity, as they display the criteria of performativity.

But this realism of the "anything goes" is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield. (ibid)

It should be noted that the power of the art and book market is not

new. What is new is that the cultural policy of governments is taking on this logic of performativity and profitability, with successive governments reducing funding to the arts in favour of a system of sponsorship<sup>9</sup>.

Lyotard's version of contemporary aesthetics does not rely upon the strong periodisation used in his analysis of knowledge in computerised societies. He still denotes a distinction between modern and postmodern, but this is articulated in a different way from his analysis of society or language. Lyotard, in responding to a range of new art and architectural criticism, is concerned that too simple a distinction has been made between modern and postmodern products by those writers with a vested interest in particular cultural styles. Lyotard suggests that the application of the term 'postmodern' to certain contemporary cultural products is the result of a misunderstanding of what Modern art and style really is.

According to Lyotard, modern art has a general common feature, that of bearing witness to the unrepresentable. It makes visible the unrepresentable by means of allusion. Lyotard offers the example of Malevitch's squares, where reality is denied through the avoidance of figuration or representation (Lyotard, 1984: 78). Lyotard's intent in sketching this brief generalisation of modern art is to bring out the nature of what postmodern art is. It is Lyotard's concern to make clear that there is such a thing as postmodern art, and that it is he who is defining it, as he notes with dismay that there are a number of other critics operating a number of, for Lyotard, specious definitions. The portrayal of the unrepresentable as a missing component of the artefact is an expression of the Kantian notion of the 'sublime'. The postmodern artefact is a step away from this Kantian aesthetic.

Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, although a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. ...The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, 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. (Lyotard, 1984: 81)

As examples of the difference between these two positions, Lyotard offers a contrast between Proust and Joyce: both are offering the unrepresentable, alluding to something that does not allow itself to be made present. In Proust it is the identity of consciousness, but in Joyce it is the identity of writing. Both use the same medium, yet Proust is modern and Joyce postmodern, by Lyotard's definition<sup>10</sup>. There is a further relationship between the modern and postmodern in this context that Lyotard brings out.

What, then, is the postmodern? ...It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. ...A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. (Lyotard, 1984: 79)

Lyotard offers an insight into what he considers to be the way in which (post)modern art is produced: the process leading to the creation of the artefact must include the postmodern as well as the modern



component. But there are consequences of this definition of modern and postmodern. Firstly, we must be aware that the dividing line between the two forms is tenuous. Secondly, that there is nothing new in the postmodern mode of producing cultural artefacts, and that if this version of the aesthetics of the modern and postmodern is accepted, critics who hail a new dawn in the cultural world should be treated with caution.

Lyotard highlights trends through generalisations. He is concerned not to let the word 'postmodern' be applied randomly to the most popular or kitsch works of art that are being produced. Yet he does not permit of a theoretical approach to artistic production that would allow a manifesto of postmodern art to be written. The criteria for the definition of postmodern art rests with the individual viewer or reader, and are contingent upon which language-game (in Lyotard's terminology) that person is operating in at any particular time. Despite this lack of applicable criteria, Lyotard gives a clear picture of what constitutes art in postmodernity.

The powers of sensing and phrasing are being probed on the limits of what is possible, and thus the domain of the perceptible-sensing and the speakable-speaking is being extended. Experiments are made. This is our postmodernity's entire vocation, and commentary has infinite possibilities open to it. Today's art consists in exploring things unsayable and things invisible. Strange machines are assembled, where what we didn't have the idea of saying or the matter to feel can make itself heard and experienced. The diversity of artistic 'propositions' is dizzying. What philosopher can control it from above and unify it? Yet it is through this dispersion that

today's art is the equal of being as the power of things possible, or the equal of language as the power of plays.  
(Lyotard, 1989: 190)

### The Postmodernists

The application of the term 'postmodern' to all forms of contemporary cultural production is now well established. However, the most successful attempt at creating a new paradigm for cultural production has been in the realm of contemporary architecture, and this is a result, to a large extent, of the work of Charles Jencks, an architectural critic. Jencks's major recent work on architectural theory, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, is a continuation of his earlier theory of 'ad hocism' (Jencks & Silver, 1972), but rather than suggesting an alternative way of building based upon ad hoc principles, Jencks in this later work, suggests that modern architecture has died (Jencks, 1977: 9)<sup>11</sup>.

Before looking in some detail at the work of Charles Jencks as the main representative of postmodern cultural theory, it is necessary to clarify some of the confusion that arises over the usage of the terms 'modern' and 'Post-Modern' in his work. Lyotard offers a broad analysis of the social and cultural world, based upon a critique of recent social theory, and concludes that society as a whole is entering a new phase, which he terms postmodern. It is Lyotard's contention that the liberalising project of modernity has failed, and that attempts to resurrect it will also fail, as the project of modernity relies upon metanarratives that, rather than liberating, actually repress the members of society. Lyotard's analysis encompasses the whole of society, and has implications for all social activities where Jencks, on the other hand, is

not concerned with the project of modernity as a whole, but with aspects of modernism (the cultural style). Although his later work looks at more general aspects of cultural production (Jencks, 1986) he focusses on Modern architecture in particular. Jencks uses the term 'Post-Modern' to designate an architectural style that has rejected the Modern architectural modes of communication. It is from this perspective that Jencks launches his attack on modernism and modernity. Effectively, this is an inversion of the project of Lyotard, who starts from the general and works his way down to discussion of the particular. Jencks starts from the particular issue of architecture, and later goes on to extrapolate his conclusions to encompass all of culture.

Modern architecture, according to Jencks, has changed little in ideology from the first formulations of Modern architectural principles, which form the basis of the International Style, made by Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, in the 1920s and 1930s. This ideology is one of providing technical solutions to social problems; social reform through a change in the built environment. Le Corbusier, for example, promised a 'Radiant City', built in the air, with communal social spaces and facilities (Le Corbusier, 1967). The reality of Modern style housing schemes, as shown by Oscar Newman in his book Defensible Space, is of communal areas that rapidly fall prey to vandalism and neglect (Newman, 1973). The dislike of the tower block Modern housing scheme is, according to Jencks, a direct consequence of the style of building chosen by the architect. Corporate building, according to Jencks, has been the victim of the International Style as much as public housing. Office blocks around the world conform to the same design, and the cities of the world are becoming indistinguishable from each other.

For the general aspect of an architecture created around one

(or a few) simplified values, I will use the term *univalence*. No doubt in terms of expression the architecture of Mies van der Rohe and his followers is the most univalent formal system we have, because it makes use of few materials and a single, right-angled geometry. ...The glass-and steel box has become the single most used form in modern architecture, and it signifies throughout the world 'office building'. (Jencks, 1977: 15)

Modern architecture has failed to remain credible due to its inability to communicate with its users. Jencks proposes a new form of architectural communication. Rather than the visual language of modern architecture, one of purity, function and honesty towards materials, Post-Modern architecture employs a visual language based upon plurality: a profusion of signs and symbols. Post-Modern architecture should be based upon a radical eclecticism.

The architect should be trained as a radical schizophrenic (everything must be radical today), always looking two ways with equal clarity: towards the traditional slow-changing codes and particular ethnic meaning of a neighbourhood, and towards the fast-changing codes of architectural fashion and professionalism. (Jencks, 1977: 97)

The basic principle of Post-Modern architecture is 'double-coding': the paradoxical dualism of the continuation of modernism and its transcendence (Jencks, 1986: 15). Stylistically, Post-Modern buildings make reference to their modern predecessors in ironic and allegorical ways, showing the redundancy of Modern architecture through pastiche and (often) the use of traditional building (Jencks, 1986: 14). Post-Modern buildings are the humanised face of their Modern precursors. Jencks claims that Post-Modern architecture is more acceptable to the public than Modern architecture: it is less intrusive, reflects the surrounding

area better, and has even, in a very few cases, been designed in consultation with the local residents<sup>12</sup>. Architecture has been the subject of fierce public debate in recent years, and there appears to be a trend towards a style of public building that is not as alienating as Modern architecture.

No doubt many architects are now as disenchanted with modernism as the public, and a new paradigm, or theory, is beginning to form. (Jencks, 1977: 101)

Post-Modernism is not a radical departure from modernism, but an evolutionary one (Jencks, 1977: 87). The style of visual communication employed by Post-Modern architecture is better suited to the world that we live in today than that of Modern architecture, and, Jencks hopes, the next generation of architects that have not been schooled strictly in modernism, will be able to produce much more convincing examples of radical eclecticism. This 'new architect' will have been trained in a number of different styles, and will have a knowledge of anthropology, signs and symbols from around the world, and a feel for tradition.

He will continue to have a professional ideology induced by the modern movement on a world-wide scale; he will respond to formal innovations coming from Italy and Japan, theory that emanates from London and New York, and individual practice coming from everywhere. (Jencks, 1977: 97)

This Counter-Reformation in architecture, mirrored, claims Jencks, to some extent in the rest of culture, is spreading very quickly around the world (Jencks, 1986: 47), and it is similar in effect to the original Counter-Reformation that resulted in the Baroque style. Unlike the original Counter-Reformation, Post-Modernism does not have, as yet, an underlying religion or faith, but Post-Modernism does have several

substitutes which forms its agenda. Jencks's Post-Modernism seeks a shared symbolic order of the kind that religion provides, but without the religion, in order to avoid relativism of the kind proposed by Lyotard (Jencks, 1986: 48). Jencks concludes What is Post-Modernism with the following passage.

In both art and architecture the tradition of Post-Modernism is beginning to mature and we can see limited progress and development akin to that of the Renaissance. (Jencks, 1986: 48)

Jencks's formulation of Post-Modernism avoids, for the most part, any specific discussion of theoretical issues. It is mainly a combination of opinions and examples taken from the cultural sphere. However, Jencks does briefly discuss the work of Jean-François Lyotard in the context of postmodern culture. According to Jencks, Lyotard confuses Late-Modernism with Post-Modernism, by which he means that Lyotard's theory of cultural forms based upon innovation and pluralism is the latest avant-gardism. Lyotard's description of the incredulity towards such metanarratives as progress, the liberation of humanity, and the emancipation of the proletariat is dismissed as so much nihilism and sociological jargon (Jencks, 1986: 39).

It's embarrassing that Post-Modernism's first philosopher should be so fundamentally wrong. (Jencks, 1986: 42)

Jencks cannot accept the definition of postmodernity that Lyotard offers as it denies the possibility of a future to the project of modernity. Although Jencks does not explicitly state that he wishes to see the project of modernity continue, we can see it clearly in his work. For Jencks, the Post-Modern architecture that he describes is an evolutionary step forward. As we have seen, Jencks's version of Post-Modernism is of

a movement which shows signs of maturation and progress, 'akin to that of the Renaissance', where a new generation of architects, with a professional ideology based upon a new version of architectural theory, will provide the world with better, more rational, forms of building. All that is needed to complete the foundations of this Post-Modernism is the non-religious shared symbolic order.

In this summary of Jencks's theory of Post-Modernism we can see a subtext of many of the metanarratives that Lyotard claims are no longer viable. The idea of a progressive, rational cultural movement goes against all anti-foundational thought that most contemporary critics consider to be the root of postmodern theory. Jencks does offer a strong critique of Modernism, but the alternative that he proposes is not a rejection of Modernism, but a new version of it. It is a better version of Modern architecture that Jencks proposes in particular, and a better version of Modernism that he proposes in general.

There is a fundamental disjunction between the Post-Modernism of Jencks and the postmodernism of Lyotard. Jencks considers that Lyotard, as a philosopher and sociologist of knowledge, and not a cultural critic or historian, 'is not finely tuned' to the differences between Late-Modernism and Post-Modernism (Jencks, 1986: 42). Lyotard, on the other hand, distances himself from Post-Modern architecture.

I have read that under the name of postmodernism, architects are getting rid of the Bauhaus project, throwing out the baby of experimentation with the bathwater of functionalism. (Lyotard, 1984: 71)

Jencks does not look outside of the cultural sphere to produce his

concept of Post-Modernism, and why should he? What he offers is a perfectly reasonable account of contemporary architecture and the way that it can be changed for the better. The problem of the usage of the term 'postmodern' arises when it is realised that a term implying modernity has reached some form of closure, such as 'Post-Modern', is not the same as a term that implies a continuation of modernity, such as 'Late-Modern'. For modernity to have finished means that either the project has been completed, or the project has been abandoned (Habermas, 1987: passim). Jencks does not consider the scope of modernity before applying the term Post-Modern to some aspects of contemporary architecture. Jencks is still attached to the project of modernity, and his usage of the term 'Post-Modern' is consequently misleading<sup>13</sup>.

#### The Modernists

The increasing use of the term 'postmodernism' by cultural commentators does not mean that modernism has failed, or been rejected. To investigate the status of modernism we need to look behind the actual cultural productions themselves to see whether or not modernism is still the overarching cultural paradigm in contemporary culture, and we need to understand the ways in which modernism can be used in the construction of theories about contemporary society.

In Has Modernism Failed?, Suzi Gablik provides an analysis of the state of the current art world. It is a world where anything is considered to be art and nothing appears to have any substance to it. The art world has become drastically over institutionalised in the last two decades, and this, coupled with the routine overturning of conventions, has led to the decline of modernism and is the fertile ground for the rise of postmodernism.



What is this postmodernism? According to Gablik it is a state of culture that lacks any centre, any notion of tradition and, any coherent aesthetic (Gablik, 1985: 12-13). In the rise of modern art since World War 2, postmodernism is more a culmination of the modernist road as a surge of expectations than an actual movement. Gablik points out the relationship between art and society, in that art can be used as a measure of the state of society at any given time. In late modernity we can see the failings of modernity in the way that art is executed. There is a lack of any system of beliefs that justifies allegiance to any entity beyond the self (Gablik, 1985:32). This leads to a negative attitude towards society itself, and results in a pervading nihilism. This is the, possibly inevitable, culmination of the project started by the early modernists, but it is surely not what they intended. The initial impetus of modernism was a rejection of tradition, a desire for freedom and a continual striving for new forms and methods. The modernists thought that the world could be changed for the better, but the history of the twentieth century has not borne that out. The logic of the modern ethos, and the harsh reality of contemporary society has led the artistic community towards a retreat into the self. But this forsaking of reality has meant that something vital has been lost. The desire for freedom may have been met by this movement into the self, but the artist has lost any social role that they might have had. And, as Gablik points out:

...the paradox of freedom, as I have been trying all along to show, is that it is very difficult for the individual to preserve his identity in a society where traditional institutions and values offer no support. Liberation and alienation turn out to be inextricably connected - reverse sides of the same coin.

Beyond a certain point, freedom - like technical progress - is counterproductive: it defeats its own ends and becomes alienating. For artists to lose the sense of being members of a tradition which transcends both themselves and their contemporaries leads to demoralization. (Gablik 1984:120)

This failure of modernism can have different outcomes. The postmodern road has already been started upon. It will lead to a further abstraction of art. Postmodernism means, for Gablik, a lack of integration in culture, and a lack of meaning. It is a dark body which absorbs everything and gives out nothing: a state where innovation is neither possible nor desirable.

The other alternative is a restructuring of modernism based upon the concept of tradition. Alasdair MacIntyre argues, in After Virtue, that we need to reinstate the virtues, the code of action that allowed individuals to contribute and contemplate the communal good. These virtue concepts have all but disappeared in contemporary society, and have been replaced with success criteria: we seek wealth, power, fame, rather than the common good. The values of modernity have fostered this set of values: the virtues belong to the values of tradition. Gablik seeks a restoration of the virtues in the artistic community to effect a change for the better in the way that art is practised and displayed. The tradition that was rejected by the early modernists must be reconstructed, at least in part, to take the place of the pseudo-tradition that infuses modernism (the pseudo-tradition of rejecting all traditions) to give some kind of structure within which the values of the artistic community can be arranged. This is no easy task: the values of modernity and tradition are opposed, and Gablik's call for a less self-orientated approach in the art world is mediated by the fact that

capitalism will not be on the side of those who choose to reject affluence in favour of communal spirit. But this, for Gablik, is the only way of saving the good aspects of modernism (innovation, social change and progress), and to abandon the bad aspects of modernism (individualism, overinstitutionalisation).

In dialectical terms, the tension between traditional and modern values is resolved by the creation of an interesting synthesis of elements from both. (Gablik, 1984:126)

Gablik concludes that the rejection of tradition and authority by the early modernists has been a foundation of sand which could not be built upon: tradition and authority may be necessary to make a genuine avant-garde possible - in order to provide something to revolt against. The artist in contemporary society finds herself under continuous pressure to be modern, only to find that to be modern now is to be traditional.

Gablik's definition of postmodernism rests on stressing the nihilistic component in it, and this is different from Lyotard's definition of postmodern culture - presenting the unrepresentable. But Gablik's refusal of postmodernism in art, and her reconstruction of modernism through a reappraisal of tradition coincides to a large extent with the definition of Post-Modernism given by Charles Jencks.

Post-Modernism has the essential double meaning: the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence. (Jencks, 1986: 15)

Jencks distinguishes Post-Modernists from revivalists, and traditionalists, but does stress the importance of tradition to their work (Jencks, 1977: 97), although it is a purely aesthetic tradition that Jencks is referring to, not the social tradition of Gablik. The link between the two viewpoints of Gablik and Jencks is a profound

dissatisfaction with the state of modernism and modernity, and a desire to change, at least, the mode of cultural production. Both seek a better, more rational, version of modernism, rather than the pluralist, anarchist cultural paradigm that Lyotard proposes.

### Jürgen Habermas and Postmodern Culture

Gablik's analysis of postmodernism reaches a similar conclusion to that of Jürgen Habermas:

Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow. (Habermas, 1981b: 10)

Jürgen Habermas, although not principally concerned with the nature of artistic expression in contemporary society, gives some consideration to the way that art and aesthetics are understood by people in modernity. He identifies three different value spheres, art, morality and law, which have become autonomous entities and which must be reunified to reinstate the project of modernity. There is, for Habermas, a strong link between cultural production and the state of progress a society has reached.

At the level of completely differentiated validity spheres, art sheds its cultic background, just as morality and law detach themselves from their religious and metaphysical background. With this *secularization of bourgeois culture*, the cultural value spheres separate off sharply from one another and develop according to the standards of the inner logics specific to the different validity claims. (Habermas, 1987a: 196)

In Habermas's overall project for the reconstruction of the project of modernity, art is located in a historical context, as well as being one

of the ways in which modernity can produce positive and progressive changes in contemporary society.

Habermas introduces the concept of 'aesthetic modernity' to describe the changes in the cultural world that first appeared in the second half of the last century, at the time when the modern artistic movement was beginning. 'Aesthetic modernity is characterised by attitudes which find common focus in a changed consciousness of time' (Habermas, 1981b: 4). The modern movement expressed this in their work, and also in the ways that tradition was rejected and avant-gardes set up. We can see this process occurring up to the late sixties, with the Dadaist, the surreallists, the abstract expressionists. The avant-garde are the crucial factor in the continuation of the modernist movement.

The avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, of shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future. The avant-garde must find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured. (Ibid)

The quest for the new and the uncharted results, according to Habermas, in an exaltation of the present (this is the altered consciousness of time). Modernity exalts in revolt, and attempts to overturn tradition and all that is normalizing. Aesthetic modernity is a spirit of continual revolution against the past, while at the same time drawing upon that past. This spirit of aesthetic modernity could not have arisen had it not been for the emergence of an aesthetic conception of art in the mid 19th century and led to the dictat of 'art for arts sake' (Habermas, 1981b:9). The aesthetic sphere had become independent in line with one of the goals and tenets the project of Enlightenment devised by the philosophers of the 18th century. Despite the modern artists claims to

be revolutionary and against tradition, the continuation of an aesthetic conception of art shows that they were part of the Enlightenment project to develop the rational organisation of society.

This condition of aesthetic modernity gained strength through the twentieth century. 'Now, this spirit of aesthetic modernity has recently begun to age' (Habermas, 1981b: 5). Modernism today is much weaker than it was twenty years ago, and we are experiencing the end of the idea of modern art. According to neoconservatives, the generic term Habermas uses to identify the proponents of postmodernism (Habermas, 1981b: 13; 1987b: 3-4), modernism is dominant but dead. Neoconservative doctrine sees modernity as a totalitarian force that has resulted in many negative phases in history such as communism, fascism, anti-semitism. Modernity has resulted, not in the rational organisation of society, but in the power of irrational forces, hedonism, conspicuous consumption, and a lack of faith. Neoconservatives see the need for a rejection of modernity as a whole, yet Habermas feels that this argument, although certainly forceful, is based on false assumptions and a confused foundation. Modernity can still be a powerful force for good, if it is properly implemented.

Neoconservatism shifts onto cultural modernism the uncomfortable burdens of a more or less successful capitalist modernization of the economy and society. (Habermas, 1981b: 7)

Culture cannot be held to be responsible for the problems of societal modernization, and to reject modernism as a whole is to doom society to an unstructured and meaningless cultural vacuum: culture will become directionless without modernism. However, Habermas does concede that there are problems with the project of cultural modernity that are not a product of societal modernization. Although the 19th century produced

the aestheticist conception of art, it also paved the way for modern art to change the focus of representation.

Colour, lines, sounds and movement ceased to serve primarily the cause of representation: the media of expression and the techniques of production themselves became the aesthetic object.

(Habermas, 1981b: 10)

The separation of art and society had begun. A process of alienation started, as art withdrew into an autonomous realm. It was, according to Habermas, the surrealists who noticed that this process was taking place, and sought to reconcile the spheres of art and life by the negation of art (Habermas, 1981b: 10). However, this radical attempt failed to achieve the desired result; indeed it achieved the opposite by illuminating the structures of art that the negation of art was meant to dissolve. The overall result was that the cultural sphere of art broke open. The surrealists attempt to negate culture was a false program, which could not succeed as it did not have any effect on the social system surrounding it.

A rationalised everyday life, therefore, could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere - art - and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes. The surrealist revolt would have replaced only one abstraction. (Habermas, 1981b: 11)

The attempts to negate modernity are thus of two sorts: those that seek to bring about a more harmonized society through the negation of modern culture, as in the case of the surrealists, and those that seek to abandon the whole project of modernity, as in the case of the postmodernists. Habermas rejects both approaches, suggesting that rather than attempting to negate or abandon modernity we should try to learn

from the mistakes that have been made along its path. Habermas offers an example to suggest how such a reconstruction of modernity can be affected (Habermas, 1981b: 13). The reception of art at present is mediated by the artistic community, where aesthetic judgements are created and then passed down to the lay public. This denies the artistic product any influence upon the viewer to associate it with her own life. Side-stepping this system allows people to appreciate and confront art on their own terms, and to critically appraise the way that art affects and/or reflects their life. It is a way in which the specialized knowledge complex can be broken open. We need to reappropriate the expert's culture for ourselves. Habermas concludes his description of the modernist artistic project with an appeal.

In sum, the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled. And the reception of art is only one of at least three of its aspects. The project aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism. (Habermas, 1981b: 13)

### Conclusion

The theoretical descriptions of cultural production that are outlined above do not rest upon the description of cultural products, but the position and importance of culture in contemporary society. Habermas and Gablik both argue that the work of art in contemporary society is now so far removed from the general culture that it can no longer tell us very much about the world: art no longer reflects society. The modernist theorists seek to change this, to bring about an artistic paradigm such that art and society are closely linked. In a different way, this is what



Jencks is also calling for: his Post-Modern architecture will produce buildings that are better than those of Modern architecture, and which the general public prefer to buildings designed to the formula of Modern architects. The two cultural critics studied above, Jencks and Gablik, argue for very different things. Jencks wants to see Post-Modernism as the new cultural paradigm: Gablik seeks to reinstate the project of modernity through a revitalised modernism. But, as we have seen, these amount to very much the same thing in terms of cultural products: both aim at a better, more 'rational', version of modernism. The real difference between Jencks and Gablik concerns the social function of art. Where Gablik suggests that art can be central to our understanding and appraisal of the world, Jencks ignores such a possibility.

Lyotard's discussion of contemporary culture is an adjunct to the main thesis of The Postmodern Condition; it is a statement of what postmodern culture comprises given in the most general terms. Even though this is not a full treatment of the subject, it is still worth noting that Lyotard is concerned with a very small part of what we call culture, namely the avant-garde. No consideration of popular culture is given, and the few references that are made to it are disparaging of contemporary TV orientated culture.

Habermas's view of a reconstruction of society through, in part, a reconstruction of art, cannot be adequately verified unless the project is actually implemented. The decline of modern culture has coincided with the decline of the project of modernity: this is a product of capitalist modernisation. Given that this is the case, it seems unlikely that culture can be expected to rescue society: the cultural world has failed to provide the liberalising aspects of modernity that were promised by modern artistic movements such as the surrealists, and has now, with the

advent of postmodernism, given up any pretensions to do so.

The separation of art and society described by the modernists suggests that the question of whether or not contemporary society has entered a new phase called postmodernity will not be answered by reference to the artistic world. To answer the question we must look at the nature of contemporary society itself, and question the ways in which social theory construes social action and structure.

## CHAPTER 4

### POSTMODERN SOCIETY

#### Modernity versus Postmodernity: Theorising and organising social life.

The propounders of a modern approach to the understanding of the social world and those suggesting a postmodern approach produce results which are widely divergent. A social science based upon foundational methods would, obviously, throw up competing theories of the social: for the most part, the opposition between Parsonian systems theory and Marxist class analysis held sway in the debate. However, these two approaches had a common link: they both relied upon finding and analysing a generating mechanism for all of social action: in Parsons case it was the collective system of norms and values; for Marx, the economic system. This base: superstructure approach has been attacked in a variety of ways, but in an especially profound way by Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard's postmodern approach denies the possibility of any foundation that acts as a generative mechanism which causes, and where we should ultimately look for explanations of, social phenomena. It is as if consensus politics has been lost in the social sciences: the study of the social world is now split into two camps who have little, in terms of their respective methodologies, in common. But, of course, both ways of theorising the social have to use the same data, the same social world, as their testing ground. The social world does not change because of the way that social theory is written, but the way that social theory is written may change the perceptions of those who write it. As we shall see, the differences between the postmodern and the modern approach to theorising about the social world, and particularly to suggesting ways in which the social world can be reorganised, are so vast that it is only

reasonable to conclude that either one of the approaches to social science is wholly wrong, or social theory is no longer providing us with answers about the world, but opinions as to how we should see the world. In a cosmology based upon reason and rationality, where the criteria for truth are dictated by the canons of science, this is a problem that is greatly diminished. Modernity is that epoch where the rationalisation of the social world will provide people with ever more powerful explanatory frameworks for all aspects of the world. As these are applied, the world itself will become more rational, and social ills will diminish. This should proceed to an endpoint, where everything is in its rational order. The social and economic worlds of modernity are thus pushed towards a perfection through history by the dynamic forces of reason and rationality. We can see this form of analysis in the social sciences in the work of Marx, Durkheim, and Parsons. Latterly, we have the example of Jürgen Habermas exhorting us to reinstate this project of modernity, under quite changed conditions from those that Marx, Durkheim, and Parsons were writing under. For Habermas, the abandonment of this rationalisation process would be a retrograde step, as it would negate all the advances that have been made in social organisation over the last two centuries. Modernism, as the attitude of modernity, has to be promoted amongst society: it is the dynamic attitude that leads people towards a constant striving for a better life: without it, we simply cannot improve the societies that we live in. The attitude of modernism, for Habermas, is the avant-garde of consciousness that will project the social world forward; it is the state of mind that is not self-seeking, rather it is the state of mind that seeks the greater good for society.

The opposite of the modern consciousness is the postmodern attitude. In social theory, the foundations of science and rationality have been

abandoned, according to the anti-foundationalists, because they do not work. There is no explanatory power in the approach that sees social action as the pure product of, say, the economic system. There is no advantage in using scientific language and techniques for describing a social world, when science itself is nothing more than a vast puzzle solving game, where validity is given to results when they are based upon hypotheses. Rationalisation has failed to prevent the worst ravages of totalitarianism, and has produced democracies where the vast majority of people are excluded from the process of government. The postmodern attitude is one of 'anything goes', and it has begun to take a hold of the social sciences: the explanation of the social world should be based upon what actually is out there, rather than what can be hypothesised to be hiding underneath social phenomena. Postmodernity, according to the advocates of postmodernism, is a time where the large-scale 'macro' approaches to the social world will no longer apply, where the small scale approach will rule, and where logical coherence to a local situation will be the only criteria that will be necessary for the explanation of the social world. The project for the emancipation of people and the progress of societies has been left behind: societies cannot be forced to progress when there is no such thing as progress. Progress has been replaced by difference: we cannot claim any superiority for our historical epoch over another as we simply do not have the relevant criteria to do so. Those who have made such bold claims were merely fooled by an illusion, albeit a very complex one.

The project of modernity, with its promise of rationalisation and progress for society, has been disrupted. Whether it has failed, been abandoned, or is undergoing restructuring is still the subject of debate, and will no doubt remain so as long as social theory is still concerned

with providing explanations for the actions of large numbers of people. For all that Lyotard claims to be opposed to the style of social theory written by Jürgen Habermas, seeing it as oppressive to all concerned with it;

*'systemtheorie'* is technocratic, even cynical, not to mention despairing: the harmony between the needs and hopes of individuals or groups and the functions guaranteed by the system is now only a secondary component of its functioning'.

(Lyotard, 1984: 11)

Lyotard is proposing a theory that will apply to all members of society, just as Habermas claims to propose a theory to explain all facets of social life. Admittedly, Lyotard has chosen the anti-foundational path, where there is no central generating mechanism to which all social actions are subordinate or determined. But Lyotard's analysis of political action in postmodernity and his view of society as a plurality of language games leads to a suggestion for a politics for the reconstruction of Western societies, and for the liberation of society as a whole. Lyotard is dealing with generalisations across the spectrum of the social world, and these may not be founded on particularly strong premises. However, when comparing the outlines for future political structures and activities of Lyotard, Habermas, and Rorty, three widely dispersed opinions, it would appear that all three have neglected to look further than their own theoretical formulations to see whether or not the social changes they envision are likely, or even possible. Postmodern political theory remains hotly contested, but the issue of the very possibility of altering political attitudes is hardly touched upon by these social theorists. It may be that a conclusion concerning the

veracity of one, or more, of these competing theories is simply not possible given the nature of the contemporary social world.

### Lyotard

The social world, according to Lyotard, is made up of a plurality of language games, each operating according to its own rules in its own context. Some of these language games carry more weight than others, they are priveleged by the fact that they have that unseen component - metanarrative. Other language games - narratives - are considered trivial by societies that have been so used to hearing the grand master narratives of science and politics and religion for so long. These narratives of our everyday lives are the way in which the social world operates: short term contracts drawn up between players in a vast network of language particles. But there are other aspects of societal language that are priveleged above the ordinary language of everyday life, political discourse, and yet, if Lyotard's suggestion that postmodern society is here, their recourse to metanarratives will be losing its power to confirm privelege. Postmodern citizens cease to believe these extravagent and fanciful fairy tales when faced with the lack of social progress that has resulted from the post-war years.

Lyotard's political philosophy, if we may apply such a grand title to what is in effect a footnote to a mass of writings principally concerned with the nature of philosophy, is based, as we would expect, upon his concept of narrativity. As we have seen (supra: chapter 1), narratives are stories, although they do not always appear to be the same as the fictional accounts that we usually associate with this word. Political parties employ narratives to carry their political messages to the general public, conveyed by the media. To use the media they use

monetary funds, or the apparatus of government. To validate these narratives, they make recourse to other narratives, they use knowledge of a specialist nature, or they link them to some overarching theory of societal improvement, based on rationalisation of, for example, the economic sphere. The mode of production of political narratives is sketched out by Lyotard in the briefest of all possible ways, because it is not the political narratives themselves that interest Lyotard, but what they imply for society as a whole<sup>14</sup>. To discover these implications we must look at the pragmatics of the politicians narratives: this means all the complex relations that exist between a speaker and what she is talking about, and the listener and what story she is told by the storyteller. Democracy, according to Lyotard, is a coercive system, one that places the citizen in an impossible position of being both the recipient of political narrative, and the promoter of these narratives. The hearer is in a position that is incommensurable with that of the storyteller, they do not have the same access to information and power, and are inevitably dominated. Yet they are the cause of their own domination through choosing one political narrative rather than another. According to Lyotard, the political system at work in contemporary society can not be just, nor can it be while the narratives of some are privileged over those of others.

It is this question of justice that occupies the central position in Lyotard's analysis of the political, and it becomes the cornerstone for the future politics that Lyotard proposes. Lyotard first looks at how justice has disappeared from modern society, and links this to the decline of the modern and the rise of postmodernity. Lyotard specifically abandons any attempt to draw up a model for a just society, unlike foundational theorists, in the same way that he abandons the attempt to



draw up a model for politics. The modern approach has been to see justice as the core of politics, the central point to which all others must answer. Modern justice is of the order of the prescriptive: it dictates what should be done, rather than judging what has occurred. In this case there can be no just society, and any model which uses this conception of justice will be false in an assertion that it promotes liberty, as it implies that a set of prescriptions produced from such a model will be applicable to the whole of society (Lyotard, 1985: 25). Such a theoretical discourse will effectively exclude many of those whom the prescriptions apply to. But the use of such a theoretical concept of justice, based on prescriptions such as 'thou shalt not...', is not the way that justice actually works anyway. Lyotard notes that justice, in the way that we use it today, can equally be construed as the correlation between actions and true statements. This form of justice, i.e. non-prescriptive justice, is at odds with the rule based form. It is a form of justice that is similar to our everyday narratives in that it grounds itself according to context and participants. Modern justice thus fails on two counts: it is no longer correct, and it no longer applies. And yet, it is still with us, and still being applied: it is the cornerstone of modern democracy, or at least it is trumpeted as such.

Democracy is a concept of modernity, and a deeply entrenched icon for contemporary politics. Lyotard, while not anti-democratic, is strongly opposed to the modern concept of democracy, but not for the reasons that one would expect. Given Lyotard's Marxist credentials, one would expect him to assault democracy for being a sham to protect the ruling class. Rather, Lyotard again points out the plurality of language games, and the need to allow this multiplicity to be freed. Modern democracy prevents other voices from being heard, but if this were simply the case

then it could surely be changed to accomodate more narratives. Lyotard sees the system as being much more sinister.

The capital issue is terror. ...It is the fact that the social bond, understood as the multiplicity of games, very different among themselves, each with its own pragmatic efficacy and its capability of positioning people in precise places in order to have them play their parts, is traversed by terror, that is, by the fear of death. In a way, that has always been the political problem. The question of the social bond, when it is put in political terms, has always been raised in the form of a possible interruption of the social bond, which is simply called "death" in all of its forms: imprisonment, unemployment, repression, hunger, anything you want. Those are all deaths. (Lyotard, 1985: 99)

The privileging of certain narratives over other narratives, which even Lyotard admits may be inevitable (1985: 94), results in the terror of being removed from the game (silenced), and this terror may take a number of forms. In this analysis, the question of modernity or postmodernity is not an issue: this is a simple analysis of a political system that stifles and threatens a populace.

To be more precise: if a language game owes its efficacy, I would not say only, but also, to the fear of death, even if it is a minority game, it is unjust. Majority does not mean large number, it means great fear. ...In order to become a majority, is it necessary to violate the boundaries of the language game concerned? Isn't there, in the pretension to regulate other language games, something like terror? (1985: 100)

The question of a postmodern approach arises from Lyotard's own

prescription for his concept of a pagan justice, that is, the multiplicity of justices where each one is defined in relation to the game it is specific to, to be adopted in contemporary societies. Such a non-foundational approach could fit into no modern theory of the social world.

Paganism, as an alternative to the modern, can be described as the ethos of the postmodern: it is the postmodern attitude that Lyotard sees appearing in contemporary society, and that he sees as the future possible. Rather than having concepts of, democracy and justice reified at the centre of a theoretical approach, which is then dictated to the populace, paganism suggest that there is difference to be celebrated. 'What we need is a politics which is both godless and just' (Lyotard, 1989: 135). Justice is a working within what the rules of each game permits, and can be the basis for the working out of new rules. It is liberating rather than prescriptive. The justice of multiplicities is the way forward that Lyotard seeks from the maze of modernity. The negation of progress, that cornerstone of the Enlightenment project, and the denial of rationalisation, is the centrepiece of the promotion, indeed celebration, of difference that Lyotard sees as being the only way to restructure the social world.

It is the changes that Lyotard proposes to the methods of social organisation that suggest his theory has some grand transforming agenda to it. Lyotard wants our society to be based upon free access to all knowledge, so that language games will have the potential to be equal at any time. The way forward, and it is almost impossible to deny that Lyotard is suggesting a progressive movement for society, is to liberate all the computer data bases and give the public free access to them. This is an attempt to liberate the individual, and hopefully, to produce

a society of free individuals where the temporary contract between people, rather than the institutional contract imposed from outside the context of each language game, will liberate difference and deny any power base to terror.

### Habermas

Of all the topics covered in the massive *oeuvre* of Jürgen Habermas, the principal one has only emerged in his recent writings (Habermas, 1981; 1982; 1987a; 1987b). It is that of the project of modernity, and the importance of continuing the tradition started in the Enlightenment. Reason and rationality are at the centre of all Habermas's writings on the condition of society; for Habermas, the good society is the more rational society; but the location of these two concepts into a larger framework has, at least in part, been due to pressure from writers such as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard who have attempted to turn their backs on the philosophy of the subject, and the use of scientific rationality to base theoretical understanding of the social world upon. Habermas has dubbed such opponents to modernity 'neoconservatives' (Habermas, 1981b), and has tried to show that any such wholesale rejection of modernity is a retrograde step for society. However, it is clear from some of Habermas's work that he has taken on board some of the criticisms of the Enlightenment project in his construction of a theory for the progress of societies towards a better world. It is the rejection of subject centred philosophy that Habermas finds closest affinity with in the work of the anti-foundationalists, as we shall see.

The social science tradition that Habermas works within, and also extends, is that of critical theory. Responsible for extensive revisions to much of the Frankfurt School's work, Habermas presents us with a

reworked critical theory, based upon Adorno and Horkheimer's uptake of Marx, but modified in significant ways. Habermas is critical of Adorno and Horkheimer relying too heavily on Marx, particularly in the emphasis upon the economic base of society: the cost of this preoccupation is to ignore the social superstructure. Habermas proposes a critical theory which regards the social structure of society as being its main object of concern; in this respect he is more a follower of Weber than of Marx. The Weberian theme of status and interest groups also receives certain prominence in the work of Habermas. Rather than seeing capitalism as being an historical entity comprising a struggle between two great classes, Habermas translates this into an ideal typical situation where capitalism and bureaucratic socialism are the two main ideal typical forms of society. In each of these, the structure of society is composed of struggles between competing status groups. Habermas does not abandon Marxist analysis, he merely dilutes it: for Habermas, there is a ruling class, but the force it exerts over society is mediated by all the members of society. A key theme in Habermas's work is that of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the arena in which social and economic structures interpenetrate with our consciousness and actions. Lifeworld is what is behind our conscious interpretations of the world, our *weltanschauung*. Material reproduction is still the principal area of conflict in modern societies, but it is by no means the only one. In line with the Marxism of critical theory, Habermas identifies the main problem of social dissatisfaction as being that of alienation, where the lifeworlds of members of society are distorted by the operations of the capitalist (or bureaucratic socialist) state. These distortions must be removed for society to become more rational, and it is towards this end that Habermas directs his attention.

Firstly, Habermas adopts a particular concept of rationality and rationalization. Habermas notes that the rationality of science, expounded by Enlightenment thinkers and social scientists alike as being the way to answer all questions, can not answer practical questions. The technical/scientific approach can only solve technical/scientific issues. What is needed is a form of practical rationality that can be used to link theory to praxis: this is what critical theory should in fact be, and any attempt to reduce problems of social action to technical issues (as is done by Parsons on one hand, and the Frankfurt School on the other) is a depoliticization of the problems of society, and also an expression of an ideological position. For Habermas, science and technology are in themselves ideological social practices, although the rules they embody need not be so. The concept of rationalization and rationality that Habermas uses is based upon that of Max Weber: rationalization as the extension of the areas of society subject to rational decision (Habermas, 1971: chapter 6).

Habermas presents us with a critical theory, where the task of the social scientist is to analyse meaningful social action. The systems theory he presents us with is one based upon a Marxist analysis, where market relations are the main source of exploitation and power, but, unlike Marx and the economic reductionism he embodies, the forces of production are located in the growth of human knowledge. Social progress is not, therefore, located in control of work practices and the products of labour, but in the possibilities of learning and the expansion of knowledge. Emancipation will result from this: the greater institutionalization of reason against the use of arbitrary power. The tasks of Habermas's social science are similar to those of Weber: to understand meaningful social action, and to promote reason and the

rationalization of society. The theorist is thus an active tool in the changing of society. Habermas, again showing his Weberian heritage, sees the need for a historical perspective in the understanding of modern society, and modernity as a whole.

#### Modernization as rationalization.

The history of modernity is that of a world historical process of rationalization. In a similar way to Weber, Habermas sees modernity as beginning with the overcoming of tradition by rationality, the process of disenchantment, and the subsequent growth of rationality in all aspects of human action. As modernity proceeds, rationalization spreads through both the structures of society and through the consciousness of people. Rationalization, in this Weberian form, can be either positive or negative: positive rationalization takes the form of disenchantment, or demystification, and it is a progressive and civilizing force. Negative rationalization is manifested as the Iron Cage of bureaucracy, and capitalism. Habermas sees Weber as being a 'despairing liberal' with regard to this issue, and, although agreeing that the Iron Cage will be present in late capitalism, suggests that this need not be the case if one looks further than just the rational action of entrepreneurial activities. The process of modernization will proceed as long as society chooses rationality as its organising principle, and this process will lead to an emancipatory effect. In the case of the human sciences, which is where Habermas notes the slide away from modernity and into the dead end of postmodernity, their history is equally one of the gradual progress of Reason throughout the disciplines. However, rather than this process continuing to the present day, Habermas identifies a number of wrong turnings that have been made on the path of modernity: it is these false turnings that have lead the human sciences to the

postmodern conclusion (Habermas, 1987b: 83-105). Those that have turned away from the project of modernity are labelled 'neoconservative' by Habermas, who principally identifies Foucault. Foucault, because of his prediction of the death of the subject, is seen as being the prime mover away from subject centred philosophy by Habermas (Habermas, 1987b), and he traces the line of reasoning back from Foucault to Nietzsche. But for Habermas, there is no point to the study of society without the human component. To escape from modernity is to open the doors to unreason and totalitarianism: it is to deny all the positive changes that have occurred in human society in recent times. However, Habermas does agree with Foucault that a subject-centred philosophy is unworkable, but only up to a point. Habermas proposes that the study of society should be based upon intersubjectivity rather than subjectivity, as it is intersubjectivity that gives meaning to the world. Habermas arrives at this conclusion from his use of Wittgenstein, and Wittgenstein's idea of meaning as being contingent upon use. Habermas seeks to rescue the project of modernity in the study of society by means of a theory of communication.

What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus. (Habermas, 1972: 314)

The intersubjective nature of language and communication, and thus all other forms of human action, offer Habermas the way in which he can suggest a reconstruction of the project of modernity in the human sciences, and maintain the ongoing rationalization process as a principle for the progress of society. Put simply, Habermas proposes a social



system based upon communicative clarity.

Habermas uses the example of psychoanalysis as a metaphor for all communication in society. He wants to show that rationality and irrationality are present in all forms of ordinary social interaction, and the model of psychoanalysis illuminates this in that it is a structured form of communication between speaking and acting subjects that will lead to a form of emancipation: in psychoanalysis, this is manifested as patient autonomy through rational control of their life. The critical reflection involved in the psychoanalysis process is extrapolated by Habermas to encompass all communication, and it is the way in which a subject will evaluate the world through appraisal of knowledge. However good this critical process on the part of the subject may be, it may not be correct: communication can be systematically distorted. The metaphor of psychoanalysis illuminates this again: the psychoanalyst may be required to explain the distortions that the patient can not see through. These are not misunderstandings, but distortions that actually reflect the distortions of social structures. Moving back to the world of ordinary speech, most disagreements should be resolved easily by the use of rationality: this is not possible in the case of systematically distorted communication as the relevant information for a rational analysis is distorted or occluded.

...communicative competence does mean the mastery of the means of construction necessary for the establishment of an ideal speech situation. No matter how the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding may be deformed, the *design* of an ideal speech situation is necessarily implied in the structure of potential speech, since all speech, even of intentional deception, is orientated towards the idea of truth. (Habermas, 1970b: 372)

The ideal speech situation that Habermas is seeking, and this is the ideal speech situation that will resolve the problems of society and project society forward through further rationalization of the lifeworld and social structures, is thus a situation that is nascent in all speech situations, distorted or not. It rests on a form of intersubjectivity based upon mutual understanding, and embodies a form of social discussion that will apply concepts such as truth, justice, and freedom. This social discussion which will reach conclusions about these concepts will, in the ideal speech situation, be through unconstrained consensus. The concepts themselves are based upon rational criteria, and as such can be defined and applied rationally, given that no communicative distortions, or restrictions are applied. The ideal speech situation is the goal of a critical theory of society, and is the goal of the project of modernity: it can not be achieved by abandoning rationality and reason, or giving up on ideas of progress and the possibility of emancipation.

#### Habermas and Postmodernity.

Regardless of the debate between modernity and postmodernity, Habermas identifies a number of problems in the organisation and structure of contemporary society. The public sphere, the scene through recent (modern) history of the debates about the legitimation of social and political action has become degraded. Where the public sphere served to provide open ended discussion of important issues in the past, it has become, in an age of mass affluence and mass democracy, a space where the mass media 'manipulates' public opinion, and where the level of participation in political discussions has been falling off. This is, for Habermas, a feature of the irrationality that needs to be corrected to solve some of the problems of contemporary society. The management of

politics by the system can only be countered by the forming of rational consensus amongst the populace, effectively an injection of Reason to counter the irrationality in the body politic.

Habermas does not offer his readers rapid solutions to the problems of societal organisation. What he claims to offer is an understanding of why particular symptoms have appeared, and what the healthy state of society should look like. The path between the two states of being remains somewhat obscure, although Habermas does give guidelines as to how the transition should be achieved. Contemporary society (postmodern society according to others) is characterised by crises in the two major components of society - lifeworld and system - and the relationship between the two is highly dysfunctional. This is manifested in the rise of new social movements, such as green politics and environmental pressure groups, that display the fraying of the edge between system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1981a). The only solution for society, according to Habermas, is to restate the rationality that should be present in the course a society is taking, and this can be effected by promoting communicative clarity. It is a call for an open society, where the ideology embodied in technocratic consciousness and its concomitant politicization of science and technology is countered by a truly rational science (Habermas, 1971: 112-113). Modernism has become alienated from itself through the dilution of its content by the degradation of the public sphere: it can no longer ground itself effectively. As well as these internal problems, the neo-conservatives are seeking to destroy modernity completely, which will destroy the possibilities for an emancipated society in the future.

Rorty.

Splitting the difference between Lyotard and Habermas.

Both Habermas and Lyotard agree that there are serious problems with contemporary society. For Lyotard, it is not so much that the metanarrative based accounts of the world are lies: it is simply that they are misleading and promote misunderstanding. The commodification of knowledge, and the relocating of knowledge as the principle stake in the competition for power has led to knowledge being denied to many people. Politics have degenerated in recent years into a number of almost interchangeable narratives, backed up with spurious metanarrative justifications. Science in postmodernity is now an enterprise that legitimates itself by paralogy<sup>15</sup>, but still claims to be a grand empirical project, and still denies the value of narratives, even though they are used by scientists to explain their work to themselves and others. There is a repressive system at work in society, one which promotes conformity at the expense of difference, and one that threatens the individual that does not conform with terror.

Habermas sees the problems of contemporary society as being caused by a number of different factors. The economic system that operates in Western societies is by no means a rational one. The irrationality of the system, and the rational justifications which governments give to this leads to conflicts arising between the system of the social world, and the lifeworld of the individual: the disparities between the two are widening, and the rectification for this is a further rationalisation program, coupled with a moving towards a more efficient communicative system. An ideal, or at least better, society can be formed out of the principles of modernity, if the project is stuck with. To abandon the project of modernity would be to capitulate to the forces of unreason

and to throw away all the liberalising reforms that modern societies have made. Things may not be great, but they can be changed for the better given the right conditions.

It is interesting that although Habermas and Lyotard take fundamentally different theoretical standpoints, they both seek a resolution to conflict through the way that interpersonal communications operate, although the ways they seek are quite different. They also concur in identifying knowledge as a major tool in the operation of power. Both writers point to a general loss of meaning in society: in Habermas's case it is the loss of meaning that occurs when things that are valued no longer coincide with the values that people hold. In Lyotard's case, it is the loss of meaning that occurs when the explanations for the actions of the state no longer have any internal coherence. However, they are opposed on almost all theoretical points: the problems they identify are in many ways the same, but the solutions they find are diametrically opposed.

The work of Richard Rorty is in many ways an attempt to claim the middle ground between Lyotard and Habermas. Rather than seeking the anarchist path of Lyotard, or the functionalist path of Habermas, Rorty proposes a solution to both the societal problems of postmodernity, and the problems of producing a workable social theory through the notion of community and communitarianism. We should note that Rorty is approaching the questions of social organisation and theorising about society from a very different perspective to either Habermas or Lyotard. Habermas and Lyotard have a common heritage in terms of the thinkers that they base much of their work upon: Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Wittgenstein, Foucault. Rorty sees himself as part of the American pragmatist school, a tradition that he traces back to the work of William James and John

Dewey. Of course, Rorty does consider the work of the European thinkers mentioned above, but the bias in his work is away from the large scale social theory of Marx, and towards the language-based theories of analytical philosophy. It is important to bear in mind that the principle concern of Rorty is not social theory but philosophy. Habermas and Lyotard, but particularly Habermas, are social theorists, concerned with mapping out the way that social relations and institutions work in society. Rorty is concerned with the ways in which a non-foundational philosophy can be configured in the late twentieth century, although this does not necessarily reduce the value of his work on postmodern society. Before looking in detail at Rorty's theoretical response to the problems of postmodernity, I will review his response to the discussion between Lyotard and Habermas.

In Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity, Rorty sets out the main points of disagreement between Habermas and Lyotard, before attempting to 'split the difference' (Rorty, 1985a: 174) between them. The main disagreement rests on the nature of social theory, rather than the state of society at present. Habermas and Lyotard cannot reconcile their differences because to do so would be to collapse the rest of their theory. The idea of what theory is, and how it is to be conceived, is thus the stumbling block between the foundational and anti-foundational approach.

Anything that Habermas will count as retaining a 'theoretical approach' will be counted by an incredulous Lyotard as a 'metanarrative'. Anything that abandons such an approach will be counted by Habermas as 'neoconservative', because it drops the notions which have been used to justify the various reforms which have marked the history of the Western democracies since

the Enlightenment, and which are still being used to criticise the socio-economic institutions of both the Free and Communist worlds. 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, 1985a: 162)

Habermas, according to Rorty, wants to preserve the notion of scientific inquiry, and the concept of scientific rationality. Rationality will give the answers to questions of truth and validity. Lyotard responds that science is not the same as it used to be: it is no longer the empirical process that it once was. Science now is legitimised not by theory but by paralogy. It is an endeavour that has to describe itself by reference to narratives, while decrying narrativity for being unscientific. Lyotard seeks to remove the status that science has as a privileged form of inquiry. Given these conditions, the link between science and politics, and the reliance of politics upon quasi-scientific justification could be broken, thus freeing the ordinary narratives of everyday life from their subservience to metanarratives. Rorty sees Lyotard as being mistaken here. He certainly agrees with Lyotard's point about the strict interlinkage between science and politics, and stresses the importance of the point:

... the point I claimed that Lyotard shared with Feyerabend and Hesse - the point that there are no interesting epistemological differences between the aims and procedures of scientists and those of politicians - is absolutely fundamental. the recovery of a Baconian, non-Cartesian attitude towards science would permit us to dispense with the idea of an 'internal theoretical dynamic' in science, a dynamic which is something more than the

'anything goes that works' spirit which unites Bacon and Feyerabend. (Rorty, 1985a: 170)

But Lyotard's claim that scientific activity has somehow changed as society has entered postmodernity is quite mistaken. Although uncredited, Lyotard is making a veiled reference to the work of Thomas Kuhn in his analysis of science, but misinterprets Kuhn's thesis of scientific revolutions. Kuhn shows that the notion of empirical science is disrupted by a series of revolutions, followed by a long phase of normal science (Kuhn, 1970). Lyotard implies that empiricism has been the norm for all of science up to the point in the 1950s when postmodernity began and science began to legitimate itself by parody, and to take on more revolutionary aspects. Rather than looking for the disjunctions between normal and revolutionary science, Lyotard suggests that science should just be revolutionary, or in a state of perpetual revolution.

To say that 'science aims' at piling parody upon parody is like saying that 'politics aims' at piling revolution upon revolution. No inspection of the concerns of contemporary science or of contemporary politics could show anything of the sort. The most that could be shown is that talk of the aims of either is not particularly useful. (Rorty, 1985a: 163)

Rorty is keen to show that he and Habermas share much common ground. Habermas identifies an internal theoretical dynamic that propels the sciences to create new forms of knowledge. This is translated by Rorty, who wishes to retain the idea of progress without actually using such a term, into a social practice - an evolutionary drive towards correspondence with reality. In this case, scientists do not, as Habermas suggests, seek to tie their new knowledge to old theories, but try to link them together with other theories to effect a better understanding



of the world (Rorty, 1987b). Likewise, Habermas's conceptualisation of intersubjectivity as a workable solution to the problem of the subject is translated by Rorty into being a mistaken version of his own communitarianism. Lyotard's reliance upon the individual is too dry for Rorty, as it fails to include any notion of the collective, of a concept of 'we', a point that Rorty claims is prevalent in much of contemporary French thought, notable the work of Foucault (Rorty, 1985a: 172).

Both Habermas and Lyotard, along with most other Western social theorists since the time of Kant, have made a vital mistake, according to Rorty, and that is to be preoccupied with the notion of the tradition of philosophy, and the need for it to be 'overcome, unmasked, or genealogized' (Ibid.). Habermas and Lyotard are both overly concerned with rewriting the tradition of social theory to see that the sequence of philosophers through modernity is a distraction from the history of concrete social engineering. Rorty claims that it is this idea of social engineering that is important to social theory, not where the wrong turnings may or may not have been made in the history of philosophy. Continuing in this pragmatist vein, Rorty describes the way in which Lyotard and Habermas can be restructured to make them fit in with such a program of constructive social engineering:

We could agree with Lyotard that we need no more metanarratives, but with Habermas that we need less dryness. We could agree with Lyotard that studies of a transhistorical subject are of little use in reinforcing our sense of identification with our community, while insisting upon the importance of that sense. (Rorty, 1985a: 173)

Where Lyotard makes such a claim about the importance of 'reinforcing our sense of identification with our community' is unclear: Rorty is far

too keen to show that Lyotard is really a supporter of Rorty's own theory of communitarianism.

As for Rorty's own solution to the problems facing postmodern society, and the possibility of a postmodern theory, many of the key features have already been mentioned above. Rorty offers a prescription for the restructuring of social life for the better, which he calls 'postmodernist bourgeois liberalism', and later 'communitarianism'. The postmodern component of this comes from Rorty's agreement with Lyotard about the current distrust of metanarratives visible in society.

These metanarratives are stories which purport to justify loyalty to, or breaks with, certain contemporary communities, but which are neither historical narratives about what these or other communities have done in the past nor scenarios about what they might do in the future. (Rorty, 1983: 585)

'Bourgeois' is used by Rorty as a marker to show that the conditions giving rise to the practices and institutions of contemporary society are only possible under certain historical and economic conditions. 'Liberalism' highlights the need for social action to be responsible to society as a whole, and the need for identification with the whole of one's community. Rorty considers many intellectuals as having marginalised themselves from the communities of which they were once members, due to the lack of any identification, or due to the need to identify some 'supercommunity' such as the whole of humanity. This attempt is a Kantian option, but one that will not succeed, as there can be no such thing as human dignity that does not spring from some specific community. It is the Hegelian tradition that seeks the identification of humanity as a biological rather than a moral notion, and it is this line of reasoning that Rorty promotes.

It is the responsibility of intellectuals to promote the idea of community, and to identify with existing communities, and this can only be done by changing the vocabulary that we use to describe the world around us.

Once we realise that progress, for the community as for the individual, is a matter of using new phrases as well as of arguing from premises phrased in old words, we realise that a critical vocabulary which revolves around notions like 'rational', 'criteria', 'argument', 'foundation' and 'absolute' is badly suited to the relation between old and new. (Rorty, 1986c: 10)

The idea of philosophical foundations will disappear when this vocabulary is changed. Such foundations presuppose what topics and arguments are on the agenda in democratic societies, and to achieve any degree of liberalisation, all topics must be allowed to be discussed. The removal of such foundations from a society will lead to the understanding that a community need only live up to its own traditions, not to a moral law imposed from the outside, or from history. A rhetoric of liberalism can be built upon the work of Kuhn, Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Davidson, but without the vocabulary of the old philosophical foundations it will not provide any community with any way of proving a moral superiority over any other community. Any attempt to do so would be futile, as the argument would run up against the wall of vocabulary: one community's vocabulary of liberalism against another's. Rorty provides a useful outline of how societies will look given the prescriptions of postmodernist bourgeois liberalism are achieved.

An ideally liberal society is one in which whatever is both desirable and possible can be achieved by persuasion rather than by force, reform rather than revolution, by the free and open

encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions from, and examples of, new practices. But this is to say that a liberal society is one which has no ideal except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome. It is a *societas* rather than an *universitas* precisely because it has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for other people only by words, and not deeds. It is a society whose hero is the strong poet and the revolutionary because it recognises that it is what it is, has the morality it has, speaks the language it does, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man, but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did. (Rorty, 1986c: 13-14)

Rorty is not so foolhardy as to suggest that this form of life is just around the corner. What he does propose is that it is worth striving for an ideal, and that the intellectual must play a part in activating this particular way forward, and, particularly, must play a part in the defence and promotion of freedom.

### Conclusion

#### Postmodern Society.

During the last 150 years there has been an unprecedented democratisation of political life throughout the Western world. Modernity has been an age of advancing the needs of the state and society through the public sphere. At the same time, the growth of capitalism, and the consolidation of the idea of a ruling class controlling the means of production has been advanced. But for all the democratisation that has

taken place, Sheldon Wolin points out that public participation in political affairs has never been so low. The exercise of political rights is now seen as boring, burdensome, and lacking significance.

To be a citizen does not appear an important role nor political participation an intrinsic good. ...By reducing politics to a cheap commodity, democracy has seemingly contributed to the dilution of politics. (Wolin, 1961: 353)

Lyotard, Habermas and Rorty each present us with a different version of how postmodern society has come into being, and how it can be changed for the better. For Lyotard, the way to improve society is by giving the public free access to the databases of the institutions of the state, and to rid society of metanarratives: all language games would thus be of equal status at any given time. For Habermas, the project of modernity must be reinstated, and a situation of communicative clarity brought about, so that all discourse will be equally intelligible. For Rorty, communities must be turned into the ideal liberal institutions that they are capable of being: they will then be able to progress through a growth of knowledge, and produce greater democracies based upon genuine control of the instruments of the state by the people. These major changes to social structure have a common factor; in each case, the social theorists rely upon the people of a given society to effect change in particular directions. In the case of Lyotard and Rorty, an elite, be it the legislators of society in the case of Lyotard, or the intellectuals in the case of Rorty, will impose the necessary preconditions upon people. In the case of Habermas it is not exactly clear how the necessary preconditions for change would be arrived at, but the process in all three cases requires major alterations in the daily lives of most people in Western societies.

The feasibility of such occurrences is not questioned at all by Lyotard, Habermas, or Rorty, indeed in the case of the work of Rorty the possibility of change is hardly even touched upon. And yet, it is surely the most apposite of questions to ask what the likelihood is that such large-scale social transformations will come about. And if these visions of ideal, or at least better, futures have not been made seriously, then why have they been made at all?

There would appear to be something in the way that social theory, be it modern or postmodern, is performed that requires of the writer to make claims about the way that society can be improved. It is possible that the tradition of Western social thought has left us with a strain of utopian thought. Even the most pessimistic of social theorists, such as Max Weber or Friedrich Nietzsche, will include strategies for the betterment of society or the individual. In the cases of the social theorists discussed above, we are faced with very pessimistic analyses of the social world (Lyotard and Habermas) which do not seem to admit the possibility of rectification, and yet the discussion of the redemption of society is included. This is a rhetorical strategy that the authors use to legitimate their work: it makes it worthy in that the author can be seen to be providing useful strategies that have been constructed out of the fragments of society that have been analysed. This gives an optimistic aspect to the study of social theory, and a subtext that suggests that the furtherance of social investigation must be continued as a viable project. And yet, this rhetoric is not sufficient to convince the reader that there is a solution to the crises which emerge from the writings of social theorists, or indeed that any rectification can be achieved. This rhetoric, with its subtext of the

need to continue investigation, is, of course, a metanarrative of sorts. Not the grand form that promises to explain everything in the world, but a metanarrative of emancipation nevertheless. The question, however, of whether or not such a rhetoric is appropriate in the present circumstances, remains.

Sheldon Wolin's analysis of the decline of political participation, made in the early 1960's, is developed sociologically by Zygmunt Bauman in his book Legislators and Interpreters, and is set in the context of the decline of modernity and the rise of postmodernity. According to Bauman, the postmodern age is upon us, and however distasteful it may be to a number of social theorists, it cannot be ignored. Bauman charts the rise of postmodernity against the change in role and status of the intellectual in society, arguing that in modernity, intellectuals fulfilled the role of legislators. Intellectuals as legislators act as arbitrators of the controversies of opinions, and, after resolving such controversies with respect to social order, produce authoritative statements that become binding for the whole of society. These statements are legitimized by the public understanding that the intellectual has a superior access to knowledge. The postmodern view of the intellectual is characterized by the metaphor of the interpreter. The postmodern intellectual strategy involves the translation of the statements of one tradition so that they can be understood in the context of another tradition. The transfer between different systems of knowledge facilitates the better communication of different participants in society, and aims to prevent the distortion of meaning. The postmodern role, claims Bauman, is not a refusal of the modern role, but rather a continuation of it, as legitimation resides in the same place, i.e. the professional authority of the intellectual. The difference in roles

arises from the abandonment of universalistic ambition of the intellectuals own tradition. The leveling of the various intellectual traditions caused by this abandoning of universalistic ambition denies the possibility of legislating over controversies of opinion, and leaves the postmodern intellectual in a position of offering explanations of meaning rather than statements of truth.

Bauman compares the modern style and strategy with that of the postmodern alternative which has, in part at least, attempted to supplant it. This analysis identifies a crisis in social theory that is only partially resolved by current social theory. The crisis is that of finding a useful causal explanation for contemporary social phenomena when the principal agent of historical change, the proletariat, has disappeared in recognizable form from Western societies. Modern social theory relies upon an historical agent that is an actor involved in the rationalization of social life, through all aspects of life, an individual who has the intention of producing a better form of society for all its members. Bauman dubs this abstract figure the 'Puritan'.

The Puritan stood for this 'inner-directed', self-controlled man which the intellectuals, from the perspective of their own mode of life, construed as the central actor of a reason-guided society and the product of such a society. (Bauman, 1987: 150)

Whether or not this figure of the Puritan ever existed is a moot point; the contemporary reality, says Bauman, is that of consumers whose principal concern is to pursue personal gratification through the consumption of commodities. This is not an overnight change, but rather the end product of the rationalization process of modernity. The market has become the major mechanism of societal reproduction, taking over many of the roles of the political system. As the authority of the market has grown, so the authority of the state has declined, leaving



the state with a role subservient to that of the market and comprising simply organisational and policing duties to enhance the dominance of the market. As the global project of rationalization declines, the concepts of rational values and purpose of modern society are replaced by an ethic of private consumption and increasing commodification. Rationality still exists, but it is of the petty individual sort, rather than the rationality of practical reason, the drive for greater satisfaction through the acquisition of commodities rather than through personal freedom and autonomy. The rise of the consumer has drastically changed the attitude of the intellectual strata towards the proletariat; even to the point where the poor are largely ignored. Unlikely carriers of rationality at best, they now seem to be concerned with liberation only through the acquisition of wealth. The rich, on the other hand, are as free as they want to be, having been able to buy for themselves the autonomy that they desire. With the state as an instrument of commodification, the market as the principle mechanism of social integration, and the agent of historical change missing from the stage, Bauman concludes that:

The project of modernity, in other words, has failed. Or, rather, its implementation took a wrong turn. It does not mean necessarily that the project itself was abortive or doomed to failure. (Bauman, 1987: 191)

Social theorists are now divided into two camps: those who agree that the project of modernity has failed (postmodern style), and those who see a possible redemption for it. Bauman outlines the strategies of each of these groups, although it is clear from his analysis that the distinction between the modern and the postmodern is not a hard and fast one. The postmodern style of theorising a way out of the crisis takes a number of forms, but all reduce to the common denominator of

abandoning any kind of universalistic theory. The strategies of the intellectual are based on the rejection of legitimating and foundational analysis and confining their discourse to the realm of intellectual spirit.

Bauman's account of the 'modern style' offers a different role for the intellectual, that of a reinstated legislator. Here modernity is seen as still having potential that remains untapped: the intellectual may save modernity through discursive redemption. The proper location for the values of self-perfection, autonomy, and authenticity is in the realm of public discourse, and the reinstatement of these in their proper place constitutes discursive redemption. By bringing these values back into the public sphere, the limitations of instrumental reason and the superiority of practical reason will be exposed. This will allow a reconstructed rational model of society to become the context in which personal values will be judged, and such a rational system will replace the commodification system of the market. The market's hold over the political system must be replaced with public debate to effect the legitimation of the social system.

And thus the conditions for emancipation, promised by the project of modernity, will be created. (Bauman, 1987: 192)

The modern programme that Bauman outlines is strongly reminiscent of that of Habermas, and, although Bauman claims to offer no judgement of the advantages of the modern over the postmodern style of theory (1987: 4), it appears that the modern alternative does at least face up to the problems of contemporary society.

We are faced with an ever-increasing withdrawal of democratic freedom in Western societies where the privatisation and commodification of all aspects of social life are only too visible. The decline of state

socialist countries in Eastern Europe has opened the way for the eradication of socialism from the vocabulary of contemporary societies. Admittedly, the prospect of global war may have receded, but in its wake comes a uniform global village, governed by the owners of capital, and policed by an expansionist United States. The decline of modernity has prompted social theory to produce the concept of postmodernity and postmodern social theory. This is exemplified by Lyotard with his anarchistic and ultimately nihilistic version of the social world, and Rorty with his schematic proposals for community action programs. Habermas may have failed to notice that a program of a global rationalization based upon rationality and Reason is no longer a viable concept, but he has not forgotten that there are many people living in Western societies who are poor, oppressed and brutalised by a system that will not even allow the concept of genuine freedom to be discussed publicly.

## CONCLUSION

The postmodern condition identified by Lyotard has made major changes to the way that social theory can be construed. The crisis of narratives, and the contemporary incredulity to metanarratives, gives us a new key to understanding society. Yet, as we can see from the topics investigated by Lyotard, this is only a different way of looking at the social world, rather than an identification of new issues and projects for the social theorist. Lyotard's postmodern social theory is an attempt to answer the questions of social order, the appreciation of culture, and the operation of language in society. His method may be new, with its attempt at operationalising language game theory, but the field of investigation is the same as that of the modern social theorist. Indeed, from the discussion of political action in contemporary society, we could suggest that Lyotard has an outdated picture of the social world. Lyotard's discussion of postmodern culture shares a number of similarities with that of Habermas, and Lyotard actually promotes a modern approach to culture; without modernism, culture has no direction. What Lyotard offers the reader is a different way of understanding the problems of contemporary society, and a new strategy for their rectification.

Lyotard's thesis does not present us with the ultimate refutation of metanarrative based discourse, or the perfect argument in favour of a social theory that is based on the pragmatics of everyday life, even if, at first sight, it holds out the promise of doing so. What his writings do show us is the need for a different theory of the way that language operates in society, and the need for a different perspective on the way

that the social world should be interpreted. The conflict between narrative and science is irresolvable, and is so due to the differences in the language dialects spoken by the practitioners of different communities in our society. The problem of essential contestability is compounded by this fact, as there is even less chance of consensus based judgments under such circumstances (see Chapter Two above). We need to become cognisant of this before attempting theory construction in what may or may not be postmodernity. The recognition of different speech communities will require the human sciences to restructure their form of discourse into patterns that allow 'outsiders' access to the information that they wish to propagate, and one would hope that a similar change would take place in the natural sciences. The question of giving the public free access to data banks is secondary to the problem of allowing the public the knowledge to overcome institutionalised dialects.

It is no mere coincidence that Habermas, Rorty, and Lyotard all identify a loss of meaning in the social world, although each gives a different explanation for this. According to Lyotard, a postmodern malaise has set in, where our fatalism is matched by our incredulity. The loss of meaning associated with postmodernity is brought about by the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative. Yet, as Lyotard points out, this need not be the case. He does not advocate the abandonment of science, nor the inflation of narrative to the status of science, but simply the recognition of the relative merits of both forms. A consequence of this would be the reinstatement of a powerful tool of analysis to the human sciences, one that, admittedly, can not provide the hard and fast answers that many of the human science disciplines have long searched for with little success, but at least a tool that has some

correlation with the workings of human consciousness. The postmodernist project concerning narrative is thus the attempt to show that the human sciences should be about narratives, as well as being narratives themselves. The reflexivity this implies is characteristic of the way that knowledge currently operates, and is reflected in much contemporary art, architecture, and literature. The 'modern' human sciences, with their reliance upon hidden narratives and a metadiscourse inherited from the Enlightenment, offer quasi-scientific accounts of society and culture that are no longer valid. The idea that an 'essential copy' of the social world can be achieved, by this method or by any other, will only force narratives, or science, into a role that they can not sustain<sup>6</sup>.

It is obvious from the uptake of the issue of narrativity that such investigations are not merely confined to writers attempting an understanding of a phenomenon called postmodernity, but it is Lyotard who makes the strongest moves in this direction. Without a recognition of the way that metanarratives are used to enforce a particular order, a resurrection of narrative forms will be impractical. The entry of societies into the computer age could have unforeseen negative consequences for large numbers of people who will have no access to the means, and language, of resistance. In this situation, the resurrection of morality and the virtues of the past will simply not be relevant, as such issues will not be on the agenda.

The abandonment of the project of modernity, advocated by Lyotard, will have significant and far reaching consequences for both society and social theory. Society will no longer have overarching metanarratives to obscure the real workings of social institutions, but government will no longer be responsible for improving the condition of the whole of society. Social theory will no longer be hampered with unwieldy universal

theories, but will no longer attempt to explain all of social life either. Habermas offers a strong defence of modernity, for both theoretical and moral reasons, resulting in a convincing argument in favour of the need for a social theory that is both critical and reflective of the problems and needs of society. The postmodernity debate has brought the conflict between the foundationalists and the antifoundationalists to the fore, and has highlighted the need for a new approach to the social world. Habermas agrees that subject centred philosophy must be abandoned, but does not go as far as Lyotard in doing so. Both Habermas and Lyotard look to language theory to base their social theory upon, although Lyotard's version of Wittgenstein, as we have seen, is somewhat inaccurate. Lyotard and Habermas both base their cultural analysis on a formal understanding of avant garde art and aesthetics: their cultural theory is marginalised, looking towards high culture and away from the popular culture which is ever expanding in high technology societies. An analysis of the postmodernity debate reveals social theory to be at a crossroads, where it can choose between a critical and self-reflective theory of society, or an antifoundational individualistic appraisal of the condition of society. This is the real choice offered between the modern and the postmodern perspectives. The choice between a modern or a postmodern society can not be made by social theorists, but the form of analysis of society, modern or postmodern, can be made by social theorists.

Ultimately the question of whether postmodernity is an actual, real, or new state of affairs, or merely a slightly different phase in the culture of modernity, is redundant. What really matters is whether the postmodern perspective that Lyotard proposes as the way that we should

interpret the social world, is useful or not. He has expanded the idea of the narrative-science split to a dichotomy of everyday speech versus metanarrative constructions that comprise science, politics, social theory, and all other foundational discourses. Whether this can be effected by, for example, attempting a restructuring of the human sciences, or the workings of government, is another matter. But it is important, for it highlights what is happening to the patterns of communication in our society, and the way that individuals will understand their own position in a social system. And it shows some of the potential perils that technology could introduce or heighten; mystification and obscurantism are not the principles of science by any means, and few scientists would want to be associated with such a project.

Finally, the legitimation of the social order rests upon the stories we are told, tell each other, and recount to ourselves, about it. As Nietzsche said;

That my life has no aim is evident even from the accidental nature of its origin; that *I can posit an aim for myself* is another matter. But a state has no aim; we alone give it this aim or that. (Nietzsche, 1954: 40)



## FOOTNOTES

- 1 The degree to which society is seen to need salvation recedes as we proceed from Marx to Parsons. Marx described society's salvation as occurring through revolution; Durkheim through collective consciousness; Parsons through the ordering power of collective norms and values. The modern strategy proposed by Habermas is discussed in Chapter Four.
- 2 These terms designate the two broad trends in contemporary social theory: anti-foundational theory is set in a context of the rejection of generating mechanisms to explain social action, and the rejection of a metanarrative of progress to explain historic change. Such accounts have focussed on the key issue of language as the principal mode of inquiry, explanation, and basis of social action.
- 3 In the cited passage, Vico shows that metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony are common to both prose and verse.
- 4 It should be noted at this point that the strong separation made here between these forms of discourse is somewhat artificial as there are forms of discourse that cross the boundary of science of narrative without being metanarrativistic in the sense that Lyotard uses the term, for example astrology.
- 5 Nietzsche's theory of the narrativistic self is brought to light in the study by A. Nehamus Nietzsche: Life as Literature. Goffman's version of the self is best stated in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. It should be noted that MacIntyre has deep reservations about the narrative selfhood models offered by both Nietzsche and Goffman. see After Virtue chapter 9.

- 6 A similar problem faced modern architecture in the 1970's and resulted in the growth of postmodern architecture. See Chapter Three below.
- 7 Foucault's writings on power and knowledge are spread throughout his *oeuvre*, but the clearest exposition is in Foucault, 1981.
- 8 we could rename this phenomena of describing the boundaries of science the function of the paradigm of legitimate science, that is the combination of memory and presuppositions. See Kuhn (1970), particularly chapter 4.
- 9 The shift from public to private funding in the public sphere, and privatisation of public services is discussed in Chapter Four. In the field of arts sponsorship, British government funding has dwindled to ridiculous levels: 'In some years, the Grateful Dead has spent as much on living British composers as the Arts Council of Great Britain'. (The Independent 22/6/91: 60)
- 10 The principal exponent of postmodern literature, according to Ihab Hassan, is James Joyce. See Hassan 1971 & 1975.
- 11 Jencks gives a very precise date for the 'death' of modern architecture:
- 'Happily, we can date the death of modern architecture to a precise moment in time. ...Modern Architecture died in St. Louis Missouri on July 15th, 1972, at 3.32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite'. (Jencks, 1977: 9)
- The Pruitt-igoe housing scheme, designed in the style of Le Corbusier, and winner of architectural awards, was run down, vandalised and dangerous. A task force sent in by the local authorities to find out what the residents wanted to be done to



- improve the area were confronted by angry citizens asking for their houses to be demolished (Wolfe, 1981: 82).
- 12 This occurred in Newcastle in the Byker Wall project (1974), designed by Ralph Erskine.
- 13 While Jencks remains attached to the project of modernity, he has dropped one major component of it, namely the possibility of social improvement through the production of a better built environment. At a time of rising homelessness and low public funding of housing, Jencks sees no role for the architect in trying to improve housing conditions for those who cannot afford to buy their own homes. Modern architects such as Le Corbusier have had scorn poured upon their ideas, but at least Le Corbusier had a genuine concern for the plight of people who were either homeless or living in slums (Le Corbusier, 1968).
- 14 Lyotard briefly discusses the narratives offered by French political parties, and concludes that the narratives of the left and right are interchangeable (Lyotard, 1989: 122).
- 15 The definition of paralogy given by Lyotard differs from the standard usage: paralogy as false reasoning. Lyotard suggests that paralogy is reasoning, to provide legitimation, that is based upon local considerations and the contingency of the language game that the legitimation is necessary for. Lyotard is making a connection with Feyerabend's motto 'anything goes'. See Lyotard, 1984: chapter 14.
- 16 The concept of the 'essential copy' is taken from N. Bryson's Vision and Painting (Bryson, 1983). The implications for social theory of Bryson's thesis are brought out in Velody, 1989, and Manning, 1989.

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