

Culture & Identity

Critical Theories

Ross Abbinnett

Culture and Identity

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SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 2003

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SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

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2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42 Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 100 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 6518 1
ISBN 0 7619 6519 X (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number available

Typeset by TW Typesetting, Plymouth, Devon
Printed in India at Gopsons Papers Ltd, Noida

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the following people. To Sian, for her willingness to proof read the endless 'draft copies' I produced. To Keith Tester, for his sound advice on the scope of the project. To Chris and Robert Rojek at Sage Publications, for their help in getting the manuscript into production. Thanks are also due to the School of Cultural Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University, whose funding of my recent sabbatical allowed me finally to complete this book.

For my parents

There is change, and departure: but there is also help
when least looked for from the strangers of the day, and
hiding, out among the accidents of this drifting Humility,
never quite to be extinguished, a few small chances for
mercy . . .

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

Introduction

I

Why are the ideas of culture and identity important, and why do they demand our attention at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Well, to begin with, they are not simply abstract, philosophical constructions; for the 'self' who participates in everyday social interaction can do so only through its recognition of certain cultural norms, values and ideals. The 'I' who will be the focus of my analysis, therefore, is not the 'existential' being who is permanently embroiled in questions of authenticity: rather, it is the self that emerges through the conflicts and negotiations which define the realm of human culture. In a sense, then, the whole of the discussion that will take place in the book concerns the relationship between the self, conceived as a reflexive agent, the other, who comes as a demand for care and responsibility, and the established structures of social, cultural and economic recognition.

In general, 'post-Enlightenment' philosophy has characterized this relationship in terms of the 'performativity' of the subject: that is, *the degree to which the person who is engaged in the substantive culture of his or her nation state is able to exercise a critical reflection upon its established structures of collective identity*. At one end of the scale, Jürgen Habermas has claimed that the possibility of such judgements arises from the communicative structure of language: for as linguistically competent beings, each of us is able to recognize how the structural organization of social relationships has tended to suppress the free discussion of the ends of modernity. And so for Habermas, the emergence of political groups based around single issues like ecology or animal rights signifies the emergence of an increasingly 'reflexive' public sphere. More conventionally Marxist accounts of the economics of cultural identity, however, have concentrated on the way in which 'the individual' has been reproduced as part of the masses: Benjamin, Adorno and Jameson have all presented compelling accounts of the impact of new image technologies on the reflective autonomy of the subject. Thus, if there is to be a political relationship between 'the masses' and the powers which 'massify' them, this must come through a radical critique of the relationship between culture, technology and economy.

The analysis of culture and ideology that has come out of the Frankfurt School, I will argue, is fundamentally important to a proper understanding

of the debates that have arisen from postmodernist theory. For it is only in so far as we have comprehended the massifying power of new media technologies that we can begin to understand the significance of postmodernist ideas like the decentring of the subject, the fracturing of knowledge and the dispersal of the social bond. I will argue that what these ideas contribute to our understanding of the 'place' of the subject within his or her particular culture is an acute sense of the contingency of belonging, and of the necessity of responding to the events of silencing and exclusion through which cultural identity is reproduced. My expositions of Baudrillard, Derrida and Lyotard, then, will concentrate on their accounts of the excessiveness of capital: that is, on the relationship between their respective theories of simulation, *différance* and the sublime, and the possibility of a political response to the infinite amorality of capitalism.

For the moment, however, I need to put the question of culture and identity into a rough theoretical context. Immanuel Kant, in his essay 'What is Enlightenment?', begins his account of political responsibility from the level of moral culture established in bourgeois civil society (Kant, 1991, pp. 54–60).¹ His claim is that once human beings have reached the point at which they are able to exercise their sovereign reason, they are under an obligation to question the traditional forms of religious and political authority which have held power over them. Enlightenment, therefore, is the willingness of an individual to exercise his own judgement in matters of civic responsibility, and to remain faithful to the universal ends of freedom, equality and justice which are proper to human beings as such. A number of important points emerge from this account of Enlightenment. First, the relationship between established forms of cultural identity and the sovereign will of the individual is reflexive; trust, obligation and responsibility are no longer simply habitual relationships. Second, the freedom of the rational will exceeds the immediate demands and satisfactions of the present; the moral stricture is entirely independent of love, friendship and traditional obligations. Third, the nature of this moral stricture is such that it cannot be realized in the 'objective' forms of culture; its demand springs from the idea of a perfect constitution of ends which is always beyond the present organization of law, state and economy. To return to my question about the relationship of the individual to the values of his or her own culture therefore, Kant's essay sets out a discourse of will and reflexive sovereignty which is supposed to exceed every empirical form of work, satisfaction and desire.

It is the possibility of this pure rational necessity of the will which preoccupies Hegel's critique of Kantian morality. In the *Philosophy of Right*, he claims that what is characteristic of the Kantian subject is to be 'inwardly related to itself alone', and that consequently, its judgements about the morality of its actions must remain entirely arbitrary. What Kant presents as the transcendental universality of the moral will, in other words, is a reflection of the amorality of private property relations, for in

so far as a person looks into himself for the pure rational necessity of duty, his *actual* motivations – greed, acquisitiveness, self-love – are legitimized by Kant's abstract idea of moral responsibility. For Hegel, then, the establishment of civil society as the sphere of bourgeois property rights demands that we confront the violent individualism that arises from the unfettering of desire from the restrictions of nature (Hegel, 1967b, pp. 127–8). And so if there is to be a civic virtue which is appropriate to civil society, it must spring from a recognition of the 'external' form of universality embodied in the arbitrary play of greed and self-interest. What Kantian morality does, however, is to reinforce this antagonism by presenting the immorally desirous individual, the 'bourgeois', as the figure of progress and Enlightenment.

In Hegel's thought, the relationship between a 'culture' (Hegel uses the term 'ethical life', which refers to the laws, values, ideals and customs of a particular historical epoch) and the individuals who share it, is conceived in terms of the contradiction between 'spirit' and 'history'. Thus, while it is true that the feudal relationship of Lordship and Bondage supports a kind of ethical life – for each knows his place, his duties, his obligations – it remains inadequate to the ideals of universal recognition. The concrete historical form of this culture therefore, can only produce the essentially mutilated identity of the slave (for the product of his worldly activity is always taken away from him), and the arbitrary and violent authority of the master (Hegel, 1967a, pp. 228–40).

The relationship between reflective subjectivity, abstract individualism and state authority that Hegel presents in the *Philosophy of Right* assumes the abstract freedom of the 'I' whose history is traced in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. The fundamental problem which Hegel confronts in his analysis of civil society therefore is how this concrete person 'who is the object of his particular aims', can become reconciled to the obligations which are proper to the concept of ethical life (Hegel, 1967b, p. 122). In itself, Hegel claims, this pure individualism belongs to the realm of understanding; it approaches the world in terms of instrumental goals whose universal significance remains hidden in the play of acquisitiveness and desire. Ultimately, however, the immanence of the universal becomes explicit in the hard necessity of justice and the law: the very possibility of exercising the rights of bourgeois individualism – producing, trading, exchanging – depends upon a basic respect for law, property and rights of ownership. The second part of Hegel's account of civil society, therefore, describes 'the actuality of the universal of freedom' contained in the economy; that is, the system of law and justice which is to impose proper restraint on the excesses of individual self-seeking (*ibid.*, p. 126).

It is in the nation state that the implicit universality of civil society is made concrete; for with their recognition of the law and the institutional organization of justice, self-conscious individuals are formed through the *substantive* universality of ethical life (Hegel, 1967b, p. 155). Put very simply, Hegel's claim is that once the acquisitive individual realizes that

his selfhood is possible only within the bounds of the law, his worldly activity is transformed through a reflexive awareness of social responsibility, duty and belonging. This awareness does not take the form of a pure procedural rationality; rather, it leads back to the substantive organization of customs, norms and laws which embody the idea of the state. Ultimately, therefore, the nation state becomes aware of itself – of the structures of recognition, mediation and coercion which belong to its concept – through the self-conscious individuals who live within its substantive culture (*ibid.*, pp. 162–4).

The nature of this relationship has, of course, been the subject of a great deal of theoretical debate: liberals, like Popper and Berlin, have argued that Hegel's philosophy is inherently totalitarian, while other more considered accounts of his work, particularly those of Gillian Rose and Jacques Derrida, have sought to open up his thought to the contradictions and aporias of modernity. What is common to Rose and Derrida's expositions is a concern with the possibility of a Hegelian response to the issues which have come to define our historical present: the primacy of economic relationships; the fetishism of commodities and the infinite extension of human desire; the collapse of the public sphere into a play of 'false needs'; the complicity between scientific knowledge, technological innovation and economic exploitation; and the globalization of capitalism. It is the fate of Hegel's thought therefore to inhabit what Derrida has called a 'Marxist space'; for even if his thought is presented as anticipating the violence of Marx's revolutionary demand (Rose, 1981, pp. 214–20), his notion of ethical life has still been transformed by the urgency and persistence of Marx's critique of capitalism.

As I have said, one of the main concerns of the book will be to look at Marx's transformation of the concept of modernity, and particularly his remarks on the political economy of culture. For Hegel, we have seen that the concept of ethical life, of the substantive culture which supports the existence of the reflective individual, is guaranteed by the inner necessity of spirit. The dialectical logic of implicit unity (Being), separation (Essence) and speculative unity (Spirit), in other words, is enacted in the return of the anarchic individualism of civil society to the substantive mediations of the state (law, justice and right). Marx, however, maintains that it is precisely this return of the acquisitive 'bourgeois' to the necessities of collective life which is impossible. For in so far as the realm of civil society is utterly inimical to the limitation of self-love, exploitation and conflict, it cuts short the logic of recognition through which Hegel reintegrates the acquisitive 'I' with the collective life of the nation state (Marx, 1977d, pp. 26–7). If there is such a reintegration, this can only take place at the level of appearance, for as long as the 'true' conditions of collective life (distributive justice, communal ownership of the means of production) are unrealized, the representations through which we recognize ourselves as autonomous citizens of the nation, remain complicit with the fundamental inequalities of a class society.

This account of the underlying reality (alienation, emiseration, pauperization) which is represented in the form of 'ruling ideas' is, of course, the core of Marx's notion of ideology: art, literature, and all of the subdivisions of philosophical thought are conceived as 'nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material [economic] relationships grasped as ideas' (Marx, 1977c, p. 64). For Marx, then, the realm of culture is stripped of the spiritual significance which Hegel attributes to it: the ethical, aesthetic and political ideals through which each individual identifies his or her place within the totality of the state, are reduced to simulacra which misrepresent the dehumanizing reality of capitalism. If we are to undertake a serious examination of the relationship between culture, identity and technology therefore we will need to look carefully at this idea of culture as misrepresentation. For it is only in so far as Marx's inheritors (particularly Benjamin, Adorno and Jameson) have sought to conceptualize the relationship between the technological reproduction of images, the fetishism of commodities and the exploitative potential of capital, that we can really appreciate what is at stake in postmodernist theories of culture, aesthetics and (performative) subjectivity.

Before proceeding to examine the detail of these theories, however, I need to say a little about the the polemic between a certain rejuvenated form of modernism (specifically, in the work of Jürgen Habermas, David Harvey and Fredric Jameson) and the cultural and political trajectories of postmodernist theory.

II

In his 'Modernity – an unfinished project', Habermas attempts a kind of analytical diagnosis of the 'postmodern' experience of fragmentation and lack of identity. Fundamentally, his contention is that the loss of any shared tradition of moral, ethical and aesthetic norms is a result of the secularizing metaphysics of the Enlightenment. With the demise of a religious world view in which God was the guarantor of harmonious relations between truth, beauty and morality, Enlightenment philosophy set about establishing the a priori rules of moral, cognitive-theoretical and aesthetic judgements (Foster, 1985, p. 9). This determination to separate everyday experience from the disciplinary specialisms of aesthetics, morality and science is, for Habermas, the beginning of an impoverishment of the public sphere that has continued to accompany the development of technological modernity. The hope of a fulfilled Enlightenment, in which the accumulation of expert knowledge would guide the construction of a 'rational social order', has been shattered by the violent domination that expert cultures have assumed over the 'hermeneutics of everyday communication' (*ibid.*). Thus, both the possibility of the effects that have come to define the twentieth century as the end of the Enlightenment project (genocide, Third World poverty, environmental devastation), and the

disorientation and irrationalism which has come to pervade the public sphere, should be conceived in terms a structural inequality between expert cultures and the normative potential of linguistically competent citizens.

For Habermas then, the modernist project remains 'incomplete' in the sense that the rationalizing demand of Enlightenment philosophy has been confined to the instrumental organization of social relations. However, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the failure of the Enlightenment project, Habermas' essay insists that the predominance of techno-scientific control should be conceived in relation to a certain achieved level of moral, aesthetic and political culture: what he calls the lifeworld. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as we will see in Part 2, makes a strong case for the collapse of the public sphere into 'the masses' – a collapse which, for Adorno and Horkheimer, abolishes the right of philosophy to present the realm of culture as the accumulation of an essentially human identity. Habermas, however, attempts to show that there is a communicative activity of human subjects which is presupposed by the legal, economic and political relations of 'organized capitalist societies'; and that consequently, the dominance of instrumental reason can never come to the state of completion that Adorno and Horkheimer describe. It is this autonomy of communicative action that Habermas seeks to defend in his account of the 'incompleteness' of modernity. For while it is true that the expert cultures of science, technology, aesthetics and jurisprudence operate with a high degree of independence, it remains the case that their operational demands impact directly on the normative-communicative potential of the lifeworld. What is required of a critical theory of modernity therefore, is 'an illuminating furtherance of the lifeworld processes of achieving self-understanding'; an illumination of the very processes of questioning, assertion, translation and identification which, for Habermas, express the moral culture and practical autonomy of human beings (Habermas, 1995b, p. 17).

The present state of our rationalized modernity then, demands that we attend to the *abstraction* of expert cultures from the communicative activity which has crystallized in the norms, values and traditions of the lifeworld. For even though it is undeniable that the ideology of 'system necessity' has come to dominate the political agenda of modernity, Habermas insists that the fact of this domination demands to be assessed in terms of its impact upon the hermeneutic culture of everyday life. The repudiation of modernity therefore, should in general be conceived as an irrational reaction to the objectifying, moralizing and aestheticizing interventions of expert cultures (Foster, 1983, p. 8). For if it is the case that the aesthetic has descended into the ephemeral enticements of mass culture, and if morality has lost all independence from the demands of techno-science, then this is not because the project of modernity is bankrupt and exhausted, but rather because social theory has yet to articulate the communicative potential inscribed in the lifeworld. Indeed,

if we are properly to understand the continued dominance of expert cultures over the communicative infrastructure of everyday life, Habermas claims that we must recognize the complicity of 'postmodernist' (as well as 'premodernist' and 'anti-modernist') thought with estrangement of rational subjectivity from processes of techno-scientific modernization (*ibid.*, pp. 13–14).

Ultimately, Habermas attempts to circumscribe the modern philosophical enterprise as an *interpretive* rather than a *legislative* project. This is important because the distinction which he draws between postmodern thought and his own critical theory, depends upon the possibility of the lifeworld functioning as a sphere of autonomous communicative action. As the 'non-objective whole [of intersubjective experience] which . . . evades the grasp of theoretical objectification', Habermas claims that the lifeworld retains a certain 'ideality' in relation to the expressive powers of individual agents (Habermas, 1995b, p. 50). Thus, any claims which I, as a linguistically competent subject, may make about the infringement of technology upon my personal existence, the absence of reality in modern art, or the destruction and pollution of nature, carry within them a claim to universality that is essentially dialogical. For in so far as such claims are expressed through linguistic and grammatical rules that are intersubjective, they place me in the position of having to justify my case through the deployment of standards of validity that belong to the concept of 'rational will'. This process of justification refers, of course, to Habermas' notion of the ideal speech situation, in which 'no force except that of better argument is exercised; and as a result, all motives except the co-operative search for truth are excluded' (Habermas, 1976, p. 107). Now, while it is certainly true that Habermas intends this configuration of political practice to function as a critical-interpretive ideal (not as a bureaucratic or procedural rationality), his recourse to the universality of language raises serious questions about the disjunction between 'modern' and 'post-modern' temporalities. For example, might not our increasingly virtualized, technological, informatic social relations, mean that communicative action, in Habermas' sense, no longer has time to take place? And further, if the possibility of such dialogical exchange is excluded by the accelerating processes of technological modernization, then on what grounds can it be claimed that consensus, intersubjectivity and deliberation are essential to the 'project of modernity'?

What is important in Habermas' account of communicative action, I would suggest, is the relationship between his attempt to describe the conditions under which the enunciation of particular statements would immediately invoke the dialogical engagement of the other, and his determination to trace the postmodern experience of evanescence, spectrality and lack of identity back to a particular dislocation of the lifeworld. This dislocation, we have seen, begins with the Enlightenment project, and the attempt to determine the a priori rules of moral, aesthetic and cognitive-theoretical judgements. Thus, in so far as the demand for

abstract classification establishes the conditions for the dominance of expert cultures, the task of a critical philosophy becomes one of attempting to reinvigorate the dialogical orientation of the public sphere. The ultimate aim of the 'project of modernity', in other words, would be the maximum engagement of expert cultures with the public expression of rational will (the lifeworld); an engagement in which philosophy would function to clarify the social, ethical and political consequences of technocratic organization. Two related issues emerge from this attempt to establish the conditions of rational legitimation. First, there is the relationship that Habermas constructs between historical evolution and the communicative potential of language. His argument is that the guiding thread of every functional, structural or systemic development of human society is the recuperation of the lifeworld as the horizon of rational-dialogical action. Second, there is the claim that postmodernist thought, because of its disregard of the history of modernist project, remains indifferent to the real dilemmas and contradictions of the political. Thus, as long as postmodernist theory refuses to acknowledge the structural deformations of communicative activity that lay at the foundation of the postmodern experience (fragmentation, evanescence), it can do no more than 'remove into the sphere of the far-away and the archaic the spontaneous powers of imagination, self-experience and emotion' (Foster, 1983, p. 14).

The logic of Habermas' arguments about the 'incompleteness' of the modernist project, is significant because it exemplifies a kind of active non-engagement with postmodernist thought. This logic proceeds from the establishment of certain essential characteristics of modernity (characteristics which are validated by an evolutionary theory of history²), to the establishment of certain necessary standards of normative and theoretical evaluation. Jameson, in his *Postmodernism*, for example, reproduces this logic when he claims that:

The constitutive impurity of postmodernism theory . . . confirms the insight of a periodization that must be insisted on over and over again, that postmodernism is not the determinant of a wholly new social order, but only the reflex and concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself. (Jameson, 1995, p. xii)

Again, the repudiation of 'postmodernism theory' is made on the grounds that there are certain fundamental aspects of modernity – in this case, the inequalities of wealth, power and resources that are intensified by the technological organization of capital – to which every form of social experience must be referred. The postmodernist attempt to theorize the feelings of diversity, limitlessness and evanescence that have decentred the modern subject therefore, is again presented as a kind of wilful determination to have done with the real contradictions of late capitalism. As long as the 'hyperextension' of commodity production is not acknowledged as the socio-economic cause of this form of subjectivity, and as long as

postmodernist theory fails to recognize the utility of such labile, transparent, manipulable individuals to the global organization of capital, its pronouncements amount to no more than an ideology of abstract difference and self-serving individualism. I will say more about Jameson's attempt to revive a Marxist critique of postmodern aesthetics in a Chapter 9.

The most consistent application of this periodizing logic appears in David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. His claim is that

strong *a priori* grounds can be adduced for the proposition that there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of 'time-space compression' in the organization of capitalism. (Harvey, 1999, p. vi)

Harvey's argument maintains that postmodernism must be understood in terms of its relationship to the 'compression' of space and time that becomes acute during periods of overaccumulation in capitalist economies. What Harvey is referring to is the rationalization of public, private and geographical space which, drawing its inspiration from the metaphysics of Enlightenment philosophy, has accompanied the rise of modern capitalism. This necessary involvement of a functional space and time in the dynamics of capital accumulation, means that the periodic crises of the world economy are experienced socially and culturally as 'disconcerting and disruptive bouts of space-time compression' (*ibid.*, p. 327). For Harvey, such periods are characterized by a loss of habitus – of those basic securities and affiliations (class, home, nation) that arise from the relative stability of the mode of production, and which function as the basis of everyday forms of legitimacy. In the absence of this spatial and temporal stability, the relationship between science (rational anthropology, functionalism, utilitarianism) and morality becomes increasingly dislocated, and 'the turn to aesthetics (of whatever form) becomes more pronounced' (*ibid.*). Thus, if we are to understand postmodernism properly – that is, in terms of its relationship to 'historical geography of capitalism' – we must recognize that, as a cultural and intellectual movement, it is primarily an attempt to aestheticize the experience of ephemerality and fragmentation (*ibid.*, p. 328).

For Harvey, as for Habermas, this 'postmodernist' assertion of the primacy of the aesthetic, and of the autonomy of cultural practice, is condemned on the grounds of its neglect of the historical conflicts and resolutions that have produced modern culture. Ultimately, postmodern cultural production is far too close to 'sheer profit-seeking' to be considered revolutionary or socially transformative (Harvey, 1999, p. 336). However, we cannot be satisfied with simply presenting postmodernism as an ideological form which feeds directly into the mechanisms of capital accumulation. Rather, the flexibility of postmodern varieties of production, communication and subjectivity should be understood as having arisen out of the old Fordist modernism as an 'opposing tendency'. For in

so far as it is the 'internalized rules' of capital that produce both cultural dynamism and economic crises in the mode of production, we must recognize that postmodern flexibility represents one pole of an adaptive process whose variations emerge through the impossibility of resolving the dynamic contradictions of capitalism (*ibid.*, p. 343). Fordist modernity offers stable markets, a 'fixed configuration' of economic influence and political power, well established processes of theoretical legitimation and a secure grounding in techno-scientific rationality. Postmodern flexibility, on the other hand, is characterized by a kind of fantastical virtualization of relations of production: 'fictitious capital, images, ephemerality, chance, and flexibility in production techniques, labour markets and consumption niches' (*ibid.*, p. 339). Harvey's claim is that this opposition between modernist and postmodernist accounts of the relationship between politics, economics and normative legitimacy must be understood in terms of their relative advantages at any give time. In the end, there is little point in pursuing debates about whether or not there has been a transition from modernity to postmodernity. For a historically grounded (i.e. Marxist) account of the relationship between cultural and economic production, demands that we recognize that the extent to which any particular economy has adopted the ideology of 'Fordism' or 'flexible postmodernism', will 'vary from time to time . . . depending on which configuration is profitable and which is not' (*ibid.*, p. 344). The 'aesthetic turn' of the postmodernists, in other words, remains an adaptive strategy of capital: a cultural form whose transformations of the established structure of economic conformity and political obedience, are riven with acute economic and political contradictions.

This attempt to fit 'postmodernism' into the conventional Marxist dynamic of base and superstructure, however, refuses any specific engagement with the political discourse of postmodern theory. Harvey's contention that under the discipline of his cultural critique, the sharp distinction between modernism and postmodernism disappears (Harvey, 1999, p. 342), masks a general determination to indict postmodernism as an irrational and irresponsible reaction to the fluctuations of capital. His remarks on the political consequences of 'postmodern flexibility', maintain a close relationship between the 'aesthetic turn' of postmodernist art, cinema and architecture, and 'a penchant for charismatic politics, concerns for ontology, and the stable institutions favoured by neo-conservatism' (*ibid.*, p. 339). Thus, if the underlying necessity of capital should be conceived as an adaptive process, this process becomes all the more pernicious and amoral as its dynamics become more flexible, fictive and immaterialized (*ibid.*, p. 343).³ The general political significance of postmodernist theory and culture, in other words, is established on the grounds that the historical (geo-economic) conditions for the emergence of postmodern culture have been comprehensively described. As such, Harvey's critique of postmodernism refers only to certain generalized themes – ontology, aesthetics, charisma – that have arisen after the 'fact'

of the strategic value of flexibility to the dynamical processes of capital accumulation. In the end, this line of argument fails to recognize that the questions of being and aesthetics that are addressed by postmodern theory, as well as having a history which exceeds any immediately 'ideological' or 'functional' determination, arise out of dilemmas that are directly concerned with the spatial and temporal dynamics of a post-Fordist capitalism. The discourse of progress, consensus and enlightenment, in other words, is not simply dismissed by postmodernist theory as untenably idealistic; rather it is re-evaluated in terms of the complex economy of informatic exchange, telematic communications and technocratic control that has transformed the 'internalized rules' of capital accumulation.

My intention in giving this brief survey of Habermas, Jameson and Harvey's contributions to the 'modernity or postmodernity' debate, is to point out the impossibility of making a fair evaluation of postmodern political theory from *within* the established parameters of either Marxist or liberal democratic thought. The concern with the origins of legitimacy, the return to the transfigurative potential of the sublime, and the extension of the critique of culture to include the impact of new telematic and digital technologies, all demand to be considered in terms of their contribution to our understanding of our own living present. For in so far as postmodernism calls into question the traditional processes through which political legitimacy has been established, transmitted and received, we cannot be satisfied with the reduction of its diverse theoretical claims to the status of a generic form of ideology (Jameson and Harvey), or to the wilful abandonment of the 'established' norms of communicative action (Habermas). Ultimately, my analysis of postmodernism theory will be concerned with the transformation of 'the real'; with the return of metaphysical questions about culture, identity and belonging through the *loss* of our basic certainties about the mode of production, the functional organization of capital and the politics of class affiliation and internationalism. As Derrida put it recently in *Politics of Friendship*:

We wish only to think that we are on the track of the impossible axiomatic which remains to be thought. Now, if this axiomatic withdraws, from instant to instant, from one ray of the searchlight to another . . . this is because darkness is falling on the value of value, and hence on the very desire for an *axiomatic*, a consistent, granted or presupposed system of values . . . Such a political history [of the object, the mode of production] would deck itself out in 'realism' just in time to fall short of the thing – and to repeat, repeat and repeat again, with neither consciousness nor memory of its compulsive droning. (Derrida, 1997, p. 81)

In the chapters which follow, then, I will pursue the theme of post-modernism as an attempt to trace the ethical, political and aesthetic consequences of this constant transformation of 'the object'. For it is only in so far as the discussion seeks to read postmodernist theory in its own terms, that it will be possible to evaluate its relationship to the accelerated, disjunctive, technological time of the present.

Notes

1. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* is, of course, concerned with this relationship between the state and the legally free individual. However, Smith's ultimate aim is not to establish the transcendental unity of the moral will and its rights in relation to the sphere of positive law; rather, his intention is to disclose the social utility of self-seeking individualism.

2. See for example, Habermas' 'History and Evolution' (in *Telos*, Spring 1979, 127–43), and Jameson's 'Marxism and Postmodernism' (Jameson, 1998, pp. 33–49).

3. Harvey's objection to Jameson's attempt to evaluate the socio-economic significance of postmodern art and culture is that he comes too close the kind of 'fusion' with the ephemerality of postmodern aesthetics which characterizes Baudrillard's writing on 'simulation' (*ibid.*, pp. 351–2).

Part 1

Postmodernity and Postmodernism

