

**The Poverty of Radical Theory Today:  
from the false promises of Marxism to the mirage<sup>1</sup> of the cultural turn<sup>2</sup>**

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*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* v.25,1: pp. 155-179 (2001)

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*Radical Theory and the Search for Utopia*

More than twenty years ago, EP Thompson cautioned academic radicals<sup>3</sup> on the dangers of using social theory to paint overly-complete, too tightly- structured images of the society we live in. He charged that such theory, and especially the academic Marxism then in vogue in Britain and the United States,<sup>4</sup> underestimated the openness and variety of historical processes and hence the possibilities for

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<sup>1</sup> A “mirage” is something which is chimerical, fascinating, often beautiful, and possibly quite pertinent or useful, but which nonetheless leads us astray.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on a talk initially presented at the Annual Meetings of the Association of American Geographers, Boston, March 1998, in a session organized by Dick Peet of Clark University. A prior version was presented to the 6th Meeting of Latin American Geographers, Buenos Aires, March, 1997. I wish to thank Dick Walker, Patrick Le Galès, Julie-anne Boudreau, Harvey Molotch, Jennifer Wolch, Doreen Massey, Andrew Sayer, John Forester, and Michael Dear, and two anonymous referees, for their comments on an earlier version. None is responsible for the text that follows.

<sup>3</sup> EP Thompson, 1979, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. London: Verso.

<sup>4</sup> Academic marxism having already peaked and waned in continental Europe, from 1956 on, except for its rather marginal resuscitation in the form of Maoism following the events of 1968, and the Eurocommunism movement in France and Italy (see: P. Anderson, 1976, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London: Verso).

making our own history. Thompson had his own personal agenda, linked to the nuclear disarmament movement. Many academics subsequently devoted themselves to trying to open up radical theory, by working on ways to combine more successfully social and economic structure with human agency and choice.<sup>5</sup>

That debate had become necessary because of the way that post-war academic radicals had constructed a totalizing<sup>6</sup> image of western society. These radicals had positioned themselves in opposition to what they considered the fatal error of mainstream social science: failure to see the comprehensive, integrated nature of social reality under capitalism. Yet the radical political economy they constructed frequently went too far in the other direction, attempting to deduce history from models of the comprehensive, integrated, "essential" nature of the capitalist system.

Why was the vision of society promulgated by academic Marxism so attractive to so many western intellectuals? This is a long story about which much ink has flowed.<sup>7</sup> Comprehensiveness was certainly a strong element of that attraction. For radical political economy, detailed outcomes could be ascribed to the essential nature of capitalism, including such features as the anarchy of its markets, its property relations, and the ideological imperatives that flow from these material relations.<sup>8</sup> This search for big explanations is in part motivated by purely intellectual concerns, much as physicists search for an

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<sup>5</sup>Probably the best known effort to resolve the problem theoretically is Anthony Giddens' (1986) theory of "structuration." *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Berkeley: University of California Press. See also, Abrams, Philip, 1983, *Historical Sociology*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Jay, 1986, *Marxism and totality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>7</sup> One of the best analyses of the history of this temptation is Jorge Castaneda 1994, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War*, New York: Vintage..

<sup>8</sup> I am drawing here from Andrew Sayer's (1995) *Radical Political Economy: A critique*, Oxford: Blackwell.

integrated theory of matter, energy, time, and motion. Nonetheless, social science differs in a key respect from physical science in that the object of study is ourselves. We have great difficulty in separating our analysis of what is from what we want to be.<sup>9</sup> This search for comprehensive solutions to many ills -- in the case of radical political economy, combating capitalism -- is what we may call a utopian impulse. Although marxism has largely gone out of fashion, the utopian impulse has moved to post-modernism (and to a lesser extent, post-colonialism) on the theory side, and multi-culturalism and "cultural politics" in political practice.

The movements to combat racism, for the rights of women and gays, for greater sensitivity to the ravages of technology and instrumental rationality, for greater transparency in politics, and for the respect of human and natural diversity in general, are certainly among the most important political developments of the twentieth century. One can only agree with Richard Rorty, when he notes

"The tone in which educated men talk about women, and educated whites about blacks, is very different from what was before the Sixties. Life for homosexual Americans, beleaguered and dangerous as it still is, is better than it was before Stonewall. The adoption of attitudes which the Right sneers at as "politically correct" has made America a far more civilized society than it was thirty years ago."<sup>10</sup>

But contemporary academic radicalism, I shall maintain, would take these achievements of social movements in Liberal<sup>11</sup> democracies and reinterpret them wrongly. Theoretically, it ascribes them too

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<sup>9</sup> The problem described by Durkheim as the necessity for "epistemological rupture." *Le Métier du Sociologue*. Paris: PUF.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, 1998, *Achieving our country; Leftist thought in twentieth-century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>11</sup> The term "liberalism" in this paper is used in the philosophical sense as referring to a liberal political system, not in the American sense of "liberal" versus "conservative."

much to a supposed and recent turn away from modernism. I shall argue, in the pages that follow, that it then constructs a utopia -- that of culturalism -- which is epistemologically and morally relativistic yet some ways politically illiberal and depoliticizing.

In what follows, we will stress the substantial achievements of marxist-inspired radical political economy, while criticizing its utopian impulses and suggesting the need for an updated radical political economy. Likewise, we will recognize the importance of contemporary movements which go under the post-modern, post-colonial, and cultural politics labels, while claiming that there are parallels in their current development to the earlier error of radical political economy in attempting overly sweeping attribution of the causes of social problems and overly general solutions. We will suggest that a critical pragmatism, combined with a firm rejection of relativism, is necessary, as well as not shying away from openly embracing certain elements of philosophical liberalism and normative ethics.

*The precedent: western Marxism<sup>12</sup> after the war, and its offshoot, radical political economy*

One of the great paradoxes of western social science was the revival of the Western Marxist tradition after the second world war. I say paradox for the obvious reasons: it occurred at a time when the countries explicitly basing themselves on Marxism were economically backward<sup>13</sup> compared to the

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<sup>12</sup>Much of what I am about to criticize with respect to academic Marxism could also be applied to the Weberian tradition in social science as well, but since this is a paper about radicalism, I am not going to elaborate the parallels to Weberian totalizations and utopias.

<sup>13</sup> It is now clear that their economic and technological progress was less even than that of Western capitalist countries, centered principally on military industries with a particular brand of sectoral planning involved. They performed rather badly in many other sectors and this is because they did not develop appropriate brands of economic coordination.

western capitalist nations, and were paragons of political repression. Though it became largely impossible for engaged public intellectuals in continental Europe to be Marxist after the mid-1950s, when evidence of the *gulags* became incontrovertible, and when the collaboration of certain western communist parties with such authoritarian regimes became known, Marxism was given a new lease on life in the Anglo-American university environment of the 1970s, in such disciplines as political science, economics, sociology and geography<sup>14</sup>; although these were always quantitatively small parts of the academy, they did constitute a real academic movement. It was also revived politically through the hitching of Maoism to the post-1968 movements in Europe and to a sort of Marxist-style radicalism in certain corners of the labor and student movements in the US and Great Britain.

Western marxism was the root for many branches of what came to be known as post-war "radical political economy." Radical political economy took up many of the themes which are present in marxism and made them more tractable. These include, for example, the notion that capitalism is not a self-guiding system, because markets have failures and contradictions (in many ways, from defining optimal levels of investment, to public goods, to technological progress); the notion that power is

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<sup>14</sup> In geography after David Harvey's (1976), *Social Justice and the City*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (although Harvey's work was certainly not mainstream Marxism, even at the time). In urban studies, one would cite the appearance of Manuel Castells' *The Urban Question*, 1976, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. In sociology, one would have to go farther back in time, to the work of C. Wright Mills (new edition, 2000, Los Angeles: The Getty Center, original 1960). In post-war economics, the 1960s movement of "radical political economy" was at first inspired by social problems such as poverty and inequality, and many of the original participants in the Union for Radical Political Economy began to publish articles with an explicitly marxist orientation in the late 1960s, and there was considerable Marxist economic and sociological analysis in such journals as *Monthly Review* in the USA and *New Left Review* in the UK. See, inter alia, Edwards, R, Reich, M, Gordon, D, eds, *Labor Market Segmentation*, Lexington, MA: DC Heath; Edwards, R, 1979, *Contested Terrain*, New York: Basic Books; Braverman, H, 1974, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, New York: Monthly Review Press; Brenner, R, 1977, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism," *New Left Review* 104: 25-92.

important to the development of the system, and especially to the distribution of income and to the definition of levels and mixtures of output; and the notion that markets don't necessarily bring about democracy. There are many others. In some of these fields, radicals -- as skeptics about the effects and properties of capitalist market system -- have been able to make significant contributions to our understanding of the world. Academic radicalism across the board drew on Marxist economics as a way to show that capitalism, as a structured whole, had to be dealt with in order to resolve the particular social or economic problems. And this often ran the gamut from the largest-scale problems (economic cycles, or the existence of social classes and inequalities) to the most local (the housing problem, traffic congestion or uneven development between regions).<sup>15</sup>

It would be at my own peril to assess the corpus of this marxist social science in one fell swoop. What can be said, with some confidence, is that some pathbreaking work was carried out by those who are inspired by the marxist view of capitalism as a structured whole.<sup>16</sup> In economics certain classical political economy questions were revived by scholars sympathetic to Marx's view that the system has inbuilt contradictions that are both its motive force and its greatest problems.<sup>17</sup> One can

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. in the regional development field, Holland, Stuart, 1976, *Capital versus the Regions*, London: Macmillan; Markusen, Ann, 1985, *Profit Cycles, Oligopoly, and Regional Development*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Massey, Doreen, 1984, *Spatial Divisions of Labor: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*, London: Macmillan; and in the urban field, the literature, already cited, of Harvey, Castells, and many others.

<sup>16</sup> Roemer, John E, 1989, *Analytical Foundations of Marxist Economic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and *ibid*, 1982, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.; Michl, Tom and Foley, Duncan, 1999, *Growth and Distribution*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Marglin, Stephen, 1987, *Growth, Distribution, and Prices*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Heilbroner, Robert, 1986, *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism*, New York: WW Norton. See also the works on labor market segmentation cited above at note 14.

<sup>17</sup> See the Cambridge (Eng) side of the capital controversies debates of the 1950s and even of Keynes, eg. Robinson, Joan, 1956, *The Accumulation of Capital*, London: Macmillan.

think also of historians working from a marxist background, who have produced fundamental insights into the rise of capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Sociologists and economists of marxist inspiration developed insightful new analyses of segmented labor markets, social stratification of all sorts, and social classes.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, much of this work has had lasting -- though largely unacknowledged --- effects on even mainstream economics, which now admits to a greater degree than ever before the need to take into account the ways that social structure and politics are underpinnings of markets, as well as the importance of distributional and not just allocational (efficiency) questions, as both causes and outcomes of economic development.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, the overall Marxist view of the economics of capitalist development no longer carries very much weight. The strong point of Marxism is that it considers capitalism as a system: its fundamental nature is based on property relations and their corresponding social relations. But this has also become its great limitation: it has never been able to go beyond large-scale descriptions to cause-and-effect analyses of the detailed internal dynamics and processes of capitalism. For this, it would require microanalytic foundations and passageways between them and the macro-description it does so

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<sup>18</sup> Anderson, Perry, 1974, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London: Routledge, or CHE Philpin and TH Aston, eds, 1989, *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Preindustrial Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, Erik Olin, 1998 edn, *Classes*. London: Verso; and, ibid, 2000, *Class Counts: Studies in Marxism and Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>20</sup> This is especially true, in my view, of the segmented labor market literature, which had a distinctly marxist inspiration, though it later grew to incorporate insights from microeconomics. A vast literature on labor relations and labor markets was inspired by class-based theories of power and discrimination, racial discrimination as linked to class power (e.g. Reich, Michael, 1981, *Racial Inequality: A Political Economic Analysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press), and was strongly present in non-marxist journals specialized in labor market issues. As examples of the ways that initially marxist concerns have been incorporated into somewhat more mainstream approaches in economics, see Aghion, Philippe and Williamson Jeffrey G, 1999, *Growth, Inequality and Globalization*, Cambridge:

well. Because of the failure to build a true multi-level theory, when Marxists use their basic descriptive categories to try and say things about short- or long-term evolutionary processes of the system, they generally do not do so very well.<sup>21</sup> Fundamentally, it treats capitalism as if it were a closed rather than an open system. This procedure leads to utopianism in the bad sense of the term, in that it simply derives, from a conceptual description of capitalism, that many problems are related to capitalism, and then prescribes the medicine of abolishing the source (capitalist property relations and class structure), rather than being able to analyze the real margins of variation which are possible within the system.

Even the role of revolution, so dear to Marx because of his Hegelian background,<sup>22</sup> has been seriously questioned as the principal source of democratization and development. A new consensus has emerged around the French Revolution as in and of itself not the decisive episode in the creation of the

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Cambridge University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Kaldor, Nicholas (1976, *Causes of Growth, and Stagnation in the World Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Maddison, Angus (1991, *Dynamic Forces in Capitalist Development: A Long Run Comparative View*, Oxford: Oxford University Press) and others have affirmed six facts about economic development in the 20th century which go against the grain of both neoclassical and marxist economics:

- a. Per capita labor productivity grows continually without a long-term drop in its growth rate;
- b. Per capita capital endowments grow continuously;
- c. Profit on capital is stable over the long-run, though cyclical in the short-run;
- d. The ratio of capital stock to GNP is stable;
- e. Capital and labor receive roughly stable shares of total income;
- f. There are strong differences in productivity growth between countries (on a world scale), owing to tendencies toward catch-up and convergence.

Marx predicted “b” But Marx’s economics run *inherently* in the wrong direction when it comes to c,d, and e: there is no long-run tendency for the rate of profit to decline; there is no long-run growth in the organic composition of capital; and there is no tendency to immiserate the working class.

They also contradict the marginalist neoclassical analysis, of course, i.e. any standard analysis which does not take into account such things as technological and organizational change, which are the real motors of the growth process, and their handmaidens, external economies of scale (what are currently called Marshall-Arrow-Romer externalities).

<sup>22</sup> The Hegelian inspiration for Marx’s theory of history is, of course, fundamentally idealist, in spite of Marx’s materialist amendments. It is a logical construction which Marx sought to improve. But history does not conform to the Hegelian schema of Marx, nor of the Hegelian anti-Marxists such as Fukuyama, Francis, 1993, *The*



French version of western democracy.<sup>23</sup> The end of this once widely-held idea about the French revolution has carried away with it the principal model of rapid and comprehensive social change in the West, a model which has been intellectually seductive for more than two centuries. If we want to cast this in contemporary social theory language, we would say that there is no marxist “metanarrative of social transformation” left.<sup>24</sup>

Radical political economy in academia finds itself in crisis today not only because it has no large-scale program of transformation to suggest, but also because it has stalled in scientific terms in recent years. In non-radical economics and sociology, significant progress has been made in the study of imperfect markets, technology, property rights, corporate structure, information, decisionmaking, multinational location, and so on.<sup>25</sup> Radical political economy in economic geography, for example,

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*End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Avon.

<sup>23</sup> F. Furet, 1989, *A critical history of the French revolution*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press; 1988, *Marx and the French revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1981, *Interpreting the French revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1995, *Le Passé d'une illusion: Essai sur l'idée communiste au xxe siècle*, Paris: Calmann-Levy.

<sup>24</sup> This does not prevent elites who push global market Liberalism from totalizing analysis and utopian politics. But this project, perhaps most famously defined by Francis Fukuyama's notion of “the end of history,” has fallen on hard times (see above at note 22). Fukuyama recently admitted that history is not over. And there are once again big divisions within the economics profession over the degree of state intervention required to make sustain the global integration of markets.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Becker, GS and Murphy, K, 2000, *Social Economics: Market Behavior in a Social Environment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; G. Esping-Anderson, 1999, *Changing Social Classes: Stratification and Mobility in Post-Industrial Societies*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage; Dixon, Huw David and Rankin, Neil, eds, 1995, *The New Macroeconomics: Imperfect Markets and Policy Effectiveness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Barzel, Yoram, 1997, *Economic Analysis of Property Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; North, Douglass C, 1990, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Williams on, Oliver, 1985, *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism*, New York: The Free Press; *ibid*, 1999, *The Mechanisms of Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Arrow, Kenneth J, 1970, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Stigler, G.J., 1983, *The Organization of Industry*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Solow, R, 2000, *Growth Theory: An Exposition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Conwell, F.A. and Champernowne, David, 1999, *Economic Inequality and Income Distribution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Arrow, Kenneth J, 1984, *The Economics of Information*, Stanford: Stanford University

centers on such issues as power (between firms), exploitation (of workers), and unevenness in location.

But it has made no significant recent progress in the development of basic theory which can be called distinctly radical.<sup>26</sup> Even certain valiant attempts at large-scale theorization, the most prominent among them being the French Regulationist School, are themselves large-scale assemblages of facts, and have made no breakthroughs at the level of basic theory.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, most of the contemporary work on constructing new bases for social theory is not being carried out by self-described radicals. One thinks here of the interesting debates opened up by communitarians, public choice theorists, or liberals, on key questions such as community, individual rights, individual versus collective responsibilities, and the nature of justice.<sup>28</sup> For those of us who come from the Left, the bitter irony of our day is that self-described

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Press; Loasby, Brian, 1999, *Knowledge, Institutions, and Evolution in Economics*, London: Routledge; Simon, Herbert, 1997, *Models of Bounded Rationalities: Empirically Grounded Economic Reason*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Streit, ME, ed, 2000, *Cognition, Rationality and Institutions*, Berlin: Springer.

<sup>26</sup> The broad radical geography literature made its most significant contribution, in my view, in introducing two notions into the study of regional development: social context in general and power in particular, as in the Massey, 1984, op cit at note 15. However, most of its attempts to do a new form of geographical economics in the marxist tradition failed, because the labor theory of value, already flawed in its basic form, is no better when it comes to geography. One can see this failure in, for example, the economics in Ernest Mandel, 1975, *Late Capitalism*, London: New Left Books, where the marxist "law" of inter-place exploitation is much too structural to take account of the varied pathways of development of the periphery. Most of marxist economic geography and urban development analysis relies on simple models of profit rate differentials and rent gaps between places, which do not go very far in explaining real patterns of development. Indeed, conventional development economics has done much better than marxist economics in explaining why poor places stay poor and rich places get rich. For an attempt to couple Marxist thinking with conventional but heterodox theories of technology, external economies and industrial organization, see Storper, Michael and Walker, Richard, 1989, *The Capitalist Imperative*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. The notion there was to see the capitalist process in broad terms but to admit that marxism had little to say about concrete issues such as technological change, and industrial organization. In recent years, many economic geographers initially inspired by marxist have, in fact, carried out their work with conventional but heterodox approaches rather than anything that could distinctly be called radical or marxist.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Aglietta, Michel, 1976, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: the US Experience*, London: Verso; and Hollingsworth, J. Rogers and Boyer, Robert, 1997, *Contemporary Capitalism: The Embeddedness of Institutions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>28</sup> See the vast recent literature in political philosophy, e.g. Walzer, Michael, 1984, *Spheres of Justice*, New York: Basic Books; Dworkin, Ronald, 2000, *Sovereign Virtue: the Theory and Practice of Inequality*, Cambridge,

conservatives in some cases, and Liberals (again in the Continental sense) are probably now, on average, as effective at critical social science as are self-described radicals.<sup>29</sup>

Radical political economy's reaction to the global financial crisis which began in 1997 displays some of these tendencies. Containing more than a small dose of *schadenfreude*, there is a rather large radical literature on global financial capital<sup>30</sup> which sees financial crises as evidence of the fundamentally unproductive and speculative nature of financial capital, on the one hand, and to its tendency to massively overshoot investment levels, on the other hand.<sup>31</sup> In Europe, this has led to absurd statements such as "Choose Europe or Choose Employment" (for example by the French union CGT, as seen on their posters). Meanwhile, it is the non-radicals who have developed hands-on analyses about unregulated financial systems, kleptocratic capitalism, crony capitalism, and the

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MA: Harvard University Press; Rawls, John, 1999, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap. Or, on public choice: Buchanan, James, 1975, *The Limits of Liberty*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (and the earlier seminal contributions of Kenneth Arrow on principal-agent problems, and more recently, such works as North, D, 1981, *Structure and Change in Economic History*, New York: Norton and Olson, Mancur, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>29</sup> A point made by Alan Wolfe, 1996, *Marginalized in the Middle*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>30</sup> See: Martin, Hans-Peter; Schumann, Harald, 1998, *The Globalization Trap: Globalization and the Assault on Prosperity and Democracy*, London: Zed; Henderson, Hazel, 1999, *Beyond Globalization: Shaping a Sustainable Global Economy*, Brisbane: Kumarian Press; Mittelman, James H, *The Globalization Syndrome*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Arrighi, Giovanni; Silver, Beverly; and Iftikhar, Ahmad, 1999, *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>31</sup> For the most part, in this effort to achieve a blanket condemnation of financial capital, most radicals have skipped over the very credible and important critique of increased financialization of the world economy: under certain institutional conditions, it leads to pressure for "short-termism," a lack of tolerance for low profit periods, and hence a speeding up of necessary adjustments on the part of firms. This, it has been held by some authors, actually can induce market failures, in the sense that certain activities get shut down even though there are good long-term profit possibilities in them. The long-term efficiency effects of linking companies in some sectors so closely to financial markets is thus possibly negative. There are also likely to be powerful redistributional effects toward investors, with unknown consequences. But, by the same token, this is the kind of phenomenon that has to be observed sector-by-sector, placed into institutional and geographical contexts, and seen in at least the medium-run of history, in order to be judged. Theoretical description alone would not do.

proliferation of international ponzi schemes among large-scale international investment houses. In general, it is fair to say that radicals have tended to adopt too much of an all-or-nothing attitude to the global financial economy, while non-radicals have opened up new ideas about the necessary institutional complements to the expansion of global trade.<sup>32</sup> Many of these analyses have even strongly criticized national elites in Asia and in the United States for refusing to put in place a more regulated financial system. The most serious proposal for reform of international investment flows has come from a liberal, American Nobel laureate, James Tobin (the so-called "Tobin tax"). Of course, the Left has been correct to point out the class basis of the new world financial elite and the astounding profits that it is enjoying at the expense of Third World countries via its power to enforce austerity policies there. But there is a huge and fundamental difference between an analysis that condemns financialization of the economy *tout court*, and an analysis which distinguishes between the unproductive nature of financial speculation and the essential role of certain other kinds of financial instruments in advanced capitalism.<sup>33</sup>

Radical political economy continues to remain fascinated by the figures of total social transformation, as reflected in the frequent appearance of the twin notions of constructivism and

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<sup>32</sup> See, inter alia, Haggard, Stephan, 1999, *The Political Economy of the Asian Financial Crisis*, Washington DC: Institute for International Economics; Lucatelli, A, 1997, *Finance and World Order*, Boulder: Greenwood; Stiglitz, JE and Yusuf, Shahid, 2000, *Rethinking the East Asia Miracle*, Oxford: Oxford University press; Woo, Wing-Thye; Sachs, Jeffrey; Schwab, Klaus, 2000, *The Asian Financial Crisis, Lessons for a Resilient Asia*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Rodrik, Dani, 1997, *Has Globalization Gone too Far?* Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics; Gilpin, Robert and Jean, 2000, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Pempel, T.J., 1999, *The Politics of the Asian Economic Crisis*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>33</sup> And it should not be forgotten, as I have implied above, that in Europe, there has always been a rather strange agreement between the Left and the extreme Right, in a common hostility to financial capital as strangely

collectivism,<sup>34</sup> respectively the ideas that we can comprehensively construct society through the exercise of human will and that human beings are fundamentally altruistic and desirous of collective solidarity rather than the pursuit of individual interest.<sup>35</sup> Andrew Sayer notes that as a result, radical political economy has devoted insufficient attention to the difficulties of collective social and economic coordination, whether in capitalism or another kind of society, and that certain Hayekian problematics should be treated more seriously by them. Translated into scientific practice, radical political economy is weak when it comes to the motivations and rationalities of actors and the functioning of the market and price system: in other words, most of the micro-level.

There is certainly a viable intellectual contest right now to determine what degree of regulation capitalism needs to attain a reasonable level of stability and social justice. Current efforts to define the nature and degree of political regulation of capitalism have no credible utopian social project attached to them. I am not arguing that radicals should abandon the search for better futures, but they are now challenged to find realistic alternatives and thereby to take back the discourse on the future.

### *The new radicalism of postmodernism and the cultural turn*

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cosmopolitan, escaping the boundaries of national control, with all the overtones that this has in European history.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Sayer, *Radical Political Economy*, op cit.at note 8.

<sup>35</sup> These theoretical Atropes,≡ it needs be mentioned, have frequently been used by radicals to justify or tolerate such things as authoritarian or totalitarian enforcement of social transformation: utopia can only be reached by force. Of course, the use of force and repression is hardly limited to the Left. To criticize them does not imply, via the principle of enemies of enemies, that the Right is better or clean of the charges I am levelling here. On average, in the United States at least, the Left has done far better on defense of human rights and civil liberties than has the Right, and contemporary radicalism of all sorts leads the fight for maintaining and extending civil liberties. I think this is also true of struggles in many other countries. But a lot of this is precisely the non-marxist left.

In certain social sciences and humanities in the Anglo-American world,<sup>36</sup> radicalism has come to be closely associated with what is known as the "cultural turn," consisting of theory and research based on the overall notion that the keys to understanding contemporary society and to transforming it lie in the ways that culture orients our behaviors and shapes what we are able to know about the world. The keystone to the cultural turn is that knowledge and practice are relativistic, because culturally determined. The cultural turn variously blends postmodernist philosophy, cultural theories of society, and poststructuralist philosophy. These literatures explicitly disavow what they term "metanarratives." These ideas are associated by intellectuals with certain social movements: the "race/gender/culture/sexuality" liberation nexus, as well as community-based organizations of all types, environmentalism, and postcolonialist politics.<sup>37</sup>

### *Radicalism's New Object of Critique: Modernism*

Because there are so many things going on in the intellectual movements I refer to here, it is

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<sup>36</sup> I refer here specifically to the Anglo-American world. I believe that the point is valid to some extent for certain other social sciences, and for the humanities.

<sup>37</sup> The cultural turn in various guises has extended to many subfields of geography and urban studies. Just a very small sample would include (but see also below, for more specific citations to areas of urban studies affected by the turn): Barnes, Trevor J, 1996, *Logics of Dislocation: Models, Metaphors and Meanings of Economic Space (Mappings)*, New York: Guilford; Porter, Philip, Sheppard, Eric S, 1998, *A World of Difference: Society, Nature, Development*. New York: Guilford; Gibson-Graham, J.K., 1996, *The End of Capitalism (As we Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, Oxford: Blackwell; Watson, Sophie and Gibson, Kathie, eds, 1995, *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell; Soja, Edward W, 1989, *Postmodern Geographies: the Reassertion of Space in Social Theory*, London: Verso; Soja, Edward W, 1997, "Planning in/for postmodernity," in Benko, Georges, and Strohmayr, Ulf, eds, *Space and Social theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity*, Oxford:Blackwell, pp. 236-249; Sandercock, Leonie, 1998, *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities*, Chichester: Wiley;

impossible to discuss each and every position and the variations on it. I am therefore going to try and reconstruct the cultural turn's intellectual solipsism, in a summary and highly reduced form. I hope that it captures what is fundamental to these movements, while avoiding making them into a straw man.

A. There is a world created by modernism which has done many good things and many bad things. The latter include such phenomena as imperialism, colonialism, categorical linear rationalist thinking (subject-object separation, mind-body separation) worship of technological and technocratic solutions to problems and the non-respect of nature. The result of all of this is the tendency to suppress legitimate difference and diversity, while inventing hierarchies of difference -- racial, gender, sexuality, cultural -- in order to marginalize the Other;<sup>38</sup>

B. There has been an explosion of movements which struggle against modernity's order: the poor, women, gays and lesbians, non-Europeans, environmentalists, NGOs, new forms of

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Dear, Michael, 2000, *The Postmodern Urban Condition*, Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>38</sup> See, for some descriptions of the field, inter alia: Rosenau, Pauline-Marie, 1991, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1999, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a Theory of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Connor, Steven, 1997, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Oxford: Blackwell. In a critical vein, see, Ashley, David; Tilly, Charles, and McNail, Scott, 1997, *History without a Subject: The Postmodern Subject*, Boulder: Westview; Callinicos, Alex, 1990, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, New York: St. Martin's Press; and Norris, Christopher, 1997, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. We should be reminded that the "original" postmodernist manifesto, though quite sweeping, was concerned mostly to show that the belief in the power of applied Cartesian rationalism and political universalism, so characteristic of France in the post-war period, had to be questioned: Lyotard, Jean-Francois, 1985, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (original, in French, 1976). On the question of the invention, indeed fetishism of difference, see Gilroy, Paul, 1995, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (note, however, that Gilroy is "against" difference as a political category: see Gilroy, loc. cit at note 82). Also, see the literatures cited at notes 40, 46, and 48 for various aspects of the difference question.

popular internationalism, indigenous peoples, urban community groups and coalitions, and others.<sup>39</sup> These groups are fundamentally knit together by their ways of knowing the world, which are irreducible to a common single formula of knowing and communication (as in modernist epistemology).<sup>40</sup> In other words, they are irreducible *cultural entities*, as opposed to the modernist "universal rational actor," an actor criticized both for being under-socialized and overly abstracted from her context;

C. Modernism's way of knowing the world -- as both an epistemology and normative doctrine-- is too rationalist to incorporate these movements' legitimate claims of difference (or, at least, of specificity); and its narrative of history and social development is too unitary and linear to survive the strain of accommodating their demands. A new epistemology, and a new

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<sup>39</sup> See: Sandercock, Leonie, 1998, *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; Fincher, Ruth, ed, 1998, *Cities of Difference*, London: Guilford; King, Anthony, ed, 1997, *Culture, Globalization, and the Contemporary Condition of the Representation of Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Cvetkovich, Ann and Kellner, Douglass, eds, 1997, *Articulating the Global and the Local: Globalization and Cultural Studies*; Miranne, Kristina B and Young, Alma H, eds, *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries and Visions of Urban Life*, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield; Pulido, Laura, 1996, *Environmentalism and Social Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press; Escobar, Arturo, 1994, *Encountering Development*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Alvarez, Sonia, Dagnino, Evelina, Escobar, Arturo, 1998, *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Revisiting Latin American Social Movements*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Harvey, David, 2000, *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>40</sup> Possibly the strongest claim in this direction is made by feminists who critique mainstream science, the fundamental basis of modernism and western rationality. See: Harding, Sandra, 1991, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and *ibid*, 1998, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialism, Feminism and Epistemologies*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Irigaray, Luce, 1993, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and *ibid*, *Je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, London: Routledge; Johnson, Barbara, 1998, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race and Gender*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Ozouf, Mona, 1997, *Women's Words: Essay on Female Singularity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Irigaray and Ozouf are members of the French feminist "tendency" known as "psychepo", arguing that women are fundamentally different from men in their way of seeing things. They can be sharply contrasted to early feminist statements such as those of Simone de Beauvoir, who firmly rejected any notion of "essential" female difference or culture, as well as many contemporary historians, such as Appleby, Joyce and



way of looking at social development are needed;

D. The world which will be brought about by developing new kinds of knowledge for these movements will be more pluralistic than that of High Modernism. This world will be based on the notion of internal heterogeneity and diversity, embracing a less hierarchical ranking of legitimate values and a greater fragmentation of society according to the way of knowing and being that different groups choose. These cultures will interact via porous frontiers, blurred borders, and new syncretisms.<sup>41</sup> Certain environmentalists push this logic further to claim that nature itself must become an historical subject.<sup>42</sup>

What is proposed, then, is a theory of society based on the relationships between culturally different groups. Some radical academics have redefined these new social movements as today's equivalents of what Marxists call the "historical subject" : the agents of wholesale social transformation.<sup>43</sup>

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Hunt, Lynn, 1995, *Telling the Truth about History*, New York: WW Norton.

<sup>41</sup> See above at note 38.

<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, the postmodern critique of science holds that nature does not exist Aout there,≡ as an objective phenomenon, but is constructed by our representations of the natural world. On the other hand, this nature is seen by some as having a "right" to existence much in the same way as Enlightenment human rights do this for persons. This "natural law" of nature thus, for some, implies that nature now has to be included as one of the agents of history with a "voice." See: Wolch, Jennifer; Emel, Jody, eds, 1998, *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands*, London: Verso.

<sup>43</sup> For Marx it was the working class, of course. But now it is diverse other groups. This redefinition of the historical subject to cultural and social movement groups can be found in a number of works. Frequently, these "neoMarxist post-modernists" are critical of purely cultural postmodernism and its lack of a structuralist metanarrative, but nonetheless share with "mainstream" postmodernism the notion that culturalist transformation is key to contemporary politics, though they retain the notion that such a politics must be linked to a comprehensive analysis of society and some kind of class-based mobilization. See, for example: Jameson, Fredric, and Anderson, Perry, 1998, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, London: Verso; bell hooks, 1989, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press; and *ibid*, 1990, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press; 1994, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, New York: Routledge; Anderson, Perry, 1998, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, London: Verso; and Harvey, David, 1996, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford: Blackwell. And the original and best-known statement by a

Contrast this to Marxism, where it is relationships between classes, or liberalism, where it is relationships between individuals. The key social actor for modernism and liberalism is the utilitarian and rationalist individual; for Marxists, classes; for postmodernists, differentiated collective cultural entities. Neoclassical economists and political liberals build on this actor toward a theory of society, including a strong theory of motivations (utilitarian self-interest), communication (prices, demand, or electoral politics) and coordination of the individual agents (the market, or electoral institutions). Marxism, as we noted, failed to develop a convincing microanalytics to accompany its ontological deconstruction of capitalism.<sup>44</sup>

The tests of whether postmodernism is doing any better than these theories should concern similar categories. The first test thus has to do with the privileged status it ascribes to culture and the opposition between cultural relativism and modernism's notions of rationality, reason and humanism. Second is the theoretical, or "microanalytic" status it ascribes to difference, since commitment to difference is held to be the new coordinating force for postmodern society.<sup>45</sup>

### *Modernism's record*

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"marxist postmodernist" is Fredric Jameson, 1992, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>44</sup> As an example of this, it has never been possible for Marxists to solve the transformation problem, of getting from the ontological (descriptive) level of labor values to prices. One could object that neoclassical economics has never been very good at getting from microanalytics of price formation to aggregate prices, and that is true. But the problem's solution can actually be envisaged within the neoclassical framework, even if not empirically solved very well. It cannot even be envisaged in any credible way within the Marxist framework.

<sup>45</sup> Like the market for neoclassicals or property relations, class solidarity and power for Marx or rationality, humanism and individual rights and capacities for modernism.

As noted, it has become common in the cultural turn/radical geography literature, as elsewhere in radical social science today, to accuse modernism of promoting: the suppression of legitimate differences along lines of gender, race, sexual practices, culture, and language (norm-based majoritarian repression); the use of technologies of surveillance and bureaucratic administration to dominate the Lifeworld; imperialism, colonialism and ethnocentrism; militarism; and the destruction of nature.<sup>46</sup> The post-modernist indictment of modernism reads something like this: if your crimes are based on the technological capacities generated by your human-centered instrumental rationality, your cold separation of emotion from reason, of body from mind, then why should we continue to have faith in your self-congratulatory view of reason as the potential vehicle of human dignity?<sup>47</sup> This is a serious doubt about the optimistic claims made by many modernists.

The cultural turn has been a significant -- though hardly the unique -- contributor to the outpouring of excellent scholarship on the history of such things as slavery; the contributions of gays and women and non-whites to technology, culture, and science; the record of the colonizers in the Americas and elsewhere; the history and culture of native peoples, past and present; the complexity of human-culture-environment relations in a culturally critical context; and so on. These accounts have done much to correct our once-distorted accounts of past and present. And they have, in so doing, helped to give

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<sup>46</sup> This is a truly enormous literature. A small sample would include: Loomba, Ania, 1998, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge; Mignolo, Walter D, 2000, *Local Histories, Global Design*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; and ibid, 1997, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Beverly, John, 1999, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press;

<sup>47</sup> Harvey Molotch points out that one can agree with the postmodernists that non-contextual knowledge is fundamentally dangerous because it privileges instrumental rationality, but that this does not require us to reject all

new dignity to people who were denied it by the dominant accounts and opened up new perspectives on current social and policy dilemmas.<sup>48</sup>

The issue is to what degree it is appropriate to ascribe the horrors of history to modernism's way of looking at the world. On the face of it, the record would tend to support the view that most of these are regrettable constants in human history, across long time periods and social systems, and not particular to modernity. The Romans did not need modernism's separation of subject and object to be imperialist and colonialist and to enslave via military conquest. The pre-modern Christians certainly needed no lessons in repression of homosexual behavior. Slaving was a common practice in black Africa prior to the arrival of the Europeans, and was carried on in the traditional Muslim world well after the end of the Triangular Trade and decolonization. The Chinese elites needed no lessons in destruction of nature via hydraulic transformation of the landscape, and they were and still are adept at bureaucratic surveillance and totalitarian policing of the population.

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notions of transversal or comparative reasoning (personal communication to author, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> See, for example: Scott, Joan W, 1999, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press; Todorov, Tzvetan, 1999, *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press (Trans from the French); Pagden, Anthony, 1994, *European Encounters with the New World: from Renaissance to Romanticism*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Terry, Jennifer, 1999, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine and Homosexuality in Modern Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Greenberg, David F, 1988, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Martel, Frédéric, 2000, *The Pink and the Black: A History of Homosexuals in France*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (trans from the French); Faderman, William, 1999, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin; Weeks, Jeffrey, 1989, *Sex, Politics and Society, The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, NY: Addison-Wesley; Baber, Zaheer, 1996, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India*, Albany: SUNY Press; White, Richard; Findlay, John, Taylor, Joseph, 1999, *Power and Place in the North American West*, Seattle: University of Washington Press; Worster, Donald, 1994, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Sugden, John, 1999, *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native Americans*; Cronon, William, ed, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: WW Norton; Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press; Kaiser, Charles, 1996, *The Gay Metropolis*, New York: Harvest Books; Hecht, Susanna and Cockburn, Alex, 1989, *The Fate of the Forest*, London: Verso.

Modern European society (and its North American offshoot), of course, was a significant innovator in all these areas, in that beginning in the fifteenth century it benefited from technological progress which no other region of the world could rival.<sup>49</sup> European technological prowess in shipbuilding, weapons-engineering, and manufacturing, enabled them to construct systems of communication and large-scale coordination with efficiencies hitherto unknown. So, of course, their military exploits -- from slaving in Africa to the exploration, genocides and colonizations of other continents -- and their alteration of nature, were on scales that often surpassed those of other peoples. This technological progress was based on a mastery of instrumental rationality, much as claimed by the postmodernist critics of modernism. But the difference between modernity's crimes and that of other peoples is more one of scale and territorial extent than it is one of nature. Unfortunately, virtually every society, whatever its principles of social organization, has found a way to invent most of these horrors, and has usually used some form of instrumental rationality to carry them out. Nonetheless, even if there is no unique association of modernism with the horrors of human history, the post-modernist literature cautions us not to accept naively the notions of rationality-equals-progress or of western democracy-equals-progress.<sup>50</sup>

### *The critique of reason*

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<sup>49</sup> I am summarizing David Landes' argument, 1998, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are So Rich and Some So Poor*, New York: WW Norton.

<sup>50</sup> Gray, John, 1995, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, London: Routledge.

The problem is that many postmodernists and cultural turn scholars do not just attack the record of modern societies. They move up the causal chain to suggest that because instrumental rationality has done so many bad things, we should consider jettisoning the keystone of modernism, the claim of reason. Modernism is fundamentally a humanistic perspective on knowledge: a belief that persons can know the world through the procedure called "reason." In turn, reason becomes a guide to action, which permits humans to shape their own destinies by substituting itself for passion and superstition (among which they count divine right). Therefore, humans are capable of enlightened self-government in the form of procedural democracy. Moreover, the historical project of reason-governed society, while having had quite limited effects, is not just another utopian dream. It has had huge positive effects in the real world. There is abundant evidence to suggest that reason has not been the unique domain of the West or of the modern period.<sup>51</sup> However, the western Renaissance probably generalized reason as a foundation of public legitimacy to a greater extent than previous systems. It can also be credibly claimed that many of the horrors ascribed to modern reason were actually due to a failure to be reasonable: slavery, Nazism, Stalinism, Pol Pot, were driven by ideology and blind belief, the opposites of reason. These blind beliefs were acted upon via a powerful mastery of instrumental rationality, but this is not, as we have argued above, particularly western or modern.

Postmodernists go much further than this, by embracing poststructuralist philosophers who flirt with the rejection of reason, not contenting themselves with a critique of instrumental rationality. Their

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<sup>51</sup> See Sen, Amartya, 2000, "East and West: The Reach of Reason," *New York Review of Books*, July 20, pp.33-38. On the universality of reason, see also Toulmin, Stephen, 1992, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of*

main inspiration for this is Jacques Derrida's critique of Logocentrism.<sup>52</sup> Derrida takes Heidegger's rejection of humanism (in the 1940s), and pushes it to its limits. Heidegger had been quite concerned with many of the same problems of modern life that disturb the postmodernists (technology, ecology, lifeworld domination), and had called for Man to decenter himself, to become more humble.<sup>53</sup> Derrida goes beyond Heidegger and tells us that language itself is the trap, that we cannot do any such decentering without distancing ourselves from our fundamentally human-centered language.<sup>54</sup> Since language is the basis for reason, i.e. reason is a linguistic construction, this amounts to a jettisoning of any privileged status for reason. But, as so many of Derrida's critics<sup>55</sup> have pointed out, it is impossible to deligitimate language through the use of language. We can *criticize* the use of language with language, but in so doing we automatically concede the utility of language and reason. All we can do thereby is to make a distinction between the good, reasoned use of language and the bad use of it.

Derrida responds to this criticism via what he calls an "acomunicative strategy," which is aimed at what he then calls the "neutralization of communication."<sup>56</sup> Derrida admits that the result of his acomunicative world is that all linguistically-based standards of judgement should be neutralized as

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*Modernity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida speaks not only of logocentrism, but of "androcentrism, phallogocentrism, phallogocentrism, carnophallogocentrism," as well. All can be found in his writings. Derrida, Jacques, 1993, *Aporias*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; Wood, David, and Barnasconi, Robert, eds, 1988, *Derrida and Difference*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, Martin, 1993, *Basic Writings from Being and Time*, San Francisco: Harper SF.

<sup>54</sup> I find it curious that the work of ethnomethodologists has found rather little resonance in postmodern circles. Ethnomethodologists recognized, decades ago, that they had to deal with the infinite regress problem, and they suggested a number of methods for dealing with it, including Conversational Analysis (one thinks of Garfinkel, Schlegoff, Hertage, and others in the UCLA group). They were sensitive to the issue of language, and worked closely with it; but they never concluded that it was a mere simulacrum and therefore never rejected logocentrism.

well: logical, scientific, aesthetic, moral and political. And when it comes to the use of language, Derrida's own flamboyant style has been adopted by many post-modernists in their writings: playful, with multiple and often imponderable meanings in their prose, the communication technique of their anti-epistemology. Post-modernists are probably correct to criticize pure propositional and instrumental rationality and the often unreasonable claims which have been made in its defense by orthodox social science, and the uses to which it has been put by engineers, bureaucrats and the military. Even if one wanted to criticize a certain kind of logocentric epistemology, and there are some claims from ecologists which in my view suggest we should do so,<sup>57</sup> it does not follow that we cannot have reliable knowledge about the world or that all meanings are radically unstable. Meanwhile, mainstream social science has major research efforts underway on what we can know (or cannot know), how we represent and judge what we know, and how we communicate what we know, in the guise of limited rationality, communicative and situated rationality, context-dependent procedural rationality, learning, and so on, without claiming that all judgements are to be neutralized because they are unfounded.<sup>58</sup> Post-structuralism simply eschews this scientific effort by making the blanket claim that it is impossible rationally to shed light upon ourselves.

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<sup>55</sup>Searle, J. 1995, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press.

<sup>56</sup>Derrida, Jacques, 1997, *Moscou aller-retour*, Editions de l' Aube.

<sup>57</sup>Thanks to Jennifer Wolch for explaining this to me.

<sup>58</sup> See, beyond the early work of Herbert Simon, such recent work as: Russell, Stuart Jonathan; Wefald, Eric, 1991, *Do the Right Thing: Studies in Limited Rationality*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Elster, Jon, 2000, *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, Constraints*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; There is, of



*The utopian antipodes of postmodernism: soft or hard*

Postmodernists and cultural turn radicals have embraced alternative politics, two versions of which I want to consider below. I shall argue that they are utopian in the sense I defined early on: they stem from exaggerated claims about supposed new historical subjects, and are rooted in a representation of an idealized new world tied together by commitment to difference.

*Soft: friendly relativism and the populist celebration of the Other*

Much postmodernism and cultural turn thought stems from the great structuralist revolution initiated by Levi Strauss in the 1950s. This was then developed and extended for contemporary audiences by what are known in the Anglo-American world as "post-structuralists," who embrace the deconstructionism of Derrida and the neo-Nietzchianism of Foucault.<sup>59</sup> How can we describe the uses of this revolution by the postmodernists and cultural turn radicals? As one writer has put it recently,

For Levi-Strauss, structuralism was a scientific method for studying differences between cultures, in the hope of one day achieving a more genuinely universal understanding of human nature. For the *tiers mondistes* he inspired, and who were radicalized by the Algerian War, this scientific relativism degenerated into just another primitivism that neutralized any criticism of abuses within foreign cultures. (Not to mention the crimes of Communist totalitarianism, which now could be excused on culturalist rather than Stalinist grounds). As the Sixties progressed, the children of structuralism came to forget Levi-Strauss' skepticism about the French revolutionary myth<sup>60</sup> and began promoting the Other as an honorary *sans culottes*.<sup>61</sup> All that was marginal within

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course, a vast literature in this area.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>60</sup> The myth that Europe and particularly France, through its revolution, had developed principles of universal application, i.e. reason, science, progress, liberal democracy.

<sup>61</sup> The French term for the poor who rose up and constituted the revolutionary battalions; a reference to their dress.

Western societies could now be justified and even celebrated philosophically.....the structuralist idea had declined from a scientific method informed by political and cultural pessimism into a liberation anti-theology celebrating difference wherever it might be found.<sup>62</sup>

The consequences of this are many, but I want to concentrate on a particular one in the sphere of cultural politics itself, a radicalized relativism which celebrates difference for its own good,<sup>63</sup> often assuming the naive form of Left-wing populism. Many cultural radicals employ the anti-intellectual procedure of taking popular, and especially "ethnic" or sexual minority culture for granted.<sup>64</sup> One sign of this is that the new radicalism has difficulty separating protestatory versions of cultural practices from consumerist, venal or even demagogic kinds of cultural phenomena. Thus for example, bell hooks, writing in the cultural studies paradigm, tells us that Madonna serves feminist goals by challenging the border between masculine and feminine.<sup>65</sup> There are mountains of articles written by academics who claim that popular culture (fashion and music, especially, and all that goes with it such as advertising and images) has become the principal vehicle of "rebellion," of a liberatory "politics of the quotidien."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Mark Lilla, "The Politics of Jacques Derrida," *The New York Review of Books*, June 25, 1998, p 37.

<sup>63</sup> There is quite a lot of discussion of this in the literature, for and against. For some interesting and dispassionate surveys, see: Putnam, Hilary, 1981, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Alexander, Jeffrey, 1995, *Fin de Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason*, London: Verso; Gellner, Ernest, 1987, *Relativism and the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and the "classic," Feyerabend, Paul, 1993, *Against Method*, London: Verso. A number of works that lean toward relativism, though in very different ways, include: Benhabib, Seyla, 1996, *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Young, Iris Marion, 1990, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Kymlicka, Will, 1996, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press;

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, McCracken, Ellen, 1999, *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press; and generally the references at note 39.

<sup>65</sup> bell hooks, 1994, *Outlaw Culture*, London: Routledge, pp 118, 123.

<sup>66</sup> For a book-length treatment of this issue, see Frank Thomas and Matts, Weiland, eds, 1997, *Commodify your dissent: the business of culture in the new Gilded Age*. New York: Norton.

This reminds one, in reverse, of the way that many marxist intellectuals condemn mass popular culture as "commodified," using a rather crude "authenticity" criterion to do so.

None of this is to deny the fundamental contributions of the cultural turn. It has taken a great deal of important and serious scholarly and political work to begin to make acceptable in public the diversity that used to be hidden or violently repressed. The new refusal to set priorities or construct hierarchies has the advantage of discouraging cultural authorities from excluding a priori what they do not like.<sup>67</sup> As a gay, I am personally sensitive to this problem. But celebratory relativism cripples the capacity to judge in any serious way. This leads to the situation where, once again referring to bell hooks, a recent critic noted that:

When republicans such as William Bennett have no qualms denouncing the profitable products of a huge corporation such as Time-Warner, while a self-professed Marxist just cannot find the right denunciatory language, the politics of cultural criticism have shifted indeed.<sup>68</sup>

More seriously, such celebratory relativism is in many ways fundamentally depoliticizing.

True, it allows infinitely many narrative accounts of the same historical events; but by the same token it disallows any assessment of them in terms of how they reflect or distort historical realities. It thereby renders impossible or pointless the unofficial "histories from below" that belong among postmodern thought's genuine achievements.<sup>69</sup>

In the absence of humanism and its counterpart, reasoned critique, we cede to a friendly consumeristic world, on one hand, and to a street scene which is represented variously as an urban ethnic nightmare

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<sup>67</sup>It seems to me that in continental European cultural politics, culturally conservative authorities sometimes arrogate to themselves the right to make judgements about popular culture they often do not understand and do fear.

<sup>68</sup> Alan Wolfe, 1997, *Marginalized in the Middle*, op cit at note 29, p. 29

<sup>69</sup> John Gray, 1998, « Medicine or Symptom, » *Times Literary Supplement*, July 10, 1998, p. 10. See some of the excellent "histories from below" cited above at footnote 48.

and a popular, post-colonial fiesta.<sup>70</sup> This is a utopia whose substance -- vigorously preached -- is precisely the lack of a center. This lack becomes its only real positively affirmed value.

*Hard culturalism: passion and illiberalism*

One could say that, at the very least, there is no harm -- beside that of depoliticization -- in much of cultural turn/postmodern radicalism. But there is another, more somber side to the cultural turn. The problem here is that the study of cultural difference has been transformed into the doctrine of *culturalism*. Post-modernist and cultural turn radicals are correct, in my view, in their criticism of a particular version of civic republicanism. Civic republicanism recognizes only one kind of political subject: an abstract human being, in the form of an individual person. This radically individualistic notion of public personhood responds to the different concerns of the Scottish, French, and German enlightenments, all of which ultimately converged on support for a society of individuals and common rights.<sup>71</sup> This universal common rights framework stems from the difficulties of understanding those who come from other cultures or even other parts of our own culture; philosophers have pessimistically called this problem "the incommensurability of traditions."<sup>72</sup> It is worthwhile to remember that, in

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<sup>70</sup> Harvey Molotch has pointed out to me the gesture of revering marginality is itself a privileging (personal communication, 1999).

Doreen Massey makes the point that the differences which are noticed are noticed because of the references we use to demarcate them, and they often reflect the categories deployed by the powerful. Massey, "Spaces of Politics", unpublished paper 1999.

<sup>71</sup> For Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, it was liberalism; for French Enlightenment thinkers, it was individual rights against historical collectivism (the Estates); and for the *Aufklärung* thinkers in Germany, it was individual capacities to reason and communicate.

<sup>72</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, 1989, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame

Europe at least, civilizational or non-group criteria for the good have a very specific meaning: in a continent where cultural differences have regularly led to violent suppression of the Other, putting cultural traditions in a secondary place has seemed prudent and necessary.

Western legal frameworks and political cultures have pushed the civic republican idea quite far. For example, it is regularly used to deny the notion that ethnic minorities exist *de facto* as *groups*. Society has not allowed them to be equal as individuals, this latter because the society has *not* been indifferent to their collective attributes (especially ethnic origin, skin color, sex, or sexuality).<sup>73</sup> In France, where the tradition of civic republicanism is even stronger than in the USA or Great Britain, the contradictions of such doctrine become very clear. Much of the French Left, for example, criticizes Anglo-American feminism because it would recognize women as a category rather than as individuals with equal dignity to men.<sup>74</sup> Hence, they continue, we should be blind to the claims of women for explicit *group*-based redress of their sufferings due to sexism. Here we can see the legitimacy of certain postmodernist critiques of modernism. Formalist rationality can be pushed so far that it becomes purely self-referential and hence a hindrance to the recognition of certain obvious facts of oppression.<sup>75</sup>

Faced with this critique, however, there are two ways to go. On one hand, we can say that recognition of *de facto* difference is necessary as a way to redress the lack of real equality and dignity --

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Press.

<sup>73</sup> A point made extensively in Martel, Frédéric, *op cit* at note 48.

<sup>74</sup> Joan Scott, 1997, « La querelle de femmes' in the Late Twentieth Century. » *New Left Review* 226: 3-20, November/December.

<sup>75</sup> Salais and I analyze this use of excessively homogenizing, objectivizing criteria for the case of the French State. Storper, M and Salais, R, 1997, *Worlds of Production: the Action Frameworks of the Economy*. Cambridge, MA:

that is, as a *procedure* for bringing about equality in the public sphere. On the other hand, we can say that *substantive difference* -- cultural, biological, etc -- is an aspect of being which is to be positively affirmed as a value in and of itself in the public recognition of the individual members of a group. Thus, an African-American is not just an individual with black skin and who therefore has probably not had the same opportunities as a white. She is also there to be publically and permanently recognized by others as an African-American whose Africanness is a part of her different (but equal) *public* dignity. So the goal has been transformed from a procedural one into a culturally substantivist one. The difference is that in the first formulation, the goal is to get beyond the stigma attached to being African-American, female, gay or whatever and hence achieve public *indifference*, henceforth unconstrained by oppression. The goal remains the construction of a public sphere composed of individuals with equal dignity, in fact. This is what Habermas or Charles Taylor might label "moderate communitarianism."<sup>76</sup>

As Alasdair MacIntyre has demonstrated,<sup>77</sup> in the absence of some privileging of universals over substantive group particularities, there are only *passionate* or *emotivist* bases for making claims about what is right or good. MacIntyre sees this as extremely unfortunate but inevitable. Many postmodernists, however, go no further than a strictly minimalist criterion for what binds us together: the celebration of cultures, each for its own sake, taking priority over all else.

These attitudes are aided and abetted by radical intellectuals in certain disciplines such as urban

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Harvard University Press.

<sup>76</sup> Taylor, Charles and Gutmann, Amy, 1998, *Multiculturalism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Habermas, Jurgen, 1998, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

planning. Radical urban planning intellectuals have for some time been linked to the notion of "advocacy planning." More recently, the term "radical democracy" has come to refer to the taking of power "from below" that will democratize society.<sup>78</sup> In both, certain urban planners set themselves up not as counselors to the prince, but counselors to the downtrodden.<sup>79</sup> In so doing, they have produced a body of very interesting research which has documented many of the previously ignored facts of life in the city. We know much more about poverty, violence, the biased distribution of city services, health conditions, and so on, than we would if there were not a committed group of researchers unearthing these facts.

Less appealing is the way that advocating the side of the poor or the different (which now extends to women, gays and lesbians, people of color, and other groups) has become an end in and of itself for many of these intellectuals. Much research simply documents their conditions or their differences and leaves it at that, as if the mere existence of differences (whether cultural or economic) were sufficient justification for action, using cultural groups as the central unit of action. But this has a serious down side. As it has been put:

The rash of sub-cultures which go to make up the ironically-titled United States may testify at first glance to an alluring diversity; but since many of these sub-cultures are tightly unified by their antagonism to others, they succeed merely in transposing into local terms the universalism they detest in the classical notion of culture. Such "collective differences" reinforce the very

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<sup>77</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair, 1997, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>78</sup> Laclau, Ernesto, 1990, *New Reflections on the Revolution in Our Time*, London: Verso; Mouffe, Chantal, 1993, *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso; Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal, 1984, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso; and Butler, Judith, Laclau, Ernesto and Zizek, Slavoj, 2000, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, London: Verso.

<sup>79</sup> See the positive views of this phenomenon referenced at note 81.

fragmentations of modernity against which they also protest....Those in the United States who criticize « high » culture in the name of ethnic solidarities sail uncomfortably close to *völkisch* notions, and the comedy of cultural difference has now yielded to a tragic fixation on it.<sup>80</sup>

More seriously, passionate celebrations of ourselves don't eliminate conflicts and the passions that go with them, for many differences are not compatible with each other. If my culture is fundamentally hostile to your culture's values, and moreover, if there are limited space and resources to go around, what is going to happen if we are equally passionate and emotional about our respective visions of what is right, more so than we are about the value of diversity? The modernist project calls for a certain separation of mind and body partly in order to tame these animal passions, which are seen as the basis for mutually assured destruction.

This can be seen easily in some of the cultural conflicts in the country where multiculturalism is most prominent today, the United States. In large measure, of course, this situation is provoked by the Radical Right's intolerance. But not entirely so. In the United States, many feminists attack pornography, even though there is no evidence that the latter contributes to or creates sexism or sexual violence. This is done in the name, therefore, not of reason, but because pornography *feels bad* to some feminists.<sup>81</sup> Another example is that inter-ethnic horse-trading -- long a feature of American

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<sup>80</sup>Terry Eagleton, "The Torn Halves," *Times Literary Supplement*, July 10 1998, p 6.

<sup>81</sup> On the feminism and pornography debate, see: Cornell, Drucilla, ed, 2000, *Feminism and Pornography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; MacKinnon, Catharine A, and Dworkin, Andrea, eds, 1998, *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Dines, Carol, et al, 1997, *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Identity*, London: Routledge; Strossen, Nadine, 1996, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex and the Fight for Women's Rights*, New York: Anchor/Doubleday.



urban politics -- has received a new lease on life, a century after the Progressive Movement tried to deligitimate it. Part of this is because cultural turn relativism has relegitimated the pursuit of group interests for ethnic minorities, without being sufficiently careful to require a link to more general principles of the public good. Thus, city council members no longer debate projects in terms of the public good, but in terms of their own narrow constituent interests, and many admit that many good projects go down the drain because they cannot satisfy enough different groups.<sup>82</sup> Another example would be the debate over bilingual education in California in 1997, which was often defended by cultural radicals on *symbolic* grounds,<sup>83</sup> even though it had been demonstrated to have failed, and where most importantly there was serious evidence that it was *slowing down* english-language acquisition for Latino children.

A particularly relativistic version of contemporary planning practice is that of "communicative planning theory," essentially based on the notion that if different groups -- all presumed to have legitimate claims -- can be brought to the negotiating table, the resulting communication, if handled with

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<sup>82</sup> For analyses of the ethnicity phenomenon in American urban politics, see, inter alia: Elkin, Stephen, 1987, *City and Regime in the American Republic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Peterson Paul E, 1981, *City Limits*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Judd, Dennis R and Kantor, Paul, eds, 1997, *The Politics of Urban America: A Reader*, Boston: Addison-Wesley and Orfield, Myron, and Rush, David, 1998, *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. For positive views, see Sandercock, Leonie, ed, 1998, *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press; and Fincher, Ruth, ed, 1998, *Cities of Difference*, New York: Guilford; Kaufmann, Michael, 1997, *Community Power and Grassroots Democracy: the Transformation of Social Life*, London: Zed; Croucher, Sheila, 1997, *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in a Postmodern World*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia; and the "classic" in the urban studies field, Castells, Manuel, 1985, *The City and the Grassroots*; Friedmann, John, 1992, *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, Oxford: Blackwell. For more critical views, see Gilroy, Paul, 2000, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. See also the literatures on the multiculturalism debate more generally, cited at notes 43, 63, and 76.

contemporary consensus-resolution techniques, will somehow prove beneficial in identifying best possible solutions for all concerned. Communicative planning theory borrows from Jurgen Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*<sup>84</sup> to stress the role of the planner as a facilitator of undistorted communication. Many planning theorists go beyond this, to argue that such consensual and communicative planning process can lead to desired outcomes such as place-building, community-building, institution-building and even democracy-building. However, as many practitioners and theorists now admit, this discursive practice tends to run up against, on the one hand, the interests of the powerful, and on the other, the tendency for communication to not be so clear or understanding as we might like it to be.<sup>85</sup>

Contemporary multi-culturalism is thus a very unstable doctrine, haunted on the one side by a bland and relativistic celebration of difference, easily leading to indifference, and on the other by the potential struggle of differences against each other. Culturalism and postmodernism are not necessarily soft but they can be naive.

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<sup>83</sup> Hakuta, Kenji, 1987, *Mirror of Language: the Debate on Bilingualism*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>84</sup> Habermas, Jurgen, 1995, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Boston: Beacon. See also the important work in planning by Patsey Healey, 1997, "Situating communicative practices: moving beyond urban political economy," *Planning Theory* 17: 65-82; Innes, Judith, 1995, "Planning Theory's Emerging Paradigm: Communicative action and interactive practice." *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 14,3: 183-191.

<sup>85</sup> See the symposium on "The Limits to Communicative Planning Theory," organized by Mickey Lauria in *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 19,4, Summer 2000, pp. 331-378, with a number of articles which are critical of the communicative turn. More generally, some skeptical points of view may be found in Beauregard, Robert, 1995, "Edge Critics," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 14,3: 163-176; Flyvberg, Bent, *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Fainstein, Susan, 1995, "Politics, Economics, and Planning: Why Urban Regimes Matter," *Planning Theory*, 14: 34-43.

*Handmaidens of difference: populism rejects political economy*

When these culturalist perspectives trickle down to practice-oriented intellectuals, they often eschews wider questions of urban political economy. Questions of how the urban system functions to generate or deepen urban poverty, or questions about how pluri-ethnic urban societies might be governed, are rarely posed.<sup>86</sup> It is understandable, for the reasons referred to above in our discussion of the decline of radical political economy, that intellectuals should be skeptical about big ticket solutions to big problems. But much radicalism has now gone beyond that: it now confuses its normative project of getting beyond modernism with the notions that society and economy really *are* postmodern. But at least in economics -- and one could argue as well for culture, technology, and many aspects of social organization -- there is much reason to believe that modernism -- with its components of systems rationality, rights orientation, legalism, bureaucracy, and industrialism -- is not only intact, but is being reinforced into what might be aptly called a "globalizing hyper-modernity."<sup>87</sup> This is perfectly compatible with, and even encourages much of the so-called cultural fragmentation and diversity so celebrated by cultural turn theorists, through its coupling of liberal individualism, a hyper-efficient economy of product differentiation, and the ludic consumerism it makes possible. Yet one hears little

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<sup>86</sup> This echoes a critique made in planning theory by authors such as Lauria, Mickey, ed, 1995, "Planning Theory and Political Economy: A Symposium," *Planning Theory* 15,3: 3-115. Also see Healey, Patsey, 1999, "Institutional analysis, communicative planning, and shaping places," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 19,2: 111-121. In substantive work on cities, one can think of the excellent work on immigration carried out by Roger Waldinger, which places immigration and pluri-ethnicity in the context of broader questions about social mobility and integration. Waldinger, Roger, 1999, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Post-Industrial New York City*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>87</sup> Giddens, Anthony, 1991, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; and, idem, 1994, *Beyond Left and Right*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

from postmodernist and cultural turn radicals about the organisation and properties of this world, which can only be had through an updated radical political economy.<sup>88</sup>

Many intellectuals, a considerable number of them inspired by the cultural turn, have become either actively disdainful of state-oriented collective solutions to problems, or enthusiastic promoters of the replacement of statism by localism and voluntarism.<sup>89</sup> A frequently-heard cant along these lines is: "cultural fragmentation=diversity, which requires decentralization+voluntarism+self-help." The current policy fashion for decentralization -- in some spheres absolutely necessary and desirable -- sometimes involves a retreat of the state from its necessary tasks of regulating the capitalist economy, assuring a minimum of social inclusion by providing public goods, and attending to the limitation of inequalities.<sup>90</sup> Decentralization of all sorts has been transformed into good in and of itself. Thus, what began as a necessary and important critique of disempowering and in some ways oppressive bureaucratic welfare states<sup>91</sup> has come full-circle to become an ideological legitimization -- perhaps unwitting -- of retreat of

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<sup>88</sup> It is not possible to define what such a political economy would look like here in any detail. In geography, there are all kinds of interesting questions about how territories, containing complex organizational and institutional structures, markets, firms, and states, are governed. Rather than big ticket deterministic explanations for things, we might opt for a political economy which, to paraphrase Jonathan Zeitlin, is against teleology, recognizes the plasticity of technologies and organizations, sees markets as historically constructed, sees neither frictionless adjustments nor path dependency, sees actors and contexts as mutually constructed, and looks for uncertainty, contingency and strategic choices as mainsprings. I would add continued attention to questions of class solidarity (especially the upper classes) and cultural hegemony, but in a very open and non-dogmatic way.

<sup>89</sup> Though, it should be remembered that the decentralization and civil society advocates are often strange bedfellows, with many people coming from a communitarian -- anti-relativist-position and others from the cultural turn position. See, inter alia, Dionne, EJ, Jr, ed, 1998, *Community Work: The Revival of Civil Society in America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution; Gutmann, Amy, ed, 1998, *Freedom of Association*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Eberly, Don, Jr, 1994, *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. University Press of America. See also the references at note 39.

<sup>90</sup> For an excellent study of one aspect of this, see Donahue, John, *Disunited States*, New York: Basic Books.

<sup>91</sup> Alan Wolfe, 1986, op. cit at note 29; Esping-Anderson, Gosta, 1990, *The Three Worlds of Welfare*

the state from its desirable role in capitalist societies. And in many cases this localism aids and abets reactionary policies, as in Bill Clinton's use of the language of decentralization to defend the abandonment of federal welfare minima in the United States.

The society at large would be better served if these intellectuals, all the while maintaining their commitment to the poor and oppressed, were to try and show how complex cities and societies can be governed in a more socially just way, and this requires analyzing governance processes of wide spatio-temporal extent. It is not enough to document difference and advocate the interests of particular groups; it is also necessary to think about how these groups can fit together.

*Effects of orientation: radicalism's separate culture is no longer justifiable*

Western intellectual radicalism, whether marxist or postmodernist, sustains a kind of cultural separatism. By this, I mean the notion held by many radicals that they have unique insights into the evil of the world and how to correct them, while non-radicals do not, because of their conformism to the big rules of the game. It is time to admit that the methodological and epistemological differences with standard theory (non-radical intellectuals) which many radicals have so passionately defended, have mostly crumbled. I am not speaking here of a rejection of crude positivism, because good non-radical intellectuals reject it, too.<sup>92</sup> Non-radicals, in a post-marxist world, have just as much ability to ask

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*Capitalism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Searle, John, 1997, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press; and Putnam, Hilary, op. cit, at note 63; Flyvberg, Bent, 2000, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

penetrating questions as do radicals. In many fields of social science, they have become the intellectual revolutionaries<sup>93</sup> because they have developed and incorporated new methods for looking at the connections between micro- and macro-level phenomena in society and economy.<sup>94</sup> Meanwhile radicals have frequently been content with macro-level ontological critique or deconstruction, often simply a form of empirical description dressed up in obscure structuralist terminology. By avoiding micro-macro dynamics (except, of course, to insist on the anarchy of markets), it is easier to maintain the illusion that history moves forward either according to laws which do not closely implicate the ordinary actor's choices, or according to the strings pulled by those with big power. This is one reason why radicalism is often anemic when it comes to such issues as why the "masses" do what they do. As scientists, radicals need to engage more effectively with micro-level choices and motivations and with causal analysis more generally, and not rest at the macro and descriptive levels.

This can be seen precisely in the way that postmodern and cultural turn scholars have constructed their utopian view of postmodern society. They see the rise of identity-based and community-based politics as collective expressions of the needs of the downtrodden, as essentially

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<sup>93</sup> There are many fields which they have revolutionized in recent years. In sociology, new theories of contextuality of social processes, of social capital (Coleman, James S, 1994, *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard/Belknap) and civic culture (Putnam, Robert; Leonardi, Robert; Nannetti, Raffaella, 1994, *Making Democracy Work*, Princeton: Princeton University Press), have been developed. In philosophy, lively debates over rights and equality have revolutionized the theory of political liberalism (see Walzer, Dworkin, Rawls, op. cit. at note 28). This is just a small sample of how social science theory has advanced, virtually all of it from outside radicalism, though in some cases, popular radicalism may have been a stimulus to thought.

<sup>94</sup> See references at note 25, above, on the new institutionalists in economics, the economics of information, and so on. One could add evolutionary economics (Nelson, R and Winter, S, 1992, *An Evolutionary theory of economic change*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard), as well as new international economics, new growth theory, and a number of other fields.

linked to a progressive vision of the future. But, as I have implied above, many of these demands can be seen, from a more micro-analytical point of view, as simple extensions of modern Liberal individualism, not as potentially radical forms of new collectivism. Indeed, some scholars now argue that American society -- where these politics are particularly important -- is going through one of its periodic upsurges of religious and moral sentiment. This wave of such sentiment is anchored in the widespread search for self-realization. The Right wing has a program which appeals to such desires for self-realization -- it is individualistic, non-egalitarian, religious, and resolutely non-collective.<sup>95</sup> The point is that an excessively select orientation can blind us to the objects of study closest to our concerns.

Nonetheless, as *intellectuals interested in human society*, there are probably major differences between radicals and non-radicals. Postmodernism and the cultural turn have enabled us to see clearly two major flaws in the development of modernism over the past several centuries. First, much modernism has been naive about the human body in relation to the mind.<sup>96</sup> Humans are creatures of passion, not just products of reason. Our passions, especially when they are harnessed to instrumental rationality, can be destructive as well as beautiful. Modernism's attempt to achieve a public regulation of the passions may be necessary but this political project has also frequently been allowed to become a pretext for all kinds of repressiveness and cultural intolerance. This leads to the second

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95 Fogel, Robert, 2000, *The Fourth Great Awakening*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

96 Much of the postmodernist inspiration for this line of thought comes from Michel Foucault. Among his many works that develop this notion, we might cite 1990: *The History of Sexuality*, New York: Vintage. See also the works cited at notes 38 and 40. on recent histories of sexuality and gender, which are part of this current of considering the role of the body in social development. The enormous literature on the role of psychology in Western modernism, and its attitudes toward the body, also needs to be taken into account here, as well as the psychologically-inspired political sociology of the post-war Frankfurt School, especially Adorno, Horkheimer, and

problem. Early on, modernism's internal development had great problems. It was linked to a mechanical and not just a humanistic cosmology. I believe that modernism's humanism is its greatest achievement. But epistemologically, it started out equally inspired by the Florentine humanists and by the Newtonian mechanicians. Once it was given the benefit of the second law of thermodynamics, most modernist thinkers could no longer resist the attraction to positivism and instrumental reason. They essentially outgunned their humanist rivals, and they continue to do so for the most part. The result is that modernism's potential for humanistic modesty turned out to be naive. The liberatory potential of human reason is frequently defeated not only by the passions, but also by instrumentalism. The critics are on to something when they see the modern world as one that unleashes the power of instrumental rationality to give unbridled reign to the worst of human passions.

This theoretical divide, moreover, continues to exist today. And we might say that if there is a future for the difference between radical intellectuals and non-radical intellectuals, it should be about the role, extent, and desirability of interest-based action and instrumental rationality. Fundamentally, the average good non-radical, Liberal<sup>97</sup> social scientist believes more in the possibility for instrumental rationality to produce good, through procedural fairness, than does the good radical social scientist.<sup>98</sup>

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later, Marcuse.

<sup>97</sup> In other words, I am not making the comparison to true conservatives, but between what we might call modern Liberal intellectuals and a construct of the radical intellectual I am trying to advance. In America, contemporary conservatives tend to be pessimistic about the passions, admitting that they are central and holding that tradition or authority are necessary to contain them, not reason. In Europe, conservatives are often anti-capitalist because of a visceral belief in the legitimacy of tradition, and have no modernistic idea about liberty whatsoever.

<sup>98</sup> For an excellent treatment -- which I would label "radical" in the good sense -- of how power and knowledge are always intertwined, see Flyvberg, Bent, 1998, *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Flyvberg shows the radical's commitment to asking certain kinds of questions



This leads to differences of orientation which are politically and scientifically legitimate and should be very fruitful in the decades to come.

*Why we need skepticism about modernism, and cultural studies; but why we need other things, too*

With this in mind, we can locate what is a fundamental contribution of certain work which goes under postmodern or cultural turn labels. Its ability to document the dark sides of modern society and the violence and repression which have accompanied both humanism and instrumental rationality instruct us to make major changes in modernist ways of knowing and acting. They show us that certainty is a very dangerous thing when it comes to social thought. From this it follows that all good social science must incorporate a new procedure of self-questioning, of self-doubt, of attempting to check itself via an intense self-scrutiny. This scrutiny must operate on all levels, including the most basic: where do our categories come from? Of what and of whom are we speaking? In whose name?

It also follows that in social science as in politics, a proceduralist commitment to dialogue and transparency, and true attentiveness to different voices, is indispensable. This procedural revolution goes far beyond that of standard pluralist Liberalism in the sense that it is not just about the formal contest of different interests, but involves a presumption -- rebuttable of course -- in favor of the worthiness of all viewpoints. This rebuttability, which occurs via the deployment of reason,<sup>99</sup> is now *ex posteriori*, and

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that non-radicals generally do not ask, but he has the intellectual rigor of good non-radical social science.

<sup>99</sup>Jurgen Habermas, op cit at note 76, has pointed out that there is a fundamental difference between practical

can no longer occur via the intellectual's scientific preconceptions. This procedure of using reason can be carried out with attention in historical and geographical context and without foundational appeals to History or Reason. We can acknowledge uncertainty, in part by placing it higher up the chain of reason, without becoming paralyzed by the Grand Self-Inquisitor. As John Forester<sup>100</sup> has noted, this is an appropriate form of "critical pragmatism." But this procedural doubt and humility<sup>101</sup> is different in a fundamental sense from many of the institutionalized positions of High Postmodernism, with their paradoxical pretensions to cultural and intellectual authority in the name of culturalism, relativism, and difference.

*Some suggestions for a radical's agenda*

In this paper, then, I have argued that contemporary intellectual radicalism needs to improve itself in four principal ways. At the level of ontology, a more complex view of the human actor, from motivations to socialization; radicals should abandon their often simplistic notions of why and how human actors do what they do and what makes them what they are. At the level of epistemology and theory construction, radical theory needs all the levels, including a micro-level, and macro-level

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reason and instrumental rationality. Thus, in contrast to much of the postmodernist critique, he argues that instrumental rationality can be tamed without abandoning the notion of reason. See also Feyerabend, Paul, op cit at note 63. Still, he has difficulty in responding to critics who argue that reason is an ideal, not a reality.

<sup>100</sup> Personal communication to author, 1/18/99.

<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Wolch points out that "humility as a basic approach to life and dealing with others is I think a gendered feature; masculinist norms that dominate organized intellectual life don't readily admit to an approach that could seem so wishy-washy, where one might actually admit to not knowing something.." (personal communication, 1/7/99). In this vein, one might also think of the work of the contemporary French moral philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, who suggests an ethics based on the phenomenological principle of ambivalence. See Carlwall, Thomas and Flesch, William,

descriptions of society must be linked to the micro in order to have an effective explanation of historical development. At the level of priorities and commitments, cultural turn radicals need to reaffirm their engagement with questions of political economy (issues of wide spatio-temporal extent), and traditional political economy radicals need to be more attentive to societal development and difference. Finally, the sensitivities to difference which have been sharpened by the cultural turn should remind social scientists of the importance of sustained doubt and intellectual humility, which is not to be confused with relativism.