

# **Difference and Equality**

A Critical Theorist analysis of Post-Modern Philosophy.

# **Unterschied und Gleichheit**

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*In memory of Jacques Derrida*

### **Preface**

Philosophy has failed to attack the mutilation of the world by capitalism. Its disavowal of an adequate, furious, outraged assault upon the forces that undermine human existence is in every respect an indictment of its futility. Its failure is a symptom of its complicity with a system which manages it, determines it, restricts it; having lost the greater battle, it has withdrawn into a tiny niche, reenacting this more momentous failure in stunted discourses that circle the ghost of what brings us daily anguish, but never attempts to seize it. Economy is the philosophical *Denkverbot* of today.<sup>1</sup> The greater scope of challenge is shunned--the real material world beyond its intellectual parameters is ignored because it remains an unspeakable terrain, a region falsified by the continual corruption of ontologically transcendent dreams: justice corrupted by torture, equality corrupted by worldwide poverty, democracy made synonymous with imperialism. Philosophy has settled for a crouched domain: an elaborate pantomime of debate on matters that have nothing to do with human suffering and the fragmentation of the world by commerce and exchange.

Post-structuralism is more complicit in this crime than other schools of philosophy because its intention from the outset was so much higher than that of its contemporaries: pragmatism, positivism, and phenomenology. Post-structuralism characterized itself from the beginning as something “radical” because of its willingness to depart from

orthodox definitions of power, from a study of history to a study of genealogy and language, from a question of inequality (as a negative) to a focus upon difference (as a positive). This inversion of terms, substitution of others, and invention of entirely new ones meant the promise of something hopeful, a program for change, a set of theories that could break some of the spell that reified society has had over the capacity of thought and knowledge to be critical. This promise however was never realized. It is this aborted endeavor that the following paper attempts to examine.

The derailment of post-structuralism from becoming a truly critical philosophy is not so much rooted in any historical occurrence such as the Stalinization of the USSR, the events of May 1968 in Paris, or the colonial adventures and catastrophes of Algeria or Vietnam (all markers for its historical development in France), as much as in its emergence out of a particular reading of the work of Nietzsche, and in particular the question of Nietzsche's concept of value. It is actually the continual repetition of a fundamental mistake in Nietzsche's thinking on the distinction between identity and equality that has found itself repeated all the way forward through to the present time.

The convergence of the concepts of identity with equality in Nietzsche's critique of value has resulted in several consequences for philosophy. By not acknowledging the difference between a critique of value in the question of identity and a critique of value in the question of equality, Nietzsche collapses the problem of epistemology into ethics. This is where the critical promise lies: a philosophy which recognizes the interdependence of epistemology and ethics. Yet this is where the promise ends. It is in the character of the gesture that ideology gains its foothold. It is not that Nietzsche states

that the two realms of value are interdependent in ways which must be investigated in order to gain a grasp upon the reification of existence by capitalism; rather, he denies the distinction in the first place and posits a false unity by default. Interdependence and unity is not the same thing, but in post-structuralism, following Nietzsche's lead, they have become synonymous.

### **Truth and Lie**

In Nietzsche's essay "Ueber Wahrheit und Luege im aussermoralischen Sinne" the word that is at the center of this contention is "ungleichen" – a term which translates roughly into English as two things: "unlike" and "unequal".<sup>2</sup> Regarding its definition as "unlike," it could be said that Nietzsche's essay comprises a theory of epistemological value (in its critique of identity), while regarding its definition as "unequal," it could be said that it comprises a theory of social value. But these two separate issues, adjoined by one word, of a theory of knowledge and a theory of morality, have ever since been conflated into one reading, with consequent judgments and results that have reflected the confusion of such a blurring. The definition of "ungleiche" as unlike or different has meant an underscoring of the post-structuralist focus upon and recovery of the position of the Other in the social realm, as well as the textual other of writing (with its assertion of slippage, delay, and deferral, where meanings are always plural, provisional, and often accidental). But its definition as "unequal" has been the after image of the former, a shadow haunting the project of textual analysis, where social divisions and class relationships are unaddressed in the critique of knowledge and passed-by unnoticed. A pale mimicry was fashioned that took upon itself the characteristics of a truly exact and courageous pursuit,

but which in reality was mute, devoid of substance, empty waving in the wind. The conflagration of matters pertaining to value into matters pertaining to identity has meant that the object of the performance was always only a vague shadow of the real problem and threat, and rarely otherwise.

What Nietzsche sets out in his essay is the attempt to describe the origin of knowledge and the desire for truth. A rough summary follows: he suggests that out of nerve stimuli, the first impressions on the skin, and, presumably, stripped down to the bare determinations between pleasure and pain with very little else in between, there arise sounds. The transference from touch into sound was already the beginning of what he called “stammering translation”<sup>3</sup>: we could suggest further that there is nothing prior to this stammering translation, that what is, *is* as a result of it--knowledge evolves from a mistake, from the distortion produced by contact between disparate elements--the subject thrown roughly into a world of objects. The schematism operating in Kant’s system of reason<sup>4</sup>, as a mediation between sensory experience and a priori categories of consciousness is made redundant here, or rather, the schemata is the stammering of a translation that is never “right” because it is always converging things that are utterly incompatible: sensory stimuli to sound, sounds to words, and finally words into concepts and laws, the requirements of social order and discipline. Each leap is a bridging of an abyss fraught with the danger of error, and each bridging incorporates within its structure a further deterioration of the origin that led to the result, the production of a repeated loss of memory between genres or species, the sublimation and intentional forgetting of what constitutes the laws we act under and observe. This amnesia is necessary for society to function as a larger body comprised of unlike individuals:

...and woe to that fatal curiosity which might one day have the power to peer out and down through a crack in the chamber of consciousness and then suspect that man is sustained in the indifference of his ignorance by that which is pitiless, greedy, insatiable, and murderous – as if hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger.<sup>5</sup>

The description of this long emergence from the coils of the intestines to the ideality of concepts and the practice of law constitutes Nietzsche's critique of the master concept "reason;" though still a Kantian, Nietzsche radically revises Kant's premise of the a priori necessity of reason as the over-arching principle in charge of the production of knowledge (subverting as well the consequence of that premise, the necessity of the categorical imperative). Everything Kant described is here, but the premise that knowledge is produced due to a necessity born out of reason is abandoned as a kind of wishful thinking possible only to those who remain blind to the species' brutality. To conceive of society as operative on the basis of reason is to participate in the maintenance of reification. Instead Nietzsche substitutes for reason the concept of will to power--the production of knowledge leads not to freedom but to a social order constructed upon degrees of domination and submission. The need for survival, the flip side of the will to power (one could say the former is the pale echo of the latter), governs this progression from the sensory stimuli to the complex associations of governance and ideology. Epistemology then describes the ascendance of a species' adaptation to external circumstances, a very practical matter, and not a "quest for truth." It articulates a social rule by which members of the larger group are subject to "the obligation to lie according

to a fixed convention”.<sup>6</sup>

What constitutes the pin or hinge for this inversion of truth and lie is the role of metaphor in the development of knowledge. The distance between concept and object has meant that language can never be exact; it must always act within the uneasy approximation of metaphor, as a stab in the dark at something it can never quite see or grasp. But this approximation produces the false belief – which means, the good working order of society – that what is unequal has been brought into a realm of equality. Differences have been elided into similitude, language serves as the umbrella that holds such a variety of antagonistic entities beneath it under the declaration that they are relatable, or if we suddenly shift over to Marxism, that they are “exchangeable.” Though Nietzsche does not state this, we could suggest that the principle operating in language and knowledge where differences are obliterated by the mediation of metaphor is similar to the operation conducted by the commodity in capitalist economy. This setting into similarity is the false setting into belief of the establishment of equality--because we can “think” things alike, we assume their equality, yet already we have merged one practice into another and have called them the same. This unfortunate move quickly obscures our being able to recognize the actual state of the world in which we live, transforming relations that are deformed and inhuman into the “normal” and “familiar.” Immediacy, the illusion of proximity, is a consequence not only of language acting as metaphor, reducing differences to similitude, but to a communications technology closely aligned to global capitalist trade that has made the world seem much smaller than it is. Distances appear to have vanished yet they have only been displaced, the way freeways fly over slums and shacks rather than through them—it is not that we are brought closer to the actual

conditions in which we live, but rather the speed and velocity of communication and exchange gives us the illusion of contact yet at the same time further removes us from actually naming what we see. We could argue that it is not simply metaphor at work in the production of language, the desire for identity and presence so intrinsic to western logocentrism, but also a continual detour that misnames existence for what it is.

Jeder Begriff entsteht durch *Gleichsetzen* des Nicht-Gleichen...Wir wissen ja gar nichts von einer wesenhaften Qualitaet, die die Ehrlichkeit hiesse, wohl aber von zahlreichen individualisierten, somit ungleichen Handlungen, die wir durch Weglassen des *Ungleichen gleichsetzen* und jetzt als ehrliche Handlungen bezeichnen; zuletzt formulieren wir aus ihnen eine qualitas occulta mit dem Namen: die Ehrlichkeit (my italics)<sup>7</sup>

In a sense then we have two levels at work in the term “gleichsetzen” (the positing of identity). On the one hand, as Nietzsche intends to demonstrate, language is the actual setting into place of a conceptual ordering of disparate elements; but on the other hand, his collapsing of the two senses of the term “ungleiche” into one definition is itself an expression of this activity. A doubling occurs. While describing the evolution of knowledge he himself repeats the procedure--his critical philosophy is not critical enough, an aporia opens up in the midst of the groundwork it seeks to explore, it stops short of reflection over the conditions in which this identity-thought, this “gleichsetzen,” is made so imperative in capitalist society. Both the content and the critique of that content misfire because both are products of what they denounce: knowledge is not only the result of sensory stimuli, it is the result of stimuli under specific conditions of



material existence (wealth or poverty, pleasure or pain), and the critique of that knowledge is also the product of these same conditions. We never make it full circle to the point of production because we are a part of that production, its inheritors and its progenitors.

Or as Nietzsche himself would have said, in a very different context, we are like the hen stranded within a chalk circle<sup>8</sup>—we feel beholden to values whose origins mystify us into obedience, yet the limit is a spell that could be broken by an evolutionary jump. The historical materialist would add that the chicken itself created the chalk circle and can just as well erase it.

While it is possible to agree that knowledge is comprised of a conceptual ordering of objects (and the myriad of sensations they produce) which eliminates their versatility and multiplicity and instead reduces them down to the manageable context of metaphor, it is another matter as to how we evaluate this process if we fail to take into consideration the context in which it occurs. When identity and difference are discussed in an economic-free context, we act within the realm of reification, blissfully unaware of our complicity in the conditions which we seek to command or criticize. What value does this “obligation to lie according to a fixed convention” have? Could there be societies, before or after ours, which do not require such a transformation developed through the stammering translations of error and misjudgment? Could capitalist society, where the commodity serves as the universal mediator and the principle of reduction of value be in no small part responsible for the development of this pedagogy? Is this essential to the human being, a biological necessity (a faith in which being as spurious as Kant’s

conviction of the primacy of reason), or is it material, comprised of economic conditions which inform and dictate the possibility of knowledge and its limits? As Nietzsche never takes this question from the opposite pole, and only proceeds from a starting point which is the individual, not the society that gives rise to the education of the individual, he will never be able to offer us an answer.

Which way one proceeds on this critique of epistemology depends upon whether one views it primarily as a problem of identity, or as a problem of value. As a problem of identity, the response can be, and was, to develop a theory of “*differance*” – of language as a continually shifting textual landscape determined not by identity or immediacy but by difference and deferral, of meanings that always cascade away into other meanings, further out of reach, into chains of signifiers where the signified is never captured or seized long enough for it to be fully, absolutely, known. A sophisticated reading of this dichotomy between identity and difference that does not resort to privileging difference over and against identity, as some sort of “revenge” against the Western Logos, but rather attempts to think language and knowledge within the gap between the two, between identity and non-identity, is Derrida’s approach. The question of equality is held in abeyance and separate from the question of agreement.

A less sophisticated approach has been one which not only privileges difference over and against identity, but also abandons an adequate critique of economic circumstances; in line with Nietzsche (and against Derrida) we can see consistent steps to collapse the question of agreement in the realm of knowledge and language into the question of equality in the social and economic context. This response ranges from rephrasing the

question from one of economic inequality to one of power (Foucault), from economic inequality to an espousal of the affirmation of *inegalite*<sup>9</sup> in Nietzsche's concept of will to power as a concept of force (Deleuze), to an outright abandonment of the narratives which address emancipation (Lyotard), to current post-modern political and post-colonialist theory which attempt to assert the value of incommensurability,<sup>10</sup> where textual analysis is collapsed into social criticism (Laclau), or the view that in rejecting an economic assessment of material conditions<sup>11</sup> one is seeking a subaltern or non-Western paradigm by which to counteract the effects of colonialism (Mbembe). Gramsci's concept of hegemony is appropriated here to soften the suggestion that a positive value has been accorded to a concept such as inequality, because the difference between non-identity in a theoretical sense has not been distinguished from inequality in the real and practical sense. That amounts to a cappuccino without the caffeine: all foam, no substance; all rhetoric, no weight.

Gramsci himself argued that thinking of capitalist society without recognizing the determination of economy upon the production of culture (and thus, knowledge) is likened to thinking of the "body without a skeleton." More perniciously it ends by reinforcing what it seeks to comprehend and explode.

### **Equality/Identity/Inequality/Difference**

Rather than one primary confusion, then, there are several, all along the lines of these terms of discussion. We could argue that the following schools of philosophy, and

political and economic systems, have struggled to varying degrees within the parameters set forth below:

*Equality/non-identity* – the theory and practice sought after by critical theorists.

*Inequality/non-identity* – confusedly defended by post-structuralists, post-colonialists and cultural studies theorists due to a particular reading of Nietzsche.

One could further argue that the above juxtapositions are in part a reaction to the configurations below:

*Equality/identity* – Stalinism, state socialism, despotic totalitarianism.

*Inequality/identity* – capitalism, western logocentrism, fascism, globalization.

A suspicion is held towards philosophies which espouse arrangements that either equate equality with identity, or that excuse inequality with identity. On the one hand, equality has come to mean, in the aftermath of Stalinism, a synonym for identity-thought, where difference is forcibly destroyed through work camps, mental hospitals, and Gulags. But on the other hand, what difference is difference when it occurs in a world ripped into pieces by the robbery of exchange? Difference becomes complicit with thievery; the Other, a token accomplice to a system that mutilates and maims. Difference too can be appropriated for the purposes of sustaining the economy and furthering its reproduction in all parts of the globe. This produces a “virtual” respect for multiplicity, not an actual practice: difference is “spoken” as a kind of colloquial jargon, a lip-service, but its realization is thwarted and abused. So it can be that a few African-Americans earn

millions of dollars as sports heroes or movie actors while the vast majority of African-Americans live lives marked by poverty and despair. The logic of capitalism is not one which leads to diversification and greater degrees of individuality: it is a logic which leads to the unification of disparate elements into one totality. A pronounced movement is demonstrated where competing businesses strive for dominance by destroying or incorporating their adversaries; if this process is not checked it ends in monopoly and the cessation of competition. Capitalism, contrary to democracy, strives to suppress the different in an effort to achieve maximum power; true democracy fosters the individual as Other while seeking consensus amongst many.

Non-identity then is a mute point when it occurs in a world shattered by economic inequality—it will always remain a residue, an aftereffect of forces it has no control over; in some ways it may be included back into the system of production, ideology may have use for it to sell the system better. At other times the one marked as Other will be held at a great distance which too will serve in the reproduction of the system (for example the discriminatory treatment of gays as a useful ideological means of cementing community morale in the United States amongst the various classes). Difference in service to a system that stratifies and divides is in a sense a changeling, it is never itself—always a distortion, always a half-truth, and eventually, even an instrument of domination: it comes to signify the opposite of what it actually is, one means among many by which the system of capitalism perpetuates identity, unity, conformity, and control. Under capitalism, the management of difference serves to maintain the dominance of identity.

Eventually what is taken to be the non-identical (culturally, racially, ethnically) becomes

in the world of inequality an instrument of torture and pain, a device of identity through violence, by which to use disparate peoples and nations to control one another under the rubric of larger, homogenizing societies and empires.

This is especially pertinent today. We have seen the abandonment, for the most part, of the third combination listed above – Stalinism and state socialism, the attempt at both identity and equality. This has left a vacuum quickly filled by the fourth combination in varying stripes and degrees, the attempt to achieve identity and to reproduce inequality. This explains in large part the phenomenon of “globalization.” What emerges is a greater and greater degree of homogeneity spreading throughout the world in the form of consumerism, culture, language, and communications technology. Without access to other possible ways of living life, thought closes down and is pacified by the combined forces of market economy and American imperialism.

Thus the quintessential problem faced today by both critical theory and post-structuralist theories is that of the combination of identity-thought and economic inequality through market economy. The more global the market becomes, the less diverse it is, the more homogenized, the fewer the real alternatives to such a society that it creates. There is an inversely dialectical relationship as well between the degrees of inequity and invisibility of those who are poor, with the degree to which the cultural industry professes happiness for all, a pacified euphoria for the collective consensus. Our differences are eradicated by the dollar – we are equal in terms of exchange, our uniqueness as individuals is eliminated by a market that views us as identical; but the true conditions of our existence are grounded in an economic apparatus that reduces life to fragments and despair.

The establishment of economic equality between people, as producers, would mean the end of a system that homogenizes difference and eliminates the non-identical. The arguments of the critical theorists reach back to a critique of Nietzsche that suggests that what knowledge would be in a system other than capitalism, is something as yet unknown, yet valuable and worth knowing. It is easier to determine what it would not be – it would not be an instrumental, reductionist, identity-thought that subjects others, the world, to the status of an object, all at the expense of the negative, of difference and the non-identical. What would constitute “mistranslation” under a non-coercive society is provocative and demands a response. With the end of a society of inequality, one would be faced with an entirely different theory of knowledge.

### **Metaphoricity and Metabolism: Thinking the difference in difference**

The two meanings of “ungleichen” must be reflected upon in their distinction, asserted, and pronounced; what philosophy stands for is advocacy. It cannot fail this task. It must read better than it has. Thus we could revise Nietzsche’s image of knowledge as the subject hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger, to add that the tiger this subject dangles from is itself in chains.

One consequence is that post-modern thought, especially where it attempts to describe or prescribe material relations between people, appears as one-dimensional in its use of categories as the otherwise sterile political views of philosophies such as positivism or pragmatism. This is what Adorno would have called conceptual fetishism: the collapsing

of the concept to its object, the inability to recognize and maintain the distinction – and distance – between the two, a flattening out of experience into a single terrain of language and textuality. This reduction makes ambiguous what are highly unambiguous and extremely clear relations of domination. In the creation of this one-dimensional realm, anything becomes possible (a world of possibilities!) and yet nothing ever is: change is dreamt of as a forever postponed gesture of rebellion, but never undertaken, because action fails to address its real mark, to posit its object teleologically, in a realm that is not textual but physical, material, and saturated with human need. What Marx says of the idealists and non-historicist materialists in his “Theses on Feuerbach” could well apply here: “The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.”<sup>12</sup>

Another consequence is that the post-modern philosophies which have adopted Nietzsche’s problematic analysis of the rise of knowledge and have applied this concept of an “army of metaphors” onto real material relations of production, see this ascendancy into conceptual complexity as a one-way street. From simple, dare we say “immediate,” stimuli to the complexity of belief systems and law, the trail takes one direction upward and outward, or downward and inward depending upon one’s optimism or pessimism, of error and mistranslation. Yet what is missed here is that the development of knowledge is not simply a production but a reproduction of what is formed and accepted as true. Knowledge building is self-reflective – it must curve back upon itself through the activity of labor, ontology’s category of specificity, to implement what is learnt, to test it, and to further realize it into new forms. Knowledge is forever an activity of impression – of placing into practice what begins only as theory (and stimuli). Were this not true we



would still be observing the same laws and social contracts of our ancestors, our tools would not have changed, and our mode of production would continue to be one involving sticks and stone axes. Not taking into account this reflexive turn in knowledge allows Nietzsche to stay in the realm of language as a field of metaphoricity and to ignore the category of praxis or labor as something separate from language, as something that makes language, and the world, possible, and thus, changeable.

Finally, one could then suggest that there is a symbiotic, but not identical relationship between Nietzsche's concept of knowledge as a system of difference between concept and objective experience, and Marx's Darwinian idea of metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) as a system of exchange between physical and material objects and the labor that individuals apply to them to transform them into use values (and later into exchange values).<sup>13</sup> There is a mediated and complex relationship between these two realms – they are not separated by an impassable wall but by a porous barrier. Intervention in one affects intervention in the other. Philosophy's task could then be said to rethink the issue of identity/difference and equality/inequality in light of these *two* interlocked systems of metaphoricity and metabolism, Logos and Eros: difference in the world of metaphor, language and knowledge, equality in the world of labor – the maintenance of openness in critical thought, the capacity to think the negative while engaged in the activism that promises to bring justice to the world.

Because philosophy continues to be able to articulate this discrepancy means in essence that the catastrophe has not yet fully achieved closure. Thought still remains critical, open, and resistant, though it everywhere faces daunting threats to its freedom; the world

still lives, if for a little while longer. Theory and action are still possible though the time has grown so late for intervention. As long as the question can be asked, why are things what they are, and why are they not otherwise, so philosophy will still hold hope out to us suspended from its fingertips by a thin thread.

## Chapter 2

We can proceed from the last chapter into a metaphor that Nietzsche uses of the Man hovering over the marketplace, the Tightrope Walker, suspended between two gates, in his Thus Spake Zarathustra. What is curiously clear here but is eclipsed in Nietzsche's elision of value and identity in "Truth and Lie in the Extra Moral Sense" is the fact that the passage of Man, Man's overture, is held suspended above a *marketplace*. We could argue that subjectivity, or perhaps discourse (as post-modernism would argue since subjectivity today can only be bouts of performativity, communicative action, or embedded practices with a body amounting to another form of discourse in the flesh) is the tightrope walker—the walker is not Man, Man as species being is the suspended rope that ties two towers together to form a linear direction across, and discourse/subjectivity, "falls".

Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge

and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that he falls into the marketplace is profoundly significant. We again hear the echoes of Stoffwechsel from Marx's reading of the cyclical, interlocked exchange between nature and society, production and culture.

Discourse, subjectivity, or whatever else one wishes to call this spark of motor qualities that propels the walker to cross the rope (Nietzsche might have said will to power) is subject too to the gravity of economy. It is the arena into which he falls. It is below one out of sight if one's eyes are straight ahead glued to a goal, a "future", but it becomes imminently real the moment one loses balance. We are reminded of a fact which we will be reminded of throughout our reading of the post-modernists, that men and women are provided a belly, and the proof as Marx argued against all idealisms (shall we say now, all dismissals of the role of the material in the formation of discourse, culture, and society) is hunger.

This wandering across the abyss of economy, the perilous and even comic disavowal of the material base of hunger, exchange, and commoditization taking place in the theatre of Man as a species being, is matched shall we say by a similar allegory that will allow us to move a bit forward into the chronological deployment of markers from Nietzsche up to the current age. In Derrida, who is one of Nietzsche's inheritors, the reading of text and discourse becomes immersed in metaphors of sand, desert, wind, erasure, footsteps and brevity. The mark of text is always a mark of meaning already and always under erasure the moment it begins to signify anything. Like footsteps of a nomad cross a desert, the

signifier becomes dulled and ill defined by the falling sand that fills the gap up—a hole in the ground that once marked a subjective intercession in the midst of the wilderness is at once offset by the workings of *differance*. Where the wanderer is going to, where the wanderer is from is irrelevant. Even we are irrelevant because our observation is deflected by a profound lack of accuracy—we discover these remnants of meaning the way an archaeologist discovers a tomb. The writings on the walls of the crypt are illegible, they mean nothing to us—we try to translate, but unlike Nietzsche's description of translation as stammering leaps between epistemological fields of development, carrying error from one domain into the next, ours is not a leap into muddled clarity, but a scattering into misreading, a comedy of missignification.

This way, preceded by no truth, and thus lacking the prescription of truth's rigor, is the way of the Desert. Writing as the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation...we must...entrust ourselves to traces...writing is displaced on the broken line between lost and promised speech.<sup>15</sup>

The sense of meaning then is a permanent exile in the wilderness—meaning is always deferred and differed—it never “arrives”, it is always wound around itself, doubled up, always a confusing pattern that amounts to nothing more than a trace of an absence of former meaning—ghostly afterimages of something that was never truly solid to begin with (a simulacrum as Baudrillard would argue). We play with copies, with repetitions, never the original—textuality speaks a language of loss and remembrance, of faulty memory, of myth building. In a sense one could argue along these lines that ideologies of all stripes are efforts at reclaiming some absent mythical wholeness and presence whose emptiness is highlighted and emphasized all the more by the greater the effort to recapture what never was.

In the end, for Derrida, what will become crucial for him is that there is no such thing really as a walker, a subject, and no such thing really as an observer, an object, or even a destination. There is only the wandering itself, the passage, the trail of marks left in the sand that lead from nowhere to nowhere, indicating some purpose and plan at one time, but whose teleology has long since been lost in the deferral and difference that has underscored and dislodged communication and its meaning into patterns of association, incoherence, and tangential discourse. This text with its riddles is all that there is—the maker of the text and the reader of the text are essentially of no consequence except in an extremely peripheral manner because their location in terms of the text is always historically provisional—their presence is dictated to by the limits of time. They are mortal, the text is infinite. They are replaceable; the text differs but is not replaced.

It is important here to emphasize what is missing in Derrida's inheritance of Nietzsche—we have the original concern of identity as the primary impetus of western metaphysics towards a logocentric exclusion of the other from language, society, and life. Identity is shattered by the workings of difference which transform the text the moment it begins to announce its message.

Unlike his successors however, Derrida does not here address the question of value, equality or economy—he does not make the same mistake that Nietzsche makes, eliding the one term into the other to culminate into a rejection of emancipatory discourses. What is significant in fact is that Derrida's model for discussing difference is Judaic and draws upon an existentialist reading of the story of Moses via the poetry of Job. In

doing so, he creates a tension between two gestures—on the one hand, the emptiness of the desert and sand and traces of habitude, meaning, and expression are emphasized; on the other hand they are emphasized within a context or theatre of Diaspora, exodus, and the historical and Biblical echoes of liberation which haunt such a field of discussion.

We cannot think of these things without having come to mind such meanings, however ghostlike and implicit. That Derrida does nothing to disavow these pale shadings saves his work from descending into the contorted machinations his successors experienced as they attempted to think through the misreading of equality and identity as a single term, and to deploy it as a workable term for political purposes.

One could say that the emptiness of the aporia around the words within the text act as the negative rupture out of which a historical and interventionist (that is, an ethical and liberatory) God might emerge—out of the silences of difference, deliverance can erupt from nowhere:

The letter is the separation and limit in which meaning is liberated from its imprisonment in aphoristic solitude... There is an essential *lapse* between significations which is not the simple and positive fraudulence of a word... To allege that one reduces this lapse through narration, philosophical discourse, or the order of reasons or deduction, is to misconstrue language, to misconstrue that language is the *rupture* with totality itself.

...The caesura makes meaning emerge. It does not do so alone, of course; but without interruption—between letters, words, sentences, books—no signification could be awakened.<sup>16</sup>

But this does not say that meaning does not exist. Rather, it is through rupture, through the negative silences of the sands that surround the footprint of the nomad that a path is configured and sketched out from here to there, a line of progress, a history, a deity

capable of giving to human actions their mythical and archetypal significance. Only through this radical alterity and difference is meaning of any kind, including totality (which Derrida does not reject here) becomes possible. It is not a rejection of the emancipatory project of western humanism that Derrida is assailing, but rather the assumption of its false foundations, the unchallenged belief in presence and significance with a capital S. Instead, emancipation arrives out of the disintegration of being, which is that which makes being possible.

Where we would be helped in this situation is to have this desert like wandering of Derrida in his explanation of the text used or paralleled with his reading of Husserl's theory of signification and expression. Then another reading could be supplied that would complement Derrida's understanding of text. This second reading, derived from Adorno and Benjamin, from their response to Husserl's theory of intentionality, where they developed an understanding of objective logic and the primacy and irreducibility of the object to the subject, would act in a similar way to Nietzsche's allegory of the tightrope walker over the market place. In the latter, discourse as a kind of shattered and dispersed subjectivity propels the species over its humanity to overcome itself, only to fall into the arena of economy, which has been there all along as the context in which this could happen. In the former our analogy takes us to expressing two sides of one coin—the text as travel, as passage, without identity as its stopping point, as permanent postponement, of movement without arrival—in Derrida's work, where subject and object disappear in time, place over and upon a reading of the constellation from Adorno and Benjamin, where the subject and object are what they only by their difference from one another, by their negative identification or non-identity—thus in the work of Adorno

and Benjamin, the subject and object as historical entities still hold sway as crucially important for without them discourse would not be possible—it is the astrologer’s wave of the hand—his or her aesthetic gesture—that communication is announced to others—without the astrologer objects would make no sense, stars would have no correlation, patterns would not emerge. The act of annunciation is an act of artistry, but such artistry requires an artist and someone else who can see what is displayed.

As discourse without speaker/writer and without listener/reader, the text is difference in its unfolding; as economy, the artist/subject is separated from his or her object/observer by non-identity—inseparable yet irreducible.

... → ...

and

A ↔ B

This overlapping of two approaches to the same terrain, which compliment yet are not identical to one another, gives us what we have been arguing from the beginning, the possibility of combining the terms of equality and identity into one approach without allowing them to lose their distinctive meanings so that while we pay heed to the question of difference as described in Derrida’s work on text and difference, we also at the same time pay heed to the question of value, equality, and non-identity, the role of economy in asserting hierarchies, the context that provides the theater in which difference occurs.

For Derrida: *difference* → identity (made possible by what it is not)

For our purposes: economy → (*difference* → identity)



## **Husserl's Theory of Expression**

Derrida's engagement with Husserl matches his engagement with all the other figures of western philosophy but with Husserl he is gentle and kind because much of what happens in Husserl is the intention of a project that Derrida does not wholly wish to disavow.

Rather he wishes to eliminate the false dichotomy that Husserl inherits from his western metaphysical predecessors, free this phenomenological project up of its unnecessary binary oppositions, to allow it to breathe. He does not take what Husserl argues to task, but rather—as does Adorno and Benjamin—remark at the honesty of Husserl in recognizing his own failure to rescue epistemology from its antinomies.

One point at issue is the difference between indication and expression (verbal or spoken language, *Bedeutung*—meaning as ideality)—in Husserl's system expression is of a higher order because expression is both logical and immediate—it exists in a proximity to its content that indication does not achieve. Indication comes to represent *Sinn*, or sense without logical commitment to communication of meaning. What happens though is that this schism or division, which represents an old hierarchy of value between the discarded term and the proximate breath of presence, proceeds to unravel, its barrier becomes or recognizes itself already as porous, and the ancillary term assumes a base or foundation over and against the privileged term. Every expression would thus be caught up, despite itself, in an indicative process. But the reverse, Husserl recognizes, is not true.<sup>17</sup> The idealization of expression through speech forgets this original dependence on sign—even speech is a sign system, thus all forms of expression are also beholden to the laws and regulations of indication. Indication becomes the primordial, defining criteria by which

meaning becomes possible, and meaning proceeds thus out of sense, out of a physicality rather than from some ideality detached and severed from its sensual, material base.

Thus the privileging of presence through speech forgets this dependency:

Husserl speaks first of an addition or juxtaposition of function: ‘signs in the sense of indications (Anzeichen) (notes, marks, etc.) do not express anything, unless they happen to fulfill a meaning as well as...an indicative function.’ But several lines further he speaks of an intimate involvement, an entanglement (Verflechtung). This word will often reappear at decisive moments, and this is not fortuitous. In the very first paragraph he says: ‘Meaning (bedeuten)—in communicative speech (in mitteilender Rede)—is always interwoven (verflochten) with such an indicative relation.’<sup>18</sup>

The act of privileging backfires—by making all expression dependent upon signs and indicative functions, one can suddenly see the dilemma—Husserl argues that only expression carries meaning, otherwise the sign system at work is dead, yet without such “dead” signs there could be no meaning at all, hence presence is dependent, made possible, by absence, and being proceeds out of the rupture of the trace, the missing gap, the aporia.

Even further, Derrida takes the matter one step further; having unsettled the nice hierarchical value system behind Husserl’s system, he then asks what does it really mean to deal with signs—that is, what IS a sign. The simple assumptions made of signs and their obvious legibility begins to fall under scrutiny—the sign is neither simple, nor obvious, nor legible. It is a hieroglyphic, a tomb, a dead fragment that is only partly readable, whose sense (Sinn) is obscured by usage—it is neither flat and positive, nor cancelable and concealing of some hidden meaning (Bedeuten) buried beneath the surfaces of its gesture. Rather, all meaning and sense collide with a difference that makes

meaning and sense conceivable—the sign carries its extinction within it, and it’s this extinction which allows meaning and sense to emerge, in however fragmented a form it may be. One is reminded of the Kabbalistic fable of the universe as a once whole vase that God has made, now shattered into fragments; thus we encounter always shards that direct our attention to some infinitely incomplete whole. Just as expression and indication have been unraveled in their dichotomy, the porous barrier between them lowered enough to demonstrate mutual contamination, so the sign itself, upon which each form of address and communication rests, is also a thing not unto itself, a split entity that gives light only because it continually lapses back into space and darkness—light and meaning and even sense as its physicality are the exceptions to the rule.<sup>19</sup>

The key to this incompleteness is time—the sign is repeatable, which entails its continual loss, like a coin that is exchanged from buyer to seller and back again, to such a degree and for so many times that its face is eroded away by touch. The repeatableness of the text ensures its capacity to “sign”—to signify and mean something that can be read, but this meaning, this reading is always a partial experience because the sign is never entirely itself—as a copy of a copy of a copy, as a faded ghost of some lost origin, it is never entirely what it claims itself to be—it is always different from itself.

A sign is never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but ‘once’ would not be a sign; a purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign...It must remain the *same*, and be able to be repeated as such, despite and across the deformations which the empirical event necessarily makes it undergo. A phoneme or grapheme is necessarily always to some extent different each time that it is presented in an operation or a perception. But, it can function as a sign, and in general as language, only if a formal identity enables it to be issued again and to be recognized. This identity is necessarily ideal. It thus necessarily implies representation: as *Vorstellung*.<sup>20</sup>

Like the fetishization of currency and value in capitalist economy, an ideal unity and identity is conferred upon the sign out of necessity, but this necessity belies its expedience—it is not an essence that lies somehow dormant or buried within the sign itself, but rather is an interpretation that is agreed upon out of habit, a general consensus that has been built up over time through the sign repetition. Because the sign can be repeated, its radical difference (which makes of it something other than itself with every usage, every encounter), can be ignored or circumvented. An “identity” is developed through repetition and use—just as Nietzsche had argued in his essay on metaphor.

But “as soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not-now, perception and nonperception, in the zone of primordially common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*... This alterity is in fact the condition for presence, presentation, and thus for *Vorstellung* in general.”<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, the western gesture that has attempted to annul this alterity is rooted in a particular teleology of dominance and coercion; with the sweeping away of time as that which rips the sign in two, repeatedly, giving it its facticity, and by asserting a permanence, a mythical cohesion that is unshakeable by changes of culture, language, epoch, law, custom, and technology, western logo centricism establishes two things—a teleology of essentialism in the value of the ends, and a matching ideology of progress which denies the torn-in-twoness of the material world, a world mutilated by commodity based-exchange. In ideality, the sign acts as a system of identity despite its foundation of difference; in materiality the commodity acts as a system of equality, despite its exchange within a world beset by poverty, hunger, and need.

This teleology with its matching ideology are two facets of one coin, they sanctify and normalize current practices ranging from epistemology to economy and cultural and social practices and customs that are taken for granted. To imagine a world or a knowledge constructed in terms wholly different than the one in which we live invites derision. In espousing a kind of flattened identity where alterity is vanquished or the very least marginalized as a necessary “evil”, identity assumes a totalitarian character. In being incapable of recognizing its dependence upon the other, the difference, the dark that allows facets and moments of unity and agreement to emerge amongst much that is not in unity or agreement, identity becomes dictatorial. It is this aspect of identity which Derrida has most in mind when toppling the tables of values and demonstrating the irriterability of the sign over its permanence and presence. He has successfully shown time to be both the law of this teleology and its undoing, its nemesis.

In truth, the telos which announces the fulfillment, promised for “later,” has already and beforehand opened up sense as a relation with the object. This is what is meant by the concept of normality each time it occurs in Husserl’s description. The norm is knowledge, the intuition that is adequate to its object, the evidence that is not only distinct but also “clear.” It is the full presence of sense to a consciousness that is itself self-present in the fullness of its life, its living present....In its ideal value, then, the whole system of “essential distinctions” is a purely teleological structure. By the same token, the possibility of distinguishing between the sign and the non-sign, linguistic sign and nonlinguistic sign, expression and indication, ideality and nonideality, subject and object, grammaticalness and nongrammaticalness, pure grammaticalness and empirical grammaticalness, pure general grammaticalness and pure logical grammaticalness, intention and intuition, etc., is deferred ad infinitum.<sup>22</sup>

Normality is the plasticity of a surface founded in presence, or its illusions, its dogma, its profession of faith, and its ideology.

And in fact what we can argue here is that precisely where Derrida uses the term teleology to describe the impetus for a series of “necessary” divisions in western metaphysics that are already, always unraveled by mutual contamination, Adorno and Benjamin would replace the term teleology with ideology. For Derrida does not explain why Husserl reannounces this divisiveness in his metaphysics and epistemology, rather he explains only that it is ultimately impossible, that perhaps there is a premise of goal at the end of the exercise that attracts the denial of difference. But Derrida does not explain that this epistemological denial is really the necessary product of a world torn in two—that material conditions of existence require the production of a thinking that is articulated along lines of hierarchy, division, primacy and periphery, and antinomy. The division of labor that underscores the existence of every human being underscores the kind of thinking that such production makes possible.

And finally we could argue in passing over to Adorno and Benjamin’s critique of Husserl, that there are really two kinds of time here—there is the time of difference, which produces a signification that is already eroded and misread—a repeated text that is never original and never whole or unified, that is always “wandering”, always lost, always infinitely interpretable. Time in this case does two contradictory things—it conceives through habit and repetition the illusion of identity in signs, making communication possible over a landscape of ruins, and yet at the same time, time is the production of the disintegration of these same signs, is the death that haunts the letters, that makes all meanings derived from them provisional and circumstantial.

There is another time which one might construe as messianic, one that wrenches this temporal time out of its provisionality—one could use multiple parallels by which to conjure up the difference: where the steps as signs under erasure that lose identity, that act only as fragments conveying some lost unity to a subjectivity that is ghostlike are the signs of a temporal, fetishized time, permeated by their repeatability like carbon copies owing their reproduction to no origin, this other time is the God of history interrupting the flow of human events by intercession and catastrophe, by the institution of law and deliverance from oppression, by an act of alteration to the context more enormous than anything the subject as agency could ever master or make.

Whereas in postmodernism, discourse is the textuality of a time ripped by difference, announcement, heraldry, in sense of an angelic cry, a trumpet sound, a shofar call, something inhuman and sublime, blasts into this limited time like a knife. Whereas the focus of analysis in Derrida's work is on a critique of identity and presence in textuality in the time that is produced, made possible, by deferral and difference, the focus of the "event" of messianic time is ethics, the question of equality, the promise of deliverance, the issue of value. Where one is a matter of epistemology, the other is a matter of economy.

Finally we can bring ourselves into the flipside of the same coin of the discussion by moving from Derrida and the analysis of difference in text to an analysis of the logic of the object as the question of equality in the work of Adorno and Benjamin. In Derrida's work we find the preoccupation is fully upon the message and not the messenger nor the recipient, that the text is always the activity that actually makes the question of

subjectivity and objective logic possible (and at the same time, makes subjectivity and objective logic “impossible”):

The absence of intuition—and therefore of the subject of intuition—is not only tolerated by speech; it is required by the general structure of signification, when considered in itself....The total absence of the subject and object of a statement—the death of the writer and/or the disappearance of the object he was able to describe—does not prevent a text from “meaning” something.<sup>23</sup>

The text spirals out of itself in imminent repetition—always different from itself, always doubled against itself each time it is interpreted.

What matters however most for Adorno and Benjamin is the flipside to this image—it is precisely the “subject” and the “object of the statement” which hold tantamount importance for them. Deconstruction, unlike instrumental rationality, does not represent a reduction of the distance of subject to object or the domination of the former over the latter—rather it represents the erasure of the subject and object in favor of a resuscitation of the text as text. For Adorno and Benjamin however, all there is is subject and object, and the subject arranges the objects around him or her the way an astrologer might “arrange” the stars into coherent patterns that can be deciphered and communicated to others. These “constellations” of concepts are what produce “ideas,”<sup>24</sup> and though concepts may change rather quickly over time, it is their configurations into larger ideas which change over historical time. The reduction of the object to the subject is an act of appropriation and domination—it will be Adorno’s and Benjamin’s attempt to offer a noninstrumental approach to rationality and epistemology in their response to Husserl’s work which will serve as a way of discussing the flipside to deconstruction and the analysis of text: that is the question of equality, economy, and liberation.



## **Objective Logic: an answer to Husserl's concept of intentionality and the question of equality**

From text we are now working with subject and objects—like oases in the desert of erasure and difference. These points of reference are not “unreal”—they are not simply textual though they are that too. They are historical, comprised of a context that is interventionist, messianic, driven by a different kind of Time of which we will speak later.

Adorno and Benjamin recognized that there is another propensity in western thought regarding the eradication of difference—it parallels the primacy accorded to presence, unity, logo centrism—it is rationality's tendency to subsume the object beneath the domination of an all-knowing subject. This tendency they named “instrumental rationality.” So in a fundamental sense both Derrida and Adorno/Benjamin were addressing the same gesture of identity thought, except they were approaching it from different vantage points.

For Husserl, truth is always intentional—one intends the object by thinking of it, conceptualizing it—there can be no object per se without this addressing, this forwardness “towards”. The transcendental reduction involves a bracketing out of the empirical, changing aspects of the object—its transitoriness—leaving a thought-object behind which does not change with time, something permanent and universally true. But as Susan Buck-Morss has suggested, in her book on Adorno and Benjamin<sup>25</sup> it is precisely in the fact that the object changes that conditions what we can know about it—

the fact that the object is subject to time means its truth alters and is not fixed, static, or permanent. Husserl had the wrong end of the telescope! It is not that there is no truth; rather, Husserl was beholden to the western fixation with identity—in trying to establish a universal, timeless truth in the interest of epistemology and science, he lost the crux of the question: it is not that the object failed the criteria of truth, but that the criteria was inconsistent with what truth actually is. It is precisely in its lack of permanence, in its provisionality and cultural specificity that truth resides—as Benjamin argued, truth is accidental; it comes when the object presents itself as it is to the viewer.

The object of knowledge, determined as it is by the intention inherent in the concept, is not the truth. Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention.<sup>26</sup>

The western paradigm was to go to the object ostensibly, perhaps we could say with self-deception in play, thinking we are “going to the objects themselves” as the famous phenomenologist rallying cry would have us believe. But what actually happened would be not unlike what happens when a worker produces an object in capitalist industry through the expenditure of his or her labor-power: the object produced is then lost through its appropriation by another, by the capitalist, who now “owns” it. Ownership then means appropriation of the life-blood, the life-energy of another. In epistemology, knowledge ends up meaning the appropriation of the object by the subject, its “ownership” by the knower—the object is subsumed, dominated, absorbed like a microscopic organism by a giant amoeba swallowing up everything in its path. The universe becomes the extension of mind—and extension of Man; it is no accident then that Benjamin was a Marxist, for what he saw in Husserl’s description of intentionality

matched what he saw in the workings of capitalism—whether inanimate objects (which are never actually inanimate for the mystic residing inside of Benjamin) or whether they are other people, the act of appropriation and domination by the all-knowing subject, or the capitalist, is a similar *fait accompli*. The world in all its differential glory is reduced to a unified, homogenized whole—difference is eliminated in favor of similitude, the Other is sterilized, vanquished, eliminated or transformed into the Same, by the Same. The world itself in its materiality becomes an object of use to be devoured by the instrumental aspiration of controlling Man.

Intentionality which was originally meant as a way out of doubt, comes full circle to be an excuse for a rationality which eliminates dissent. Thus later Adorno and Horkheimer will trace this path from the Enlightenment, as a path that led from the intentions of preserving the primacy of reason as an operating principle in knowledge to the totalitarian systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In place of intentionality Benjamin and Adorno offer a reversal to the procedure—they call upon the subject to undergo what they see as an unintentionality towards the object, in which the object and its logic is “listened to”. One climbs into the world of the object, is subsumed by it, not reduced to it, nor reduces it to oneself in turn, but experiences it as it is. For Adorno the way out of totalitarian tendencies inherent in western metaphysics and instrumental rationality was the recognition, on a logical level, the principle of nonidentity. In his argument with Husserl he asserted the principle that it is precisely the arbitrary changes and provisionality of the object which we know—truth is precisely this flexible change, this transformation—far from being a static universal, truth is a process,

a motion, something that “continues” rather than sits still like an edifice or a structure that is immobile and timeless. For a model Adorno used music—music unfolds in a progression that is very much according to its own lines of logical development—in a fundamental sense music “composes itself”—the composer as subject acts as a conduit, must be trained to understand how to write music, how to listen, how to hear—but the composition itself has a direction that is its own, that is born out of silence. As it emerges it can take one of many different possible courses, but this does not make it relativistic—not all sound is music, and not all music is effective aesthetically. The most effective music is that in which the presence of the subject is almost nonexistent—the composer steps into the background and intrudes as little as possible to allow the music to make its way.

On another logical level more embedded in the western philosophical tradition, Adorno used the arguments of Hegel in the *Greater Logic* regarding identity to state that the argument of and for identity,  $A=A$ , is always at the same time an argument for non-identity.

Inherent in the meaning of a pure identical judgment is the nonidentity of its members. In an individual judgment sameness can be predicated only of things that are not the same; otherwise the claim inherent in the form of the judgment—that something is this or that—is not met.<sup>27</sup>

The actual act of predication, the assertion of a thing, also is an assertion of time—to say this is this or this is that takes time, marks time, sets the thing into place temporally, not only spatially—and time intrudes in such a way as to split the object in two, to make it other than itself: the first  $A$  in  $A=A$  is not the same as the second  $A$ , literally, figuratively,

logically—it both is the same and is not the same, its identity carries the rejoinder of its difference. Both are couched in the act of predication. The thing asserted is a thing undone.

Adorno like Derrida wishes to go a bit further though than to simply state the obvious; he wishes to suggest that rather than nonidentity as the afterthought or residual matter left over from identity claims above, one must recognize that identity is actually dependent and made possible only by nonidentity—“sameness can be predicated only of things that are not the same”. It is the difference of the thing to itself that allows us to recognize it as what it claims to be. Just as it is the changing, altering, provisional characteristic of a thing that we’ve supposedly bracketed out of the “thought-object” that actually give us recognition of what a thing is. Idealism is made possible by materiality.

Benjamin’s description of this same process takes upon itself more of an aesthetic and visual nature—this makes sense since Benjamin was often drawn to the arts and architecture, theatre, activities in which truth making were done that had a visual aspect to them, whereas Adorno was often drawn either to the logic of texts such as Hegel’s *Logic* or to music which possesses a mathematical cohesion on paper before it is transformed into the aesthetic realm when played.

Benjamin’s description of unintentionality takes the form of the astrologer who is, according to him, the earliest manifestation of the mimetic impulse, the first apparition of the artist. The astrologer through a wave of his or her hand arranges the stars into readable patterns—this gesture does not dominate the stars but rather works with what

is—the stars are offset from one another by difference, by nonidentity—they only “are” by the fact that they are negatively offset from one another. Their difference is what gives them identity. The patterns or maps that are pulled out of their positions are provisional and culturally specific, they change with time, with the one doing the gesture, with individual psychology, with the historical needs of the present. And finally all of this acts as a complex metaphor for Benjamin to describe the creation of truth.

The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality as such a configuration. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them...The idea thus belongs to a fundamentally different world from which it apprehends...Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.<sup>28</sup>

The physical object is not reducible to the concept of it, but it is also not separable from it—working with Husserl’s schemata of the thought-object, Benjamin is denying the possibility of a conceptual object that is identical with itself—rather the thought object is always embedded within, around, by the material, empirical thing it represents to thought. The thought-object is the subject’s encounter with the object.

And thought-objects are related further to one another by their nonidentity to each other—we conceptually know the object only by being different, nonidentical to it; we are able aesthetically, intellectually to link concepts together into ideas only by their nonidentity to one another as well. Ideas are the constellations that result from these negative associated relationships. Truth is the outcome of constellations of object/thoughts—the ideas that emerge from constellations, the relationships that are produced by the wave of a hand, come to hold as truth for that particular epoch, culture, and clime. For Benjamin, the impulse to truth as an epistemological investigation is

inseparable from the mimetic, aesthetic gesture. It's only when the mimetic gesture is denied, when a different literal, instrumental manner of approaching the thing in question is applied that we have the beginnings of totalitarianism and identity thought to the intended exclusion of nonidentity and difference.

### **A different way of seeing**

It is possible to see objects as equal without being the same. Difference does not die with the assertion of equality, nor is equality realized with the establishment of identity. What Adorno and Benjamin's model for epistemological inquiry, based on negative dialectics and nonidentity, does is to uphold as primary the role of nonidentity in the construction of knowledge and identity. Uniformity, unity, wholeness, totality are possible only by this differential play between objects and subject, between objects and their concepts, between concepts and one another—like the universe these relationships spread out in wider and wider widths but the principle remains the same: recognition and communication of what is recognized occurs only by a context in which the thing is made known by what it is not.

It is useful to consider that it is precisely the elimination of this negative context which constitutes what we would call reification. In reified society the context is flattened so that all things and all relationships under capitalism appear to have an equal bearing. The law of exchange produces a false equality between things and people—this false equality mimics the false similitude found in identity thought. The difference of the object to its concept is denied just as the real relationship between capitalist and the one who toils is

denied. Identity thought, logocentrism, instrumental rationality—whatever name it is given—does two things at once: it flattens nonidentity out making knowledge the production of a dominating subject, a text that is self-identical and whole, and it camouflages the true relationship between human beings in all of their mutilated barbarity, depriving them of their sting and shock. As Benjamin often said the goal in reified society is to experience a shock of awakening, that electric moment of conflict that can occur in odd and unexpected arrangements between things—surrealism being one example of an artistic attempt to elicit shock. Shock wakes the soul to what the world is.

The two complementary theories of knowledge described above provide flip sides to one coin—they inhabit the same theoretical space—the desert landscape—in one a question of nomadic interlude and wandering that is always accompanied by an infinite loss that deprives meaning of final arrival and truth of final ends; in the other the sparse marking of cities or oases in between distances of nonidentity, nonreducible to one another, different, yet intelligible, linkable, forming maps by which the mind can travel to inform itself of higher and more complex ideas. Such ideas enter what we could call the historical time of intervention or redemption, where the objects themselves are redeemed by the intercession and participation of the subject—not as an appropriation of the objects in question, but as a way of hearing their call, a vocation, where phenomenology is truly realized in all of its radical potential as the transformation of the world into a new realm.



## Chapter 3

### The Post Modern Condition

The principle problem then that haunts all of the post-modern project, from Lyotard through Laclau, from Stuart Hall to the post-colonialists, is this: equality is confused with identity, and when identity is jettisoned in order to privilege the discarded term of difference, equality is likewise abandoned.

It should be apparent by now that we are repeating the problem of idealism versus materialism, but simply under a different form. After Derrida and the move from phenomenology into deconstruction, post-modernism took flight into the realm of the ideal by enclosing reality within textuality and discourse, rather than the other way around. This privileging or reversal of the traditional epistemological dichotomy has had the tendency of collapsing the difference between the two—reality actually becomes text. We could argue here that this is the opposite error to vulgar Marxism in which textuality and discourse were the products of a crude economism and base/superstructure relationship in which anything ideal, having to do with the problem of knowledge, of identity, was the consequence of economy. The reversal of an error is still an error.

This can be seen most clearly in the theories espoused by Lyotard. This chapter will examine his idealism (which is translated by the term “language games”) and it will look at some of the cultural studies attempts at responding to the problem such idealism poses, for example its disavowal of political identity and liberation. Cultural studies, still acting within the terrain of an idealism, a terrain set up and defended by Lyotard and others,

does not succeed successfully in addressing these concerns not because it fails to recognize the problem this stance poses for political engagement, but because it remains faithful to a context, a textually privileged terrain, that is the actual cause of the problem itself, and which precludes any possible solution.

Language games, same old games

Lyotard's most important, most famous work, The Postmodern Condition, begins with a declaration that the status, character and operation of knowledge in post-industrial societies has undergone a dramatic and drastic change.<sup>29</sup> He argues that this change varies from society to society, and even within a given society, depending on what section of the post-industrial workforce we are examining. What is interesting is that the focus initiates the split between idealism and materialism—idealism is a knowledge that has undergone a dramatic shift, the reason being the change in the material base. This has only occurred in post-industrial societies. An equation is made between post-modernism and post-industrialism, and the inference is that the latter is the cause of the former. This is the consequence of a reconstruction that took place in Europe after the Second World War—it is hence a European experience.

Lyotard argues that science is a discourse, which sets it in line with other forms of discourse; he also suggests that the leading kind of science is that which is focused upon problems of language—hence discourse on discourse.<sup>30</sup> The most revolutionary changes have occurred then in the realm of information technology, in the development of new

forms of communication and exchange on the level of the ideal—on the level of text and knowledge.<sup>31</sup> What he is describing is a kind of self-perpetuating machine—an impetus that focuses money, production, interest, and outcome in consumption and involvement in and upon the subject of discourse and language, and with such changes in how language, discourse, knowledge are used, developed, and learned, their content is necessarily changed. If we were to be brusque we might suggest this is a dialectical experience, via the mediation of the Hegelian negative—form and content constantly alter one another because they mediate with one another in the process known as history. The form of language and communication alters the content, and vice versa. This too is an idealistic suggestion since it is divorced of a base or economic condition upon which it can proceed. No mention is made to the conditions under which this technological revolution has proceeded, and though it appears global, the internet appearing to unite all corners of the globe into one unified yet differential whole, 80% of the globe's population has in fact never heard a dial tone,<sup>32</sup> effectively demonstrating that it is a technological revolution for a very select few.

As for the second function, it is common knowledge that the miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited. It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media).<sup>33</sup>

What is useful in this reference is what it leaves out. The 80% of the world's population still goes to school under a village tree, sits in a semi-circle around a teacher who has no classroom, no chalkboard, and no books. But what this 80% of the world serves is the hidden presence of an economic bulwark that maintains the operation of the machinery in

the small parts of the world where Lyotard's vision operates. We could argue that it is a sickened metabolism—where the circulation of sounds and visual images have undergone this transference into a hyper reality, a virtual realm of imagination, ordinary reality stays stuck in the realm of poverty, famine, and disease. A distance is established between the ideal and the material because the material has been swallowed up as simply a product of and altered by the ideal—science is discourse (ideal), and science that matters is science of discourse (doubly ideal)—which brings us to our first point once more, a doubling up of an error is still the endorsement of an error.

When Lyotard says that the nature of knowledge will be altered to such an extent that nothing will fall outside of this operation, and if it does it is not worth speaking of—we have in a sense a blocked off space of non-discursive mystery. This is a twirling back to pre-Marxist days where the actual exchange of labor power for goods was mystified into acts of magic and inexplicability. 80% of the population of the world is consigned to a kind of eclipse, a marginalized afterworld that does not partake of the information revolution and therefore does not count. These figures then constitute a region of ghosts and apparitions, copies of a lost original, because they, by fault of their economic status and impoverishment, will be “spoken about”—the permanent subaltern subjected to control, organization, decipherment and ordering by those with power and income who control the process and relations of production. “The ‘producers’ and users of knowledge must now, and will have to, possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn.”<sup>34</sup> This means that those who translate content into a new form are a minority with the appearance of a majority because the new form of communication by which this content proceeds appears to be global and omniscient.

But this minority aspect to Lyotard's enterprise or rather the enterprise he describes as happening in Europe, America, Japan, etc., is cloaked under the guise of a universal operation affecting the planet, and that is because it always has been this way, since the days of mercantilism, through the age of imperialism, into the loss of colonies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century into our present age of a so called post-colonialist dawn in which the speechless speak back. But even those who speak back are a select few chosen by the minority in the north to represent the silent masses of the south—in a sense post-colonialism is still another form of selected discourse on the part of a more powerful neighbor. Articulation, in the cultural studies and post-colonialist gesture of trying to rescue Lyotard's technocratic fantasies from implosion, becomes just another form of domination and disavowal of responsibility. Whether we are speaking of Lyotard or those who have tried to salvage his argument on behalf of the primacy of language games, we are still dealing with an approach which cloaks and conceals the true relationship of subservience and dependency in the world, of a subjugation to working conditions which are as brutal and barbaric as any in pre-industrial feudal society.

Though ultimately in his argument Lyotard will wish to assert the necessity of abandoning the metanarrative of emancipation stemming in part from the age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, his discourse charts out a development that is purely circular and insular—it wraps itself around the technological advances and consumption of a north that lives and thrives—in *content*—on the backs of an invisible south, while expressing a technological progress in terms of *form* (to which those in the south are not privy to).

A pessimistic reading of Lyotard could argue that while the form of knowledge has undergone a radical alteration in the rich north, its content is no more enlightened or liberated than what it replaced, and could in fact be conceived as having devolved into a kind of populist banality and garish exchange of mass culture. The second half of this chapter will examine this—that Lyotard is pessimistic in his estimation of what has been achieved in the radical transformation of science and technology, and that cultural studies theorists have assailed him on this point, for his elitism, arguing instead that the devolvement of content is actually an opening towards hegemony and the possibility of democratic political action.

But this is aside from the point. The insularity of this circular relationship between production and consumption is somehow missed by Lyotard. Like his 16<sup>th</sup> century forefathers, he too views capitalism, in its appearance as technology, as a kind of global Wunderkind, a web of relations encompassing the entire world, forgetting or missing that the schism between technology in the realm of ideals (textuality, language, knowledge, discourse) and the material conditions under which most of the world lives cannot be bridged by non-dialectical leaps of imagination, advertising slogans, centrally controlled media feeds, and politicians' lies.

The relationships of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.<sup>35</sup>

The goal is an idealist exchange between participants that are more or less relatively equal to one another (shall we say, equal enough?) in the northern countries; such exchange bypasses and ignores the real exchange between material wealth and production of the south for the supply, consumption, and life-blood of the north. Lyotard goes on to acknowledge that the gap between north and south is likely to be maintained and widen by the dominance of science in terms of technology—those with technology will hold onto it while those without it will beg. But the forecasting of battles and wars over knowledge, which has already happened, does not resolve in favor of the weaker party, and the weaker party is not originally weaker due to a lack of information technology—information technology is no reason for wealth or its absence the reason for third world impoverishment. The reason for this impoverishment is the role required of so called developing nations to supply the resources and wealth to a technologically superior north, from cobalt minerals in the Congo to supply cell phone technology, to oil from the Middle East, Nigeria, and Venezuela, all hot spots of control and interference by the north into the affairs of the south. More importantly—the food, the clothing, the cars, the wood and concrete and building materials for housing—these basic necessities come from the south, from cheap labor that can be made cheaper through the destabilization of regimes unfriendly to northern concerns and needs. This parasitical dependency is submerged in Lyotard's account which focuses on the form rather than the content of exchange where technology is involved.

Thus when “nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor (...) A new field is opened for industrial and

commercial strategies on the one hand, and political and military strategies on the other”<sup>36</sup> Lyotard is not speaking of north versus south, rich versus poor countries, but rather of technologically advanced countries battling technologically advanced countries. Again we are still within the realm of the ideal because this second “base” of production is ignored—the base that makes the first base of production, information technology, possible.

This privileging of technologically advanced societies (which thereby speak for the non-technological majority of the world) leads Lyotard to espouse a possible oppositional element in the form of the masses, in the consumer, the individual, the one who buys—he or she will be the one whose demands will help dictate a more democratic form or direction to which this technology will take. This short suggestion (he only makes it in passing)<sup>37</sup> will eventually lead us into the realm of cultural studies as a more fully developed form of political advocacy.

But Lyotard argues that these transformations of the form of knowledge and its production also affect the ownership of the product—in essence, the question of nation-states will become more obsolete given that control of capitalism is now more fully in the hands of corporations.

The question threatens to become even more thorny with the development of computer technology and telematics. Suppose, for example, that a firm such as IBM is authorised to occupy a belt in the earth’s orbital field and launch communications satellites or satellites housing data banks. Who will have access to them? Who will determine which channels or data are forbidden? The State? Or will the State simply be one user among others? New legal issues will be raised, and with them the question: “who will know?”<sup>38</sup>



This is a straw-man argument because it poses a false problem grounded on false premises; there is no thorny question when it comes to the question of technology—evidence to the contrary, technology is very much a national issue, or at times regional, but nation-states are very far from being obsolete (one is reminded of the dispute about satellite GPS and Europe's attempt to compete with the US over this by launching its own satellites, or the struggle over the internet, which is controlled by the US military which shows no sign of relinquishing such oversight and management. Only its fluidity makes it appear as if it had no single owner but were a new form of exchange based on radical democratic pluralism—the reality is that with one gesture the United States could halt all internet exchange globally).

#### Tempest in a Teapot

We have not moved at all from Marx's observation that the ruling ideas are still those of the ruling classes; and when these take the form of nation-states, then national interests preside over international ones. The computerization of society that Lyotard describes as being the most likely scenario for societies in which this technological change has occurred, is a condition that has transformed the societies which are the owners of the means of production, not the societies that produce. Because we never began with a proper distinction between these forms of production—the production of information in the northern societies versus a production of basic material items for survival by the southern societies for the benefit of the northern societies—we have conflated the two. In this sense we are again reenacting Nietzsche's flawed transposition of the double-meaning term *gleich* into one definition. By such a repetition of the *aporia* in

Nietzsche's thought, 80% of the world population becomes an afterthought. A scattering of admissions and acknowledgements towards the raw materials supplied by these peoples and nations to the north for informational technology notwithstanding.

This *aporia* and its persistence makes of Lyotard's next move from the dominance of science to the question of legitimation a "tempest in a teapot" since it is a quandary that affects perhaps 20% of the world's population, much like Nietzsche's mosquito or gnat which imagines the universe in gnat-terms and itself as the center of everything.

When Lyotard moves into the question of legitimation as a question of competing language games, we are struggling with a landscape that is somewhat reminiscent of Althusser's definition of ideology as the act of enunciation and naming, the moment something is "called"—taking what is the effect of a complex economically and textually interwoven exchange into the realm of discourse, language and ideal. This move makes sense when we see where it began, it began in viewing the forces of production as informational and technologically communicative. So long as production was only seen as this, the move into the ideal landscape of discourse could be permitted and avowed.

It is useful to make the following three observations about language games. The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players (which is not to say that the players invent the rules). The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a "move" or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define. The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game.

This last observation brings us to the first principle underlying our method as a whole: to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the

domain of a general agonistics. This does not necessarily mean that one plays in order to win. A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention ...

This idea of an agonistics of language should not make us lose sight of the second principle, which stands as a complement to it and governs our analysis: that the observable social bond is composed of language “moves.”<sup>39</sup>

There are several things to say in response to what Lyotard writes above: language games are not neutral and they reside on contracts that are heavily invested with economic undercurrents, conditions and contexts which remain hidden from view (most of the time). Fight and play, two characteristics of language games, are also not neutral conditions or experiences of the game being played—they are aspects of an antagonism that is material at heart, but whose materiality is never or rarely evoked or seen. Play in fact rests upon the ruins of millions; it is a play that possesses culpability for being a form of exchange that is light hearted and “fun” within a landscape and terrain which is haunted by horror. And finally that the “observable social bond is composed of language ‘moves’” does not explain to us what are the non-observable social bonds composed of? Only a positivistic reading of human interaction and society would conceive of social bonds as purely observable, plastic, surface and superficial actions. This plasticity of the social relation can be contrived as one of discourse founded in the push and pull of language games only when the materiality underlying true human costs and sacrifice is eclipsed by pleasure. To put it another way, the pleasure in the language games between actors in a social bond occurs within a context whose composition resides upon the backs of those who remain invisible—from the shirts and pants and skirts worn by the speakers, to the table that they sit at, to the coffee that they drink. Such paraphernalia is never neutral or simply “there”—because we have begun in the idealist realm of discourse we have avoided the material context in which these settings and props are applied. But their

composition and production speaks a silent language mired by a violence of inequality, poverty, and hunger—again we might think of Benjamin’s citation of the object’s unique aura of authenticity—in our ideal realm of discourse, this aura is made mute, the objects lose their capacity to speak to us, their silence tells volumes but this communication is ignored and deflected by the game of the pleasurable social bond and contract afforded through discourse.

It matters then from what premise one starts. In addressing the question of knowledge as a question divorced of economic and material reality, Lyotard fails ever to leave the northern countries, the circular, insular argumentation of technology and information production, and the problems that this latter, parochial question poses—the problem of legitimation. Legitimation is a problem only for 20% of the world’s population, it is a question only for those who consistently have enough to eat. One could push this a bit further: it is a distraction to those who do have enough to discuss it from the real problem which is the domination of the objects within one’s reach by a subjective logic that transforms all economic production into a question of technology and communications, and all human relations into a question of discourse and language games.

In his description of the two models of contemporary society, the traditional model of positivism and systems theory of society as a unified whole, advocated by Comte, Luhman, and Parsons, versus the critical theorist or Marxist model of society as a dualistic struggle between two sides, Lyotard is charting out his third approach which is the approach of difference. But in citing critical theory he disparages it because of its weakening of the literalness of a reading of society as class warfare—in their attempt to

rescue Marxism from its rigidification and incorporation into Stalinism, the critical theorists searched for alternative models for the vanguard of radical political agency.

But the social foundation of the principle of division, or class struggle, was blurred to the point of losing all of its radicality; we cannot conceal the fact that the critical model in the end lost its theoretical standing and was reduced to the status of a “utopia” or “hope,” a token protest raised in the name of man or reason or creativity, or again of some social category such as the Third World or the students – on which is conferred in extremes the henceforth improbable function of critical subject.<sup>40</sup>

I would argue strongly against this diagnosis because there are several problems with it, it confuses failure with error. It suggests that because the working class did not bring the world into socialism, then the model of diagnosis is somehow wrong.

But failure in solving the problem does not constitute an error in acknowledging the problem—in fact one could argue that critical theory is divided along a spectrum of those who respond in varying degrees of integrity and honesty to a situation which is fraught with tragic loss. Some espouse in a desperate hope for an alternative the solutions Lyotard disparages like the Third World or students as a substitute vanguard; others choose to accept no vanguard and to see the loss of the working class as a viable agency of change as a historical tragedy that leaves the species in little hope for a future. One could further say that the dismissal of the problem because the solution posed by one interpretation of the problem “lost” the war is the height of an alienated outlook. The cultural studies criticism of Lyotard is in response to this heightened alienation which proclaims no problem in the midst of the problem’s victory over a non-mutilated world.

Much of Lyotard’s argument takes the line that a third course or interpretation of the “problem” of organized society is needed to account for the changes in technology and information production. We again have a collapse of two conditions into one—the world

of technology and knowledge as science, and the world of production, toil, poverty, and commodity-based exchange. Somehow these two worlds never meet, nor is their mutual interdependence ever mentioned or explained in factual terms. Further, the latter of the two is whisked away as a 19<sup>th</sup> century memory of the industrial revolution. As he says “the alternative it attempts to resolve, but only reproduces, is no longer relevant for the societies with which we are concerned.”<sup>41</sup> Even for the societies with which he is concerned, this is not actually true—if we have learned one thing from Derrida it is this—to establish a barrier between the one and the other is to already transgress that barrier by contamination. The Third World, a compilation of societies with which Lyotard is not concerned, permeates the First World—the slum inhabits our backyard.

We could make an argument here that the faster the world spins for those in the north, in terms of communication, exchange, and material accumulation, the faster the images, the faster the news, the more quickly comes information at the push of a button, the slower this other shadow world revolves until its motion and life force is all but blackened out by the visibility of the world it keeps alight and in motion. Motion here does not occur in a vacuum, as Deleuze and Spinoza would agree; motion here is dependent upon the expenditure and sacrifice of life from another realm that remains subjected to it—apart from one another yet inseparable.

This breaking up of the grand Narratives (discussed below, sections 9 and 10) leads to what some authors analyse in terms of the dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion. Nothing of the kind is happening: this point of view, it seems to me, is haunted by the paradisaic representation of a lost “organic” society.<sup>42</sup>

Lyotard argues that this loss of center is not something new, but only newly recognized because technology has freed the illusions of the grand narratives from deluding us into believing that there is a center. But the point is a myopic one; it revolves around a system that is contained within a larger context that remains hidden and invisible, mute and silent, like a giant holding a handful of sand. The squabbling misses the point—center or no center is of no relevance to this giant whose opinion is never asked, whose existence is not even acknowledged, whose power is denied.

There is perhaps more of a theoretical reason for Lyotard's disavowal of the giant in whose hand he stands—it rests upon the premise he begins with, using language games as his starting point. Much as with Althusser, Lyotard is advocating an understanding of the social bond as that which consists in giving the child a name. “Even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.”<sup>43</sup> While this constitutes the act of identity in the origins of the social bond, a second bond that precedes the first bond occurs with the parents who have the child—before the child is even born, a set of economic relations is placed that make the child's life either a promising one, filled with opportunity and hope, or one fraught with accident, mishap, and despair. These conditions are not arbitrary, only whether one is born into them. The conditions are as scientifically analyzable as the atom. They stem from the decisions and actions of men and women, in the devising of economic wealth and distribution. To start in an account with the individual as the smallest, most basic starting point to describe the origins of the subject is to miss this point that no subject occurs alone but must be produced in a social body to begin with,

and it is this prior existing social contract that in enormous part determines the fate of the individual who emerges from it.

As premise and starting point then, language and identity through name is not a simple origin, but is an origin already scarred, contaminated by what it seeks to keep out—the economic, the pull of the world. The social contract then is not reducible to a clear moment of enunciation as in the granting of a name because in some sense, given history, given income, given the degrees of education, psychology, terrain, food, lack of food, available for the child that is borne and the parents which bore him, this name was already given. The enunciation as a singular subjective designation of identity (and the launching of the child and subject into Lyotard's language games) is something of a pale mockery of a larger and more colossal *annunciation* of which we spoke earlier: the heralding of upheaval and resistance.

In a sense Lyotard is arguing two paradoxical things at once—that nothing ever changes (the law of designation and reference through language games) and that all of this has changed because the mode and form of technology of knowledge has changed. But I would argue in contrast that both statements are flawed and for a reason which links the two—the enunciation of subjectivity is afflicted by social conditions and a context over which it has only retroactive control—history becomes the method by which the subject discloses its identity to itself, pronounces itself, asserts its nature, a nature already in large part arrived at. The liberal optimism of a flexible and responding subject free like a *tabula rasa* at the dawn of its birth hearing and receiving messages as a referent can only be ascribed to some mythic original creature, some Adam and Eve, that exists as an



idealist archetype fraught with ideological capacities. But where subjectivity does become conversant with a social contract is precisely in this looking back, and it is at this moment that an objective annunciation, something mammoth and sublime, an intervention, a historical liberation and deliverance, has the chance to succeed. At such a moment the subjective and objective components of the social contract coalesce—they do not become reduced to one another in a totalitarian unity (as people accused Lukacs of arguing) but rather they join in reciprocation, in an realized, alert, awakened interdependency. This interdependency comes as a “shock” or Augenblick that the critical theorists looked for in art—the accidental or unintentional truth that leads to a sharp realization that the story of individual subjectivity, conveniently locked in separate boxes, comes apart and is shown to be a mask and concealment of the social and interdependent origins of individual pain.

Lyotard’s argument then falters because it rests upon this mythical world of enchantment, the world of the performative subject engaged in language games amongst other performative subjects, engaged in the radically different modes of technology and communication transfer and exchange. But simply because the mode or form of address has changed does not mean the content is different—the barbarity of human relations has not altered significantly since the inception of the human species—only its method of address has changed. The speed and rapidity with which information is exchanged only means speed and rapidity, or as Horkheimer might have put it, the adulation in contemporary society of “expediency”; it does not mean better content—the orders to send a prisoner abroad to be tortured by a country in which torture is accepted practice can now be delivered faster, by a telephone call, whereas before such orders under

colonialist administrations would take hours, perhaps days or months, to travel by wire or post and courier. This accentuated development of speed and expediency in communication and in the technology which has fueled it is inversely proportional to the slowing down of the greater majority of the world in terms of wealth, income distribution, standard of living, and quality of life. Just as the pronounced and heightened visibility due to the globalization of technology has thrust a minority into an almost universal omniscience and presence, its correlative being in the increased invisibility and shadowed underside of the majority of the world that grows ever more unrecognizable, so time broken up into smaller and smaller increments in the northern countries is matched by a greater lethargy, ennui, and immobility in the south fostered by seemingly uncontrollable patterns of epidemics, famine, and war.

At this point it would be worthwhile to turn to a cultural studies response to Lyotard and his arguments. In Dick Hebdige's "Postmodernism and the 'other side'"<sup>44</sup> we see one kind of response to this problem from a member of the British wing of cultural studies research. Hebdige is mostly in agreement with Lyotard's diagnosis of the problem of the collapse of legitimation of science in the age of post-modernism. In setting up the description of the problem he does not take much issue with how Lyotard outlines what is at stake, and in doing so, Hebdige repeats many of the errors that Lyotard starts from. For example in Lyotard's dismissal of critical theory and Marxism, Hebdige basically repeats what he has read:

In an economy geared towards the spinning of endlessly accelerating spirals of desire, consumption allegedly imposes its own 'ecstatic' or pluralist (dis)order (Jameson's 'heterogeneity without norms'). Idolatry, the worship of Baal (commodity fetishism) replaces positivism and its doppelganger, Marxism, the

dominant epistemic faiths of the modern period. Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment collapses as the combative strategies of modernism—negation, estrangement, 'non-identity thinking'—which were supposed to work to reveal the arbitrariness/mutability of symbolic-social orders and to form the last line of defense for the 'authentic' and 'autonomous' values of a kingdom yet to come—are either rendered invalid (obsolete: no longer offering a purchase on the contemporary condition) or are absorbed as just another set of options on a horizontal plane of meaning and value where either everything means everything else...or alternatively...everything means nothing whatsoever.<sup>45</sup>

There are many points to pick apart here—the economy described is that which resides on another economy not seen—the ordering of desire and its production and consumption takes place on the back of a more vital and mortal economy that remains buried from view. The juxtaposition of idolatry (interesting the religious language here given what we have said about changing the terms of discourse to that of heraldry in the language of economic liberation) and positivism belies the fact that they are not opposites but are perfectly compatible, in fact they feed upon one another in mutual reciprocity. There is nothing new in this; the practice of idolatry in commodity-fetishism only stresses the dichotomy between positivism and Marxism even more, not less.

The disavowal of the working terms for engagement of this dialectic in the language of Adorno and Horkheimer remains strange and undefended. Non-identity thinking is so closely aligned to difference that in dismissing it as invalid or as relative to all other options for discussing the problem is to do a similar thing to difference. This is very much a case where the Emperor is wearing no clothes. We are asked to believe that the combative strategy of a theory which refuses identification of the subject with the object is invalid or inherently unimportant since it is reducible to any other theory. This would be so if we were residing within a world of difference and equality, where all matters of identity were infused with their negative, non-identity core and respected as such (no

Holocausts, no pogroms, no genocides and discrimination and prejudices) and where economically human beings, all of who are designated by the common bond of having to labor, did so in equality. The categories of critical theory have trouble resonating in this field of information technology and exchange, in this post-modern condition of knowledge in the northern countries, only because this exchange declares victory over a schism that it has simply displaced—conflict and class have not vanished, they have only been moved to the margins of discourse, yet they still occupy the center of our experience.

Much of the rest of Hebdige's description of Lyotard continues along this vein, for example in the discussion of the sublime. There is a shocking relativization of the historical events and disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when in discussing what happens when people attempt to become Benjamin's angel of history, "for Lyotard they are moments of historical disaster: they inaugurate the time of 'revolutions', executions, concentration camps."<sup>46</sup> This historical relativism is in large part the natural outgrowth of the theory being presented—if critical theory and its categories is invalid or relative to all other categories, then it becomes impossible to distinguish between a revolution and a concentration camp, yet the difference between the two is akin to day and night. In one the people as historical subject seize the breaking up of time into increments and assign it a historical meaning in their own interest; in the latter, time ends, the people are made objects, history comes to a close.

The other part of this statement that shows a lack of understanding for critical theory is that for the majority of the people of the earth, daily life is a historical disaster, not their

attempt to become “the angel of history”. It is the quiet, eclipsed disaster of lives led in futility, under conditions of toil, ignorance, and oblivion that constitutes perpetual disaster. For Lyotard, the “daily grind” is not a disaster because for him the daily grind brings daily hope and reward; for the majority of the world’s population, the opposite is true.

Hebdige does acknowledge this, or begins too, further on when he speaks of Lyotard’s theory of a pan-global, trans-historical imperative founded upon a political conception of the Kantian sublime:

He (Lyotard) does make a concession to the persistence of scarcity in the Third World in the cryptic division of humanity into two (unequal) halves one of which (that is, ours?) is devoted to the text of complexification, the other (theirs?) to the ‘terrible, ancient task of survival’ (!) (1986a: 12).”<sup>47</sup>

There is much worth noting in the term “ancient”—it denotes a kind of unreachableness, something that has never changed, and never will, whose longevity somehow conditions our acceptance of it, “that’s the way it’s always been, just have to accept it”. Ancient as a designation carries with it a form of endorsement—it appears as a neutral term, if such a thing is possible at this point, but its neutrality is artificial and dependent upon a profound glossing over of exactly how deeply entrenched this dependency is of the world involved in “complexification” over and upon the world struggling for survival.

Hebdige begins to assert disagreement with Lyotard at the end of his article precisely upon this focus on the asociality of the sublime:

However, such a privileging of the sublime tends to militate against the identification of larger (collective) interests...it does this by undermining or

dismissing as simplistic/ 'barbaric' what Richard Rorty has called 'our untheoretical sense of social solidarity' (1984: 41), and by bankrupting the liberal investment in the belief in the capacity of human beings to empathize with one another, to reconcile opposing 'viewpoints', to seek the fight-free integration of conflicting interest groups.<sup>48</sup>

This deficiency or dead-end in the post-structural terrain of theory leads Hebdige to research and utilize other thinkers better equipped to discuss social forms of engagement that do not result in the totalizing or totalitarian forms of discourse-closure we have been speaking of. His principle person in mind is Gramsci.

But this approach is doomed to failure because again it operates within the same muted terrain as Lyotard's—it disavows an economic analysis (which actually runs quite contrary to Gramsci's original intentions, please see Chapter four of this work), and it orbits within the landscape of discourse, as if power and hegemony were matters of articulation alone, and had nothing to do with aspects of economy and the distribution of wealth. By eliminating the economic from their reading of Gramsci the cultural theorists like Hebdige divorce the concepts of their annunciative power. This is because the tendency has gone too far in the opposite direction—as a reaction to the vulgar and wholly inadequate accounts given to us by economism and the Second International which sought to explain culture as a simple one to one product of economy, the cultural studies theorists have rejected almost all economic influence upon culture. Economy as such has been eclipsed and vanquished from the discourse; culture exists as a kind of free floating signifier unattached to anything other than its own laws, to language, to difference, a field of play and accident, complex yet yielding to no specific rules, and certainly not beholden to the mediation of the negative. We could actually go much

further than this—culture becomes the lost utopia that Marxism failed to achieve in the realm of economic transformation—the promise of the kingdom of ends.

Hebdige writes that:

to engage with the popular as constructed and as lived—to negotiate this bumpy and intractable terrain—we are forced at once to desert the perfection of a purely theoretical analysis, of a ‘negative dialectic’ (Adorno) in favor of a more ‘sensuous (and strategic) logic’ (Gramsci)—a logic attuned to the living textures of popular culture, to the ebb and flow of popular debate.”<sup>49</sup>

This misrepresents what the negative dialectic is—it is precisely in the fact that the dialectic is “negative” that perfection as such is impossible. Theoretically, it is neither perfection nor imperfection—rather it reflects society and theory as they are, in their interdependence, as broken and two-dimensional realms of conflict that mediate one another in an endless play of determination. It is also not simply a theoretical exercise but rather within the theory there is room for the material conditions which give the theory its weight. On the other hand, the supposedly more “sensuous” logic of a Gramsci divorced of his economic character actually pushes us further away from the real and into the realm of the ideal: discourse, language, and textuality. We find ourselves very far from the context that gives the content its resonance—the sensuousness of this logic of culture leads us to an abstract, but superficially tangible and empirical experience of existence. Because we are discussing media we feel somehow rooted in the world of men and women, because we discuss fashion, art, customs, diet, architecture, we are somehow more real than theorists who see these superficial forms of expression as only the tip of the iceberg, the dressing on the cake as it were, of something underneath which remains cloaked and disguised. In this sensuous logic, culture is somehow transparent and

immediate—it is what it is. More importantly for our political purposes, it is what it says it is.

Hebdige is right when he says that in making this shift “in the critical focus, the meaning of the phrase ‘legitimation crisis’ is inflected right away from problems of epistemology directly on to the political.”<sup>50</sup> But by working with the wrong theoretical materials from the beginning, or rather with a deficiency of tools, the solution one can achieve will still be as anemic as the solution it is meant to replace. One is reminded of Marcuse’s rather famous statement in One-Dimensional Man, that eventually, under critical analysis, every epistemology becomes an ethics, and every ethics an epistemology.<sup>51</sup> It is actually not a question of rejecting the questions epistemologically and now seeing them as political problems that need to be solved politically; rather it is seeing how epistemology and politics are intertwined to such an extent that they mediate one another’s content, how the adoption of one leads one into the practice and implementation of the other. We cannot achieve this recognition without bringing into play the giant underneath these operations, the context of economy, which is intertwined with every expression of language, every disavowal of difference, every attempt at hierarchizing culture.

The Gramscian model demands that we grasp these processes not because we want to expose them or to understand them in the abstract but because we want to *use* them *effectively* to contest that authority and leadership by offering arguments and alternatives that are not only ‘correct’ (‘right on’) but convincing and convincingly presented, arguments that capture the popular imagination, that engage directly with the issues, problems, anxieties, dreams and hopes of real (actually existing) men and women: arguments, in other words, that take the popular (and hence the populace) seriously *on its own terms*.<sup>52</sup>

This passage poses several problems. How can a process which occurs through and by forces of authority which endorse, allow, administer, and sanction it, lead us to a



language that contests those points of authority? Will not the form of contest always already be circumscribed and absorbed in advance by that which it is seeking to resist? Does power ever give anything willingly away? And what constitutes “real (actually existing) men and women”? Do these processes demonstrate these real men and women more than abstract theory on class consciousness and conflict, for example? Does MTV tell us more about the populace than Marx? How can we come to know what “real” is when we divorce it of the economic which determines such an enormous part of it? This is not an argument for economism, to return to the drudgery of a simplification that never really worked to begin with, but it is also not a call to abandon the economic in favor of the pretense and superficial immediacy of what appears before us, as something that holds no sacrificial or hidden depth. It is the denial that culture is depthless, that it is surface, that it is presentable in a transparent vocabulary. It is a denial of one-dimensionality.

Real or actually existing men and women are comprised, as Marx argued, with stomachs. Culture, no matter how far it advances away from the realm of the material, always has this aspect of life in mind as a condition for its existence. This is its precondition. So where we would find issue with is not with Hebdige’s disagreement with Lyotard and the post-1968 abandonment of a subjective “we”<sup>53</sup> in which political advocacy and agency is erased, but rather with how we arrive at understanding this “we”—if we arrive at this we via culture and culture alone, we will be committed to a line of action that is still within the terrain that Lyotard and the post-structuralists have sketched for us, and this terrain will not permit us a form of political advocacy that is effective. If however we see this “we” as negatively formed through the intermediation of culture and economy, of

difference and equality (or as struggle, as in the case of capitalism today—a struggle against identity and inequality), then we may arrive at a subjective “we” that is open to the challenge and able to respond to the call. The path to the end is the deciding factor, not the end itself—on an end regarding a subjective we, cultural studies and critical theory are in agreement but it is how this agency is constructed and how we come to understand its workings which marks a difference between the two schools of thought.

The ‘we’ in Gramsci has to be *made* and remade, actively articulated in the double sense that Stuart Hall refers to in the interview: both ‘spoken’, ‘uttered’ and ‘linked with’, ‘combined’. It has to be at once ‘positioned’ and brought into being.<sup>54</sup>

We agree, but the verb “to make” is fundamental here—make involves the question at the very root of all activity, the question of labor and work. Negotiation, articulation, discussion involve the realm of language and culture, a realm that is already offset and colored by conditions of economy, and they in turn, in the manner of a Marxist *Stoffwechsel*, determine and affect economy through consumption and reproduction. It is a circular, two way street in which determination is distinguishable from being determined only in reflection but not in practice: the negative distance between subject and object, between the we and its political practice, between culture and articulation, and economic propensity, capacity, ability. Cultural Studies is on the right road in this matter of trying to respond to the rigidity and dead-end solutions (no solutions) in post-structuralism, but because it has till now operated within a language which repeats the original errors, it cannot on its own come to a solution that inspires true political empowerment and change.

## Chapter Four

In Ernesto Laclau's debate with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek,<sup>55</sup> he makes a statement in the beginning of his first opening argument which acts both as a kind of assertion of stance as well as a confession of agenda. This statement tells us both the strengths and weakness, simultaneously, of Laclau's position, and also the positions of the cultural studies theorists that it helped to form and influence.

No model in which the economic (the structure) determines a first institutional level (politics, institutions) to be followed by an epiphenomenal world of ideas will do the trick, given that society is configured as an ethico-political space, and that the latter presupposes *contingent articulations*.<sup>56</sup>

What is useful in this statement is that it discloses what Laclau rejects (a simple base to structure model of economic influence in terms both of cultural production and ideological possibilities for resistance), and what he accepts, an application of post-structuralist linguistic models placed upon political activity—"contingent articulations" because language acts as a chain of empty, contingent signifiers. But the key word in the passage is the passive construction around configuration: "given that society *is configured*"; in response we would need to ask: by whom, and for what purpose, and how?

This position of configuration—how it is formed and by whom—is the theme of this paper; it is the argument here that configuration cannot be separated from economy, that economy intermingles with difference to produce the configurations of which Laclau and the others speak—it is this metabolic exchange between two sides that are really only two sides in a single reflection, not in actual fact or practice, that produces and reproduces the conditions of power, discourse, knowledge and exchange that we have been grappling

with. It is disingenuous to leave the question of configuration without an author, it mystifies it into the mythical, taking away its concrete character.

We will look at Laclau's working of post-structuralist linguistics as he applies them to a reading of Gramsci (minus Gramsci's economic component), and how this reading influenced the formations of cultural studies in the 1970s (but has been later rejected or modified by more current authors in the field).

### **Hegemony and the empty chain of signifiers**

Hegemony is like language—groups grappling for power exist on a more or less equal plane though they do not necessarily exist “equally”—they vie with one another for dominant position, as words do in a text, until one meaning arises that comes to embrace the rest in its authority. Just as the formation of a canon occurs, so does hegemony through the formation of an episteme in political practice. When Laclau writes: “the representation of the unrepresentable constitutes the terms of the paradox within which hegemony is constructed,”<sup>57</sup> he is characterizing hegemony as functioning like language in the sense that there is always a residual absence that accompanies the object of representation, something “missing” which keeps the social formation from ever reaching a “totality”—language never closes because meaning is never finished, the chain of signifiers operate in such a way that we find ourselves running down linkages without ever arriving at the end. So too does hegemony which never achieves historical closure—the groups espousing power and grappling for dominant position in society always leave something out in their articulation, which keeps democracy and dialogue open. The historical project of liberation has within it this built-in discrepancy or disjunction that prohibits the materialization of utopia in actual practice.

The non-transparency of the representative to the represented, the irreducible autonomy of the signifier *vis-à-vis* the signified, is the condition of hegemony which structures the social from its very ground and is not the epiphenomenal expression of a transcendental signified which would submit the signifier to its own predetermined movements.<sup>58</sup>

Representation, via language or via political advocacy, is never fully transparent—it hides something in its procedure or in the course of its articulation which prevents it from becoming a closed system of self-reference (the irony here is that the relationship Laclau describes between non-transparency and openness is actually a dialectical one—the one is required for the other to occur, and both have a mediated relationship through the process or work of the negative, yet this inclusion of the negative is precisely what Laclau disavows).

Laclau's rejection of a transcendental signifier that could predetermine the movements and direction of the other signifiers is in line with his rejection of class politics and the role of the proletariat from traditional Marxist economic thought. The idea of a predetermined anything is abhorrent to post-structuralists and cultural studies theorists, perhaps because history has been strewn with examples of totalizing theories which have acted as closed, rigid, destructive systems when their founding principles were based upon predetermined grounds. So much bestiality has been generated by the assumption of a starting point.

This hostility and suspicion then is warranted, but it in turn, dialectically, can come to serve the opposite of its purpose—in presuppositionless grounds, the starting point was meant to be something of a key to freedom for thought, a way to work towards logically

agreeable ends—if the premise was logically sound, then the argument stood the chance of creating a conclusion that too could be logically sound. Instead this freedom turned into a trap—the transcendental signifier ran aground into irrationality, evolved often into its opposite—for example the long torturous road of reason from the age of the Enlightenment, finally transforming itself into the technological and instrumental nightmare of Nazism.<sup>59</sup> But so too does the rejection of a transcendental signifier or a predetermining suppositionless ground lead into its opposite—such a rejection due to suspicion leads the argument into a closed text or locked solipsism that elliptically reproduces itself without end. The box of difference is still a box, a closed system, a self-referent realm.

In other words, rigidity and closed totalities are not simply the product of unexamined grounds—they can be the product of arguments without grounds. Rigidity is characterized by lack of openness—this comes from a rejection of the role of the negative in the formation of the argument. And it is just as problematic and erroneous to say there is no transcendental signifier or starting point as it is to say that there is—either a statement of pure identity or a statement of pure non-identity fails to capture what is in fact a predetermining ground for articulation which possesses both identity and non-identity, which captures fullness and deficiency at the same time, which acts as a determinant upon other signifiers (and other identity groups) and is in turn determined by them.

This preference for a ground that is empty, based upon the absence of a transcendental signifier, and the subsequent closed system that results from it, informs Laclau's project

all the way from his discourse on language to his application of this discourse to politics. But unlike Baudrillard, Laclau does recognize that the principles of necessity and impossibility permeate this system, thus keeping it alive with a particular kind of tension or antagonism—it is not entirely closed as in the nihilism of Baudrillard where ultimately all signifiers come to nothing and the system itself is simply an exercise in simulacrum.

Now, with the need to assert both sides—necessity and impossibility—I could hardly be in disagreement, for it is the cornerstone of my own approach to hegemonic logics—the latter not involving a flat rejection of categories of classical political theory such as ‘sovereignty’, ‘representation’, ‘interest’, and so on, but conceiving of them, instead, as objects *presupposed by* hegemonic articulatory logics but, however, always ultimately unachievable by them.<sup>60</sup>

In Laclau’s work the system is differential—it seeks to achieve self-recognition or self-identity but it continually fails, all signifiers being equally at a loss in achieving this kind of transparency or immediacy. This can be described as a necessary failure for in order for the system to act continually as an open system of movement and exchange, fullness, completion, and homogeneity are not possible goals that can be realized without the advent of a kind of totalitarianism (and in language or discourse we could say the unresolved circularity of the system of differential reference is preferable to a system which becomes mute when all signifiers achieve immediacy and are known).

This impossible “fullness” which is both the goal and the impossibility of hegemonic society rests on what Laclau describes as the separation of the normative and the ethical. But this is where we are returned to the start of our argument—it is indeed true that the gap between the normative and ethical allows society to breathe, creates the open space by which democracy can struggle to give voice to those most easily crushed by majorities opposed to the interests of the marginalized. This gap between what is and what ought to

be is maintained by the residual imperfection of social struggle—nothing ever achieves completion in terms of change. This is a positive, not a negative, nor an indictment of political agency.

But the problem rests in how Laclau describes the categories or signifiers he is calling empty. He does not differentiate between identity groups and transcendental needs such as justice, equality, happiness—in a sense we have the application of three levels of articulation upon one another, I would argue, leaps of faith, made through these Nietzschean “stammering translations” from a description of language and discourse—the incommensurable chain of empty signifiers—as a structuralist model, to the application of this model upon post-modern identity groups (women, blacks, gays), to the application of this model further upon the achievement of transcendental categories—what Marcuse would have called ontological values (justice, equality, happiness). The conflation of these different levels upon one another constitutes an unjustified extension of structuralist linguistic models over and onto the prescriptive and ethical context of social change and political agency. Much is lost in this move, much is missed.

First we need to say that the Derridean model of differential syntax is not a successful model for social organization—even Derrida would have agreed with this; a more successful model would have been derived from Adorno and Benjamin’s response to Husserl’s account of intentionality. Their model as described in chapter two moves from message to subject/object identification which is more applicable than a focus which is solely on the difference articulated through the message or text (which is why Laclau is defending himself against charges of being Baudrillardian).



Second the distinction between difference and equality has its bearing here. Laclau has forgotten, like his forbearers, the distinction in “gleich” between identity and similitude. He recognizes the necessity of difference and the impossibility of fullness as a normative procedure (because as a normative procedure we are wrestling with the problems of identity). But in incorporating the question of equality into the question of identity, he conflates ethics with normative or descriptive epistemology—and thus we have a dead end, the solipsist circle. We are where we are, we cannot move out of it, and we are asked to celebrate the circularity of our dead end as that being all that we can know and all that we can do. Once epistemology and ethics is conflated in such a manner, equality as a transcendental need is collapsed into a normative and therefore impossible category. It will always remain just out of reach (the principle which protects identity politics from fascism, the residual aspect of difference that keeps minority groups alive and separate so that society can thrive and grow, is used here to make equality as an ethical call impossible).

A hegemonic approach would fully accept that the moment of the ethical is the moment of the universality of the community, the moment in which, beyond any particularism, the universal speaks by itself. The other side of it, however, is that society consists only of particularities, and that in this sense, all universality will have to be incarnated in something that is utterly incommensurable with it....there is no logical transition from an unavoidable ethical moment, in which the fullness of society manifests itself as an empty symbol, to any particular normative order.<sup>61</sup>

This is a problem only if the ethical and the normative are made synonymous. It is not a problem if they are held to be identical and non-identical at the same time, as in the work of critical theory. In that case it would be possible always to speak of the incommensurable chain of identity groups in constant differential relation to one another,

a normative system without closure, in which hegemony arises through wars of position, *and* an ethical prescription which is inclusive of but above the normative, just as equality is inclusive of and above difference, that is, equality as the ethical call and demand of society. The one does not cancel the other, since they are not synonymous.

Laclau makes the assumption that the ethical is a move towards fullness—he does not ask whether the ethical, as equality, could be both fullness and emptiness at once—that is fullness on one level, the economic, and emptiness on another, the question of identity. He works again within a language which forecloses on this matter prematurely, leaving us dissatisfied and troubled with the partial solution to the puzzle. “Hegemony is, in this sense, the name for this unstable relation between the *ethical* and the *normative*, our way of addressing this infinite process of investments which draws its dignity from its very failure.”<sup>62</sup> Due to the terms of the debate he has adopted without questioning, Laclau must see the ethical and normative as in an unstable relation—yet under different terms as mentioned above, there is no need to see them as either synonymous nor as incompatible, therefore, the relation of the two need not be unstable. It depends on the context of the debate within which we work, to imply that the ethical and normative are inherently in unstable relation would be akin to committing essentialism and applying to them characteristics independent of our manner of speaking of them.

Hegemony is the process of the failure of the normative to achieve homogeneity and dominance through the success of one group to speak for all other groups, a closure that constitutes death—hence hegemony is the struggle that keeps struggle alive. It is the work of the non-identical *in* the identical. It is not the struggle between the ethical and

the normative—to make it so is to repeat the words of Christ—“the poor will always be among us”—as one example of the failure of the ethical when it is made a question of the normative. What would the normative be under an ethical prescription that is actually fulfilled? That is the question worth asking—what would difference mean in a world of equality? It is again the argument of this paper that true difference is impossible without actual equality. Under conditions of poverty and inequality, difference possesses a sickened secondariness, and superfluity that it would not possess in a world in which the basic material needs of all were met.

This conflation of the two realms into one field of discussion occurs because Laclau starts with discourse as his model of articulation—he does not distinguish discourse and economy at the starting point. Therefore normative and descriptive organization is privileged over the ethical or at least is seen as the primary role of society, and how to fit the ethical into the normative becomes the central question. But if we start from a two-dimensional approach that already distinguishes the discursive from the economic, then we can work on two levels at once. If we do this, then the entire argument between Laclau and Žižek about the working class becomes more or less a mute point, since it is no longer a question of whether the working class is one link in the chain of incommensurability or one link that also incorporates all the other links at the same time. Rather the ethical question of equality stands above and includes the question of normative development—hunger affects all, the presence of hunger in a system of inequality prevents justice, the prevention of justice is the prevention of happiness, and so forth, a negative cascade of links occurs within the ethical realm, not due to any particular configuration of the normative (not due to class consciousness versus identity

politics) but due rather to the denial of the ethical apart from the question of identity and the normative. They are separate and distinct questions. But they are thoroughly interlinked and intermediated.

Thus it is a Leninist move Zizek makes when he argues that the working class constitutes a non-empty signifier in the chain of commensurability because it is both a place holder and it is the promise of fullness and meaning for the totality as a whole. This move is not sufficient, but neither is Laclau's counterclaim, that the emptiness of society is its ethical fullness realized. This is a cop out. Rather the normative works hegemonically, the ethical works apart from and above (yet inclusive of) the normative—as the question of equality, not of place but of terrain, context, condition. After all we do not wish to make the place holder with the most articulatory power a substitute for the terrain in which it operates. This would constitute a kind of fascism which would mean the end of hegemony and an end to the debate altogether. It is a mistake that all of the people in post-structuralism have made on this issue to make identical the ethical and the normative, the question of equality and the question of difference. To say they operate within separate planes that are interlinked and mediate one another as a kind of metabolic process is not to say they are identical, and both Laclau and Zizek miss this distinction.

### **Incommensurability—the repetition of an error**

It is instructive at this point to examine one central tenet or key term in Laclau's lexicon: the term is incommensurability. The definition for this term in English is “not comparable”—which by extension can end up meaning two possible things: something

which is not equal to something else, or something which is not like something else. We could argue that “not comparable” actually takes the original problematic of “ungleich” and makes it institutionalized in the philosophical canon by developing a word in English capable of seizing both meanings in “ungleich”. In this sense then, incommensurable achieves the canonization of a flaw in post-modern thought.

The ethical substance of the community—the moment of its totalization or universalization—represents an object which is simultaneously impossible and necessary. As impossible, it is incommensurable with any normative order; as necessary, it has to have access to the field of representation, which is possible only if the ethical substance is invested in some form of normative order.<sup>63</sup>

If the realization of the ethical substance of community is identity thought (fascism, Stalinism), then yes, it is incommensurable to the normative order of the community—if identity is the ethical substance of community, then it impossible, and necessarily so. But if the ethical substance of the community is equality, then it is not incommensurable with the normative order of society necessarily—it is possible, indeed I would argue necessary, to conceive of the true normative order of society as co-extensive with its ethical substance. True difference is not incommensurable with equality but actually dependent upon it.

By arguing for the incommensurability between the ethical substance of a community and its normative order, Laclau defeats the impetus that could lead the community to a realization of its interests—without a reason or goal hegemony becomes senseless. It is not simply the vying for democratic voice and a war of position which marks hegemony, but underneath that or inclusive of that political struggle is the economic question of equality. This is why all questions of democracy are made into something of a farce when a society suffers inequality, when there are marked discrepancies between rich and

poor, and where hunger is a primary concern for people. We are still in the linear line of western thought that a cause leads to an end, but in Laclau's case, the end is indefinite and infinitely postponed, and rather than seeing this as a negative, he declares this deferral as positive. But whether it is positive or negative, it still misses the point: the line between equality and difference is circular, they feed one another, there can be no hegemonic struggle without economic equality both as a cause and an end, and there can be no economic equality without hegemonic struggle (that is the struggle for democracy). This point returns us to Marx, to the reading of *Stoffwechsel* as an interdependent circle of mutual determination, where economy is economy and ideology is ideology, but where each is intimately tied into the other. It takes us away from the Althusser-influence in Laclau's earlier work with Mouffe, where

‘the winning over of agents to their historical interests’ is, quite simply, an articulatory practice which constructs a discourse wherein the concrete demands of a group—the industrial workers—are conceived as steps towards a total liberation involving the overcoming of capitalism. Undoubtedly, there is no essential necessity for these demands to be articulated in this way. But nor is there an essential necessity for them to be articulated in any other way, given that, as we have seen, the relation of articulation is not a relation of necessity.<sup>64</sup>

If we begin with Althusser and declare everything ideology, then this is where we end up, with a hegemonic struggle that may or may not be articulated towards the working class's true interests. But this is a false argument because the starting point is off—we start from a position that is more than ideological, it is concrete because it is embedded in the physical and material realities of existence, the mortality of the subject both as individual, and as universal—whether conscious of its class interests or not conscious of them. Hunger, a belly, as Marx said, gives the lie to all idealisms; it also demonstrates the fallacy of certain reworkings of materialist theory into discursive practices.

Another casualty of using an Althusserian model for describing capitalism is that the primacy of the working class as an agent for change is weakened and mostly destroyed—there is no reason to consider it the agency of change of the entire system, since it is only one of many groups that suffer the ideological context within which it is governed—it vies with blacks, women, gays for dominance, its needs become myopic and narrowed. But this fails to account for the fact that the one trait all these other groups possess in addition to their own specific interests is the need to survive, to struggle against their mortality, to eat—the need then to labor. Labor is the transcendental signifier that encompasses all the other groups as a unified whole—labor is the link between the ethical substance of this community, this world, and its normative particular practices of identity in struggle with identity, of hegemonic conflict for dominance of a particular group able to articulate leadership for all the others. Perhaps the problem is not that the working class became a useless and empty signifier under the reworking of the concept in Althusser and Laclau—perhaps the problem is simply that it is not a signifier, it is not one identity opposed to others, it is actually an ontological category of life, a fact that all identities share and cannot escape, from the owner of a mine to a miner, from a corporate executive to a secretary. Labor unites them all. It is the ontological positive (the ethical promise of the community, what it stands for as unmediated potential) and it is the ontological negative, the mark of death, the last limit. It mediates historical change and intervention.

Translating this ontological, materialist fact back into a discursive symbol, a signifier offering meaning, or as Laclau argued, an emptiness signifying the lack of a promised

fullness, does damage to what is being said as content—it is not an empty signifier, as the ontological limit of the species it is at the same time its promise, and it is not limited to a category among others but encapsulates all of them equally.

### **Cultural studies—for and against Laclau**

Given what we have said above, we can say we are in a similar situation as we were with Lyotard—operating within what amounts to an ideal or idealist realm versus an integrated, interdependent realm between the ideal and the material, between discourse and economy, between ideology and hunger. Operating in this supposedly “upper” realm, which has always been the preference of western philosophy since it’s early pre-Socratic inception (even post-modernism privileges the ideal over the material by privileging text and discourse over economy and the material), we lose trace of a more complete totality, not a closed totality, not a unified system waiting to be discovered, but a better more complete picture of how society, culture, ideology work. It comes down to the choice of what to include and exclude in the development of theory.

In Laclau’s work there is a problematic starting point, derived from the French—from the post-structuralism of Lyotard and made Marxist through the work of Althusser. This “structural” starting point conditions much of what ends up being a dead end theoretically. Laclau found this to be so as well and in order to counteract the limitations of a concept of culture and ideology that were purely superstructural, he chose to bring into play the work of Gramsci. This Gramscian turn has been cultural studies’ primary response to the nullification of political agency by the French post-structuralists—Gramsci has become the loop hole by which to escape activism’s *coup de grace*.



But the problem with an appropriation of Gramsci in light of the flaw of a false starting point is that it does nothing to address the false starting point, it only provides a kind of fine tuning of a flawed system of critique and advocacy. Gramsci's economic views are almost wholly ignored in cultural studies and by Laclau, and this omission of the economic in favor of an almost completely political reading of the concept of hegemony leaves the concept anemic and weightless. Its body, its substance, becomes emptier than air by being deprived of its Marxist economic component. Some theorists, instead of recognizing this as a flaw of a false starting point, have instead argued that they have simply "moved on" beyond Gramsci, correcting the mistakes of the latter by overcoming them—such an approach tends to add insult to injury for it sanctions a poor reading of Gramsci while hiding once again the flaws of the structure from which cultural studies proceeds. It is like the scientist who keeps doing the same experiment over and over again and failing to get the results he wishes, instead of examining his original data, decides that the problem is not his starting premises but rather the experiment itself—a kind of Gordian Knot approach to theoretical error. We could argue that because the theoretical starting point in cultural studies was, borrowing from post-structuralism, "discourse", the preference in the interpretation of Gramsci has been upon "articulation"—to the detriment and almost complete disavowal of "determination". Ideology is seen primarily as a practice of articulation through hegemonic struggle; the role of economy in determining the conditions of that struggle has been ignored.

In brief, from Althusser, the conception of a complex totality structured in dominance figures immensely...these levels come to be thought of as 'articulated'. One of the levels, the ideological, takes on special significance in

that in it and through it those relations are represented, produced, and reproduced.<sup>65</sup>

We could argue here that the concept of “relations” has been muddied, they have been blurred unnecessarily by a lack of clarity and honesty, and this is then called positive result. But calling muddied thinking a demonstration of “greater complexity” is terribly disingenuous; it is an effort to conceal original starting point errors under the rug of complexity and depth.

It would make sense to mark off relations of production from other forms of relations (disciplinarian powers, the politics of the body, culture, institutions, and so forth); it would do well to specify more clearly how these relations are separate from relations of production which involve labor, for by doing so, by marking them off, one can then proceed to show how they mediate one another—how the one set of relations—economic—infiltrates and permeates the production and reproduction of the other—discipline, body, culture. When Derrida argued that binary oppositions are divided by a porous barrier he did not say there is no barrier at all, he only said the barrier was porous. When Adorno argued that non-identity between subject and object makes identity possible, he did not argue that identity did not exist, he only cautioned that it was conditioned by non-identity. But in cultural studies, as an offshoot of post-structuralism, the tendency has been to allow the entire distinctions between economy and ideology, relations of production and relations of culture, to dissolve. This creates enormous problems because any political theory derived out of this reading will be impotent and lost, it will attack all and everything in the belief that it is happening upon a more or less level playing field, that the economic and the ideological are on the same level, that

relations of production and other forms of relations such as culture all exist under the same terms of articulation, that an activism within hegemonic struggle will have meaningful effect upon changing the conditions of economy that condition that struggle, and so forth. Or it will give up and turn towards resignation to the conditions that be. This is one aspect of the fall out following the rejection of the concept of determination.

Laclau's reconstitution of the problematic in the discursive mode, foregrounding the role of ideology, figures significantly in a range of directions (replete with problems and possibilities) taken by articulation after Laclau's intervention.<sup>66</sup>

But this is precisely the problem—by reconfiguring the problematic in the discursive mode, which is what Lyotard did previously, we are back where we started—the problem of relations of production becomes subsumed under the general problematic of hegemonic struggle and cultural “wars” of position. One side of the circle is given too much importance at the expense of the other side.

Jennifer Slack, one of the cultural studies theorists responding to Laclau's arguments on hegemony, argues that Laclau “amends what he takes as this western philosophical move”, the Platonic move to link concepts through articulation, “with the insistence that (a) there are no necessary links between concepts...and that (b) concepts do not necessarily have links with all others.”<sup>67</sup>

There are two possible problems with this rearticulation of articulation—one is that it ignores the necessity of the object, that the object links with object in a necessary way apart of the wishes or intentions of the subject, that there is an “objective logic” at work that sometimes defies the interests or wishes of the subject, but that is nevertheless

necessary. One can speak of art for example as having a language of its own, a work of art unfolds according to laws in which the artist or viewer is only a spectator or conduit, and means by which an objective sensibility is expressed. This may be argued in science as well or in economy, that relationships are not culturally dictated or hegemonically struggled with, but that there are objective relations between economic practices that lead to specific results, regardless of the intentions of the subject or subjects involved. To argue the opposite is to practice a kind of heightened liberalism and estimation of the powers of the individual as agency—to confer upon him or her an authority and control that he or she does not possess, and to make it seem as if existence were a blank slate waiting to be filled rather than recognizing that the individual as agency is also determined and condition by forces larger than it, perhaps only marginally affected by it.

The second problem is close to the problem haunting Lyotard's work—the argument for a differential field of discourse as the starting point by which to critique society can end up becoming a kind of meta-narrative itself, that constitutes a new closed system, a totality, in terms of political advocacy, no matter what the protests of its theoreticians.

In fact Lyotard says it in so many words. 'It is never a question of *one* massive and unique reason—that is nothing but ideology. On the contrary, it is a question of *plural* rationalities...' (Van Reijen and Veerman, 1988: 279). Lyotard does not realize that he can affirm this only on the basis of another totalizing meta-narrative: 'the concern with "preserving the purity" and singularity "of each game" by reinforcing its isolation from others gives rise to exactly what was intended to be avoided; "the domination of one game by another"' (Weber, 1985: 104).<sup>68</sup>

In Laclau's work, discourse threatens to become all that there is. Discourse by being the starting grounds for articulation, subsumes everything within it that is not discourse—it becomes both the method and the context, the form and the content of struggle and

society—a reductionism of a new sort is thereby permitted which stands just as erroneously as the reductionisms of economism that it was meant to replace. As such it begins to create for itself, out of itself, a new meta-narrative, one that is predicated upon discourse and non-necessity. From this predication and emphasis, the non-necessary links between discourse and activism can begin to be articulated, even though Laclau would have stood very much opposed to such arguments.

If what is at issue is the operation of the discursive, it is easy to leave behind any notion that anything exists outside of discourse. Struggle is reduced to struggle in discourse...Laclau's turn from reduction, which provides a basis to articulate relations in discourse, thus also provides a basis to posit a radical non-correspondence among discourses and practices.<sup>69</sup>

As Jennifer Slack argues, this would have been very much contrary to Laclau's wishes. It was precisely in the interests of developing more flexibility and effectiveness that he and Mouffe sought out new grounds and terrain for the struggle against domination and fascism—hegemony divorced of its economic reductionism seemed like an ideal corollary to the structuralist Marxism of Althusser, the two put together meant that emphasizing discourse over and above economic reform could empower the people as a popular force. But it can and should be argued that the opposite today has actually occurred—though hegemony is in operation throughout the world as a counterforce to militarism, American imperialism, and the destruction of the earth, it is offset by an overwhelming economic powerhouse or juggernaut that steamrolls over its protests without hesitation. This has been the consequence of amnesia over the distinction between the cultural and the economic. The cultural, the hegemonic, can be thoroughly discursive and honoring of difference, and it can still lose to powers of economic transformation that it has no means to counteract.



## Chapter 5

Like the process of folk painting on glass called *Hintermalerei*, Stuart Hall starts with the foreground and works his way to the background—beginning first with the consequences of post-modern political thought, disagreeing with them, then slowly disagreeing with each of a long line of theoretical influences until he finally finds himself back with Marx. This could be suggested is the opposite of what we are doing here—here we begin with background, with history, with what happened at the inception of this line of thought, and then follow it through down to the present day consequences it has engendered in political and philosophical debate.

Either way, the result is similar: Stuart Hall is virtually the only cultural studies theorist who comes close to the problematic we are describing without opting for a kind of short cut or detour that would make his work easier. His writing and thinking is marked by a rigorous honesty and a willingness to throw out whatever does not work.

In the essay “The problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees”, we find this position most forcefully argued. Hall tries to reclaim the possibility of a political activism that is grounded in the new episteme of identity politics and the advocacy of difference from the margins; but he also recognizes that there are essential important components in Marx’s critique of capitalism that cannot be thrown out without doing serious damage to the possibility of hegemony. He recognizes along with the Gramsci interpretation that he invokes that economy is to the superstructure of society what the skeleton is to the body—and in continuing with this metaphor we should cite Marx’s concept of the interplay between society and nature (as resources, as base, as the basis of

production—the human body as a worker) as one of metabolism. This concept of metabolism and economy as the skeletal framework around which culture and society are wrapped and intertwined is inseparable from the latter but not purely determining of the latter—rather an exchange is enacted that makes each component reliant upon the other. What post-modern political thought has sacrificed in the interest of expunging itself of the sins of Stalinism and the French Communist party has been this core and essential presence and function of economy—it holds everything up.

The model of economy as a base of a house forming the foundation for a culture and society that amounted to the superstructure, a latticework built over and above the concrete, suffers as an analogy in several respects. It is not alive, it is immobile and fixed. It is mechanical and not organic, aesthetically we could say it exists along a terrain of right angles, of mathematical patterns—such a visual image invokes a sterile and one to one relationship played out in any theory built upon such an image. The rectangular, geometrically perfect relationship of the image calls for a similar relationship in theory between analysis and practice. Economy is thus supposed to be the sole source of culture and that which determines the latter in a one directional flow. Were human beings machines this model would make sense, but as we are not, it is flawed. The great horrors of the past century are primarily due to an attempt to make imperfect human beings fit a model that is mathematically perfect, rather than acknowledge that such a model can not and can never describe human reality.

Another problem with this schemata of base to superstructure is that culture is lowered to one function—an abode—its contours, spaces, and patterns do not greatly differ from one



another in any real sense—they are all made of the same material, they all perform similar functions—as if civil society, media, culture, arts, education, the interdisciplinarian grid of power (Foucault) all could be reduced to one kind of image or one kind of theoretical place holder. The diversity of the superstructure is homogenized functionally in this architectural analogy.

However, when we look at the relationship of economy to culture through the models offered by Gramsci and Stuart Hall, we see society as a body consisting of tissue and organs wrapped around a material, economic skeleton—the aesthetics of the superstructural image in this model is one of curves, soft lines, where flesh is malleable and grows, where there is irregularity and the unexpected, where a higher mathematics than geometry is at work, one that takes into consideration the possibility of chaos. The skeleton, on the other hand, is not malleable, but it is also not machine-like—its function is to hold up the unexpected manifestations of culture as a kind of textured series of layers. Not as malleable or curve like as the flesh, nevertheless it bends—economy too changes and grows, it is subject as well to the unexpected (history)—it is not deterministic but it does follow predictable rules which often have exceptions.

One could also say it is like layers of paint—whether the under painting whose unseen surface holds up and makes possible the surface painting that the viewer sees, or whether it is the surface on glass that upholds a history of development,<sup>70</sup> it is still one of sedimentation and surfaces, one upon the other, in a building up that is organic.

In the body-skeletal analogy two things, of which we have been speaking from the beginning, are brought into a symbiotic interplay—diversity or difference, and structure (which leads to the possibility of equilibrium). The one does not extinguish the other, neither in a totalitarianism where the economy or skeleton takes precedence over the body as diversity (for without this chaotic diversity, the body would be bones and life would be extinguished), nor is the body a flat, positivistic two dimensional surface lacking depth underneath, something immediately knowable, and something whose secrets of operation are immediately visible. Rather both identity and nonidentity, surface and depth, are fixed in a single image.

The relationships are organic, they breathe and live as they function, when one atrophies the body as a whole dies, sometimes not all at once, sometimes over the course of time—history is this mortality of the body, with the promise of a new body to replace it—life continues whereas the society espousing a certain form of economy, or a certain cultural or epistemic milieu does not and succumbs to the passage of time.

It is this fluid, organic, whole conception of diversity and difference as an interrelated function tied to and dependent upon economy that Hall is seeking in his own way to preserve. The mutual interdependence of economy and culture requires a reassessment of traditional Marxist explanations of one-directional determinism of economy to culture, and post-modern rejections of economy as the pivotal core point of cultural dependence and evolution. Both sides have in some sense “dropped the ball” but Stuart Hall has sought to pick it up again.

In his essay Hall discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Marxism in the mid-1980s. His influences are three fold: Althusser, Gramsci, and Laclau, but he takes what he wishes from each and leaves behind what fails to function well in a theory of political practice. On the traditional line of Marxist thought Hall lines up point by point the basic problems of orthodox Marxism as it is critiqued in post-structuralism.

First the materialist premise: ideas arise from and reflect the material conditions and circumstances in which they are generated....Second, the thesis of determinateness: ideas are only the dependent effects of the ultimately determining level in the social formation—the economic in the last instance...Thirdly, the fixed correspondences between dominance in the socio-economic sphere and the ideological.<sup>71</sup>

Although this outline of critique by post-structuralism and cultural studies of Marxism seems all but taken for granted today, there are some reasons to ask if it is actually applicable. Much of what came to be called post-structuralism, and later cultural studies, was formed during the existence of the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc, and China as overt state socialist countries. The deformations of Marxism through their literal realization in practice in these areas had much to do with philosophical rejections of the theory that gave rise to them. In many instances confusion was made between what Marx wrote, and how his successors interpreted what he wrote, as if the two were synonymous. To be able to return to the source of the material, to Marx's writings themselves, requires some distance from the episteme that Soviet Russia and the Cold War created—an atmosphere of suspicion that evolved, in philosophy, into a hermeneutics of suspicion. Suspicion was the guiding thread of the “post” in post-modernism, post-structuralism, and all that followed them. It was warranted by events surrounding them, but it reflected a contamination by those events, so that even while disavowing history as a profoundly

powerful determining force upon the manufacture of ideas, they proved it so by their content in an age that mirrored hostility towards the promises of utopia, the consistency promised in theory, and the faith in a one to one relationship between ideas and their enactment in practice.

It is worth going back to each of these points now to examine them in light of what Marx said. Marx did not say that ideas reflect the material conditions in which they are generated; he said “the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.”<sup>72</sup> Several points should be emphasized. What is being criticized by post-structuralism is the primacy of material reality first and foremost over and against language and ideas (knowledge)—as the determining factor of one upon the other. This question echoes Lucien Goldman’s description of the relationship between language and society and his rejection of the problem by stating simply that the two are “simultaneously” created, as Piaget would have said :<sup>73</sup> “it would be asking the circular question about origins and wondering which came first , the chicken or the egg, to wonder whether it is language and the psychological possibility of symbolism which have made society possible or, on the contrary, whether it is the existence of society which has produced language.”<sup>74</sup> But Marx does not say material reality creates ideas, he says that ideas are at first *interwoven* with material reality. For Marx material reality was objective reality, and objective reality meant activity—process—practice, not found objects or something already to be had and examined. There is no neutral relationship between the subject and his or her world—the moment the subject is born it is engaged in the world in a tug of war, or a dialogue, in whatever kind of exchange one wishes to call

it, but under capitalism, so often an exchange that is marred by coercion and violence, even if muted and camouflaged to appear as peace.

This non-neutrality means that ideas and material reality, knowledge and society, arise simultaneously—they are interwoven in a productive and reproductive process. The language of society then is reflected and reflects the “language of real life” which is a language of the objective world as activity.

Thus the post-structuralists have attempted to cast Marx as a materialist who views the development of knowledge as a one way street out of material conditions of existence, yet Marx is demonstrating that his view is more complex than that, that knowledge arises out of an interweaving of ideas with material activity and production. Marx was hence not a strict determinist in either direction.

Marx goes on to state that “consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence.”<sup>75</sup> This does not suggest that consciousness is created by conscious existence but rather that the two are inseparably intertwined, and that the changing of one changes the other. In arguing against German philosophy, both in its Hegelian and Feuerbachian versions, Marx is attempting to find a middle way that embraces the directions of both but abandons the narrow vision of each. The line that follows shortly after the above is the line which has led many people into believing Marx an economic determinist: “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”<sup>76</sup> Throughout The German Ideology Marx is at pains to debate the idealists and to reject their premises—as he does so he sometimes leans too far in the direction of a one-sided materialism, but the passage

quoted prior to this one line from the text suggests a more complex reading of his thought than has been offered: what Marx was arguing for was recognition of the interdependent and inseparable relationship between ideas and material reality, and that idealism has often distorted and ignored this relationship by an emphasis on the one at the expense of the other.

Later this point is underscored further:

It shows that history does not end by being resolved into ‘self-consciousness’ as ‘spirit of the spirit’, but that in it at each stage there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, an historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor.<sup>77</sup>

This interrelation is the concept of *Stoffwechsel* that we have mentioned throughout this paper—the metabolic exchange between nature and society, not a one to one determining force in which materialism is privileged at the expense of idealism, but rather the futility of thinking in such strictly binary terms, recognizing the dependency of each upon the other. This mirrors Adorno’s concept of non-identity, that identity is impossible without non-identity; or Derrida’s concept of difference, that presence and meaning are impossible without the deferral and difference which comprise their assertion. So rewording the first line of post-structuralist critique that Hall has mentioned, we could say that Marx argued for an interdependent model of knowledge, that knowledge and language are made possible by material conditions of existence as activity, but that they are interdependent upon those conditions, not in a simple one to one determining relationship.

Having rewritten the first line of critique, we've also rewritten the second line of critique, which depended on the first—for the post-structuralists to argue that Marx was an economist, it was important to argue for this one to one relationship of material ground to ideal conditions of knowledge. In problematizing this model, we have made the second assertion indefensible. Marx did not argue that ideas are the consequences of economy. He argued rather, by extension of what we have said above, that they are *inseparable from economy*.

Finally as we have found fault with the strictly materialistic and economic reading of Marx's epistemology, we have no reason to maintain the last criticism of the post-structuralists which argues that Marx viewed a strict dominance of socio-economic relations to the production of knowledge and culture. This alas is not Marx, this is certainly the outcome of Marx's theories implemented in socialist countries around the world, especially during the Cold War, but it is not Marx and it is not what he wrote. We can trace back this kind of vulgar Marxism to the Second International, and to the rise of the Party bureaucrats and theoreticians in Soviet Russia shortly after the October Revolution—men like Zinoviev whose criticisms of Lukacs were precisely along the lines that Lukacs was allowing too much subjectivity, idealism, and “chance” into his account of historical stages of development—Lukacs after all had argued that the revolution might *not* happen, that there were not mechanical processes taking place in history to insure a specific outcome, that the working class might “miss their chance” at exploiting critical economic and material conditions to their advantage and overthrow capitalism. This admission of the possibility of failure is far more in keeping with Marx

than it was in what followed after Marx. In arguing for an interdependent model of ideas with production, Marx was acknowledging that the manner by which history unfolds is not simple but complex.

Not recognizing this complexity in Marx, many successors who have tried to salvage him and make him more palatable to our ears have invented greater and more complex forms of exegesis and displacements of his text in order to shift what they perceived to be a heavy dependence upon the base-superstructure model. From Engels to Althusser, a basic, fundamental ignorance of Marx's intention seems to run through the gamut of the literature, an ignorance that would have been cleared up if proper and thorough reinterpretation had been applied to Marx's original writings. But even these attempts at displacing the Marxist text on economic determinism have been met with varying degrees of rejection by the post-structuralists. Hall seeks to redeem Marx from both sides—from the post-structuralists who have thrown him out completely, as well as from the unsuccessful attempts to restructure his text to make it more accessible to our needs.

If, according to the fashionable canon, all that is left, in the light of the devastatingly advanced, clever and cogent critiques, is the labor of perpetual 'deconstruction', this essay is devoted to a little modest work of 'reconstruction'—without, I hope, being too defaced by ritual orthodoxy.<sup>78</sup>

Hall recognizes that an abandonment of the question of ideology, which happens in post-structuralism (Foucault, *ibid*), is a regrettable theoretical casualty: if we lose this concept we stand in danger of being swallowed up by that which we have claimed no longer exists. But he is also wary of the imaginative ways of reinventing Marx, from Lukacs through Gramsci to Althusser, because their attempts at a resuscitation of the original



concepts of consciousness, ideology, class tend to backfire or become weakened to such a degree by the introduction of psychoanalysis and sociology that they no longer have any weight at all. He prefers to return to the text itself and find what still works for us today.

For example, in discussing Marx's description of the market as the visible aspect of capitalism, the one people experience everyday, Hall argues that the categories in operation in our experience of the market, categories derived from a commonsense view of exchange, are later applied to other aspects of social life. It is not that there is a one to one determinate causality of the market upon culture and society; rather the model and form, the operating norm of the market, is mimicked in the categories of daily life—in the areas of 'freedom', 'equality', 'property', and 'individualism.'<sup>79</sup> An epistemological model of operation, of what makes sense, is formed by our experience and observation of market exchange—this model is then applied to other forms of exchange in social life, affecting relations within culture and the superstructure of social affairs. It's through this mimesis and habit, this development of custom, of learning from economy how to do life, that ideology develops: "this is how there arises, out of daily, mundane experience the powerful categories of bourgeois legal, political, social and philosophical thought."<sup>80</sup> Instead of reading this in the classical sense of economy as the foundation for bourgeois thought, Hall suggests that economy in relation to society is a "circuit" and this circuit triggers not simply the development of production and consumption of commodities (and their concomitant source of sacrificed labor power) but of reproduction as well.<sup>81</sup> And what the market represents to Marx varies according to his description of it—this is the lynchpin as it were to the argument of a more flexible Marxism—the market can be understood in very different ways depending upon one's point of view—it can be seen

from various positions of perspective. Though he does not say this I would argue that Hall is introducing a Nietzschean element into his reading of Marx, applying Nietzsche's theory of language to an interpretation of Marx's theory of economy and the market.

So my argument would be that implicitly, Marx is saying that, in a world where markets exist and market exchange dominates economic life, it would be distinctly odd if there were no *category* allowing us to think, speak and act in relation to it. In *that* sense, all economic categories—bourgeois or Marxist—express existing social relations. But I think it *also* follows from the argument that market relations are not always represented by the same categories of thought.

There is no fixed and unalterable relation between what the market is, and how it is construed within an ideological or explanatory framework. We could even say that one of the purposes of *Capital* is precisely to *displace* the discourse of bourgeois political economy...and to replace it with another discourse, that of the market as it fits in into the Marxist schema. If the point is not pressed too literally, therefore, the two kinds of approaches to the understanding of ideology are not totally contradictory.<sup>82</sup>

Thus the market becomes a category that assumes the status of a metaphor, an umbrella concept that captures a myriad of different possible definitions and content, some of them in jarring discordance with one another. What Marxist discourse attempts is to take one of those definitions and content and use it to displace the dominant discourse and content. This then comes closer to Hall's understanding of Gramscian hegemony—the war of position. It is not simply a war of words nor a war of activity, but a war of perspective—in the line of perspectivism in which a series of possible views are represented across a spectrum, some will jockey for greater prominence than others, and this jockeying occurs within the realm of ideological wars or battles. We could argue that it is in ideology that recognition of the role of economy comes to the forefront (or not, as the case may be today where the role of economy has been subsumed under positivist applause). This war

of perspective could be said to reach its current status due to factors such as the economic conditions which shape its potential, which unlock the door and make possible its expression, but it does not mean that a more Marxist variant of understanding will win favor over the majority of the population. In this view the scientific aspect of Marx's concept of history is still retained but heavily modified—only in certain epochs and under certain material conditions of development does specific kinds of wars of perspective become pronounced and possible for discussion and debate over others—only when the technology, the economy, the level of exchange reaches a certain threshold can the matter assume intelligible form. The assumption of an intelligible form of a new perspective on economy is the beginnings of a disjunction in society, in the epistemic conditions of culture and knowledge at that particular age. But there are no guarantees that this disjunction will succeed in taking hold as it were—it could very well be that it fails. Thus science is tempered by chance. This also explains better Lukacs' concept of false consciousness or the concept of “distortion”—it is false or distorted from a Marxist view of economic relations, but whether that view is adopted by the majority of people remains a gambit, a struggle of ideological jockeying, which could go either way (and obviously has). Lukacs recognized this too when he said in History and Class Consciousness that the working class could seize the moment, *or not*, depending upon *subjective* conditions.

Falseness or distortion then, as Hall argues, is not a simple black and white polar opposition but rather occurs when one line or connection within a circuit of multiple connections in capitalism is overemphasized or “privileged”:

One-sided explanations are always a distortion. Not in the sense that they are a lie about the system, but in the sense that a ‘half-truth’ cannot be the whole truth about anything. With those ideas, you will always represent a part of the whole...Also, if you use only ‘market categories and concepts’ to understand the capitalist circuit as a whole, there are literally many aspects of it which you cannot see. In that sense, the categories of market exchange obscure and mystify our understanding of the capitalist process: that is they do not enable us to see or formulate other aspects invisible.<sup>83</sup>

Falseness or distortion is a matter of consciousness, but not a consciousness which is dependent upon class-standing, but rather a consciousness which is open to perceiving the multiple aspects of the circuit of capitalism. It is when this multiplicity, the invisible workings of the machinery of production, distribution, consumption, and reproduction, is eclipsed by the mystification of one component of the circuit, the categories of the market, that distortion comes into play. We could argue that many post-structuralist writings that have grappled with the issue of political advocacy while abandoning an economic component in their critique suffer this eclipse—often what is accepted as a model for society is founded upon the market as one category of this circuit, while the other categories involving spiritual and physical mutilation of people involved in the maintenance of this machinery is bypassed and ignored.

To push Hall a bit further, it is the failure to practice difference which leads to distortion in consciousness of capitalism as a whole. It is a failure in recognizing the multiplicity of the categories in which exchange transpires, the privileging of one model of operation—the market—over all others. That model becomes the foundation for a new form of political advocacy, forgetting that it is a small component of a much larger set of operations which are powerfully destructive to life and society, yet invisible to criticism.

False consciousness then is a case of partial or inadequate and incomplete conceptions of the whole, thus in a sense all assertions will be partially false since a total and complete picture is not possible. But just as with perspectivism versus relativism, we can argue that just because falseness and distortion is inherent in all approaches of critique does not make all critiques of capitalism equal—rather some are more distorted than others, some more ineffective, some weaker and less powerful than others. The criteria by which we judge the effectiveness of a critique may be in its self-awareness, to what extent it recognizes its limitations, yet proceeds anyway, in attempt to embrace the multifacetedness of the situation. The further we move towards complexity and difference, the further we move towards a demystification of capitalism as a whole, and recognition of its barbarity, mutilation, and fundamental workings as a system of inequality—the further towards difference, the further we move towards equality. “The falseness arises, not from the fact that the market is an illusion, a trick, a sleight-of-hand, but only in the sense that it is an *inadequate* explanation of a process.”<sup>84</sup>

As Hall argues this shift in reading takes us away from the true and false dichotomy into one in which we speak of adequacy, partial, effective, more complete summations or perspectives embracing multiplicity;<sup>85</sup> it also implies that an economic accounting of the capitalist circuit is not sufficient enough of an account to grant us an idea of the larger picture—as we have argued, Marx would never have said so—the economic is one facet of a circulation, a metabolic activity, that involves many points of contact. To privilege one over any other is to do a great disservice to his analysis (a distortion committed by both the post-structuralists who have focused too heavily on discourse to the detriment of

economy, as well as the economist and vulgar Marxists who have done precisely the opposite).

As Hall further argues, ideology means the set of these categories or perspectives on the capitalist circuit—the sites in which ways of framing the question arises—for example discourse surrounding production, discourse surrounding consumption, and so forth.<sup>86</sup>

These discourses set in ideological format express themselves in various ways—through culture, society, politics—and they inscribe us as subjects, or subject positions, within society—we fulfill a function according to specific ideological discourses arising from sites of the capitalist circuit.<sup>87</sup> This suggests a kind of compatibility between more recent Gramscian and Althusserian readings of hegemony and ideology, and Marx’s original concept of capitalist exchange. It is not a wholly determining impact of economy upon the production of ideas but rather a question of strategic sites of reinscription of subject relations within and around points of economic activity and the categories that arise from that activity. A worker is also a father, a husband, a patient, a soldier, a voter, a citizen and so forth—it is insufficient to understand that worker’s consciousness solely according to his (or her) position within an economic class—the other sites of inscription are deeply embedded within the economic context of exchange, but they are not simply produced by that exchange: they are points along a circuit of activity that is multifaceted and multidirectional. In searching out another way of saying this Hall turns to Volosinov’s theory of language—language is not the domain of a specific class, but is rather the site of this ideological conflict. “It is precisely because language, the medium of thought and ideological calculation, is multi-accentual’, as Volosinov puts it, that the

field of the ideological is always a field of ‘intersecting’ accents’ and the ‘intersecting of differently oriented social interests.’”<sup>88</sup>

We could argue here, going back to Nietzsche, that a choice can be made at this point. Language and knowledge can be seen as neutral (relative) or they can be seen as constituting a spectrum of degrees of effectiveness, power, and adequacy (perspectivism). If Nietzsche had not elided equality into identity and cast aside the question of the former by criticizing the pretensions of philosophy to the latter, he would have—logically according to his own argument—attacked capitalism for its maintenance of inequality as being fundamentally hostile towards life. The maintenance of a system which requires the continual expenditure of life for the benefit of a few is a system of dependence and parasitism; these are qualities which conflict with the concept of will to power. The affirmation of life and of multiplicity found in Thus Spake Zarathustra is inherently hostile to a system that reduces society to a system of the same, and a system of enforced inequality for the management of its own reproduction and continuation.

Nietzsche’s successors in following suit have replaced ideologically-constructed understandings of language and knowledge with constructions based upon the discursive<sup>89</sup> which is again only a partially successful attempt to break free of the dominance of identity-thought under capitalism and western metaphysics. It is only a half truth—in leaving the economic entirely it undercuts its own argument by making it “free-floating” as Hall argues, without attachment to material or physical conditions of existence, without limits against which it needs to acknowledge.

Hall argues that rather than the old ideological blocs of concepts—whole world views that could be translated and discussed from one group to another, supposedly standing in for an entire economic class's view of their position in society, we must rather look towards partial and very specific examples of ideological practice. We need to recognize that these arise not in a vacuum but within a capitalist circuit—that though they may arise in areas of life that seem very far removed from the economic (fashion, food, medicine) they are nevertheless interconnected with the economic in multiple ways which require explanation. These points of ideological inscription within the circuit tell us to what extent the subjects involve know or understand their role—to what degree they see how they function with relation to capitalism—the more they are able to grasp the complex levels of their activity and position, the more empowered they are as subjects (we equate authenticity, autonomy, empowerment, agency with the evaluative concepts of adequacy, effectiveness, sufficiency—the more adequate and effective an understanding becomes in consciousness, the more of a subject it is—we could argue that this is a crisis of sorts—the pain of being ripped away from inadequate explanations of one's role in society and into more and more adequate explanations is a negative one, a shattering of myth, a moment of insight. This crisis punctures complacency and obedience to a system that is structurally hostile towards life).

Hall, in accordance with Gramsci, calls this a war of position—we would add it is also a war of perspective, because it involves both the position of one's place in the circuit, and also a coming to terms with one's conception of that place in the circuit (or another way of putting it—both the material and ideal aspects of subject positioning). Often the two aspects of this war are interrelated and interdependent, the change in one affects a change



in the other—being laid off from a job, being cheated by a company, being imprisoned for one’s political viewpoints can have the effect of shifting one’s perspective regarding one’s inscription in the circuit, and vice versa.

In any case this “war of position” requires an understanding of the circuit as fluid, as interdependent, and without any particular or specific direction or outcome necessary. The post-structuralists held the wrong end of the stick—they argued that the relationship between economy and ideology, hegemony, and culture was not a necessary one, yet what we find is that yes it is, but the outcome of that relationship, that impact, is undecidable because it is dependent upon so many factors other than economy. This returns us to the question mark raised in Lukacs’ view that it is a guess whether capitalism will survive and thrive or if it will undergo transformation into another form of economic activity and exchange. The element of chance comes in after the fact, not before—it enters at the point of results, not of categories. In abandoning the category of the economy post-structuralism robbed itself of one of its strongest and most central components for a critique of ideology and western metaphysics.

This latter suggestion is close to Hall’s position but a bit further along than he might have been willing to suggest. Hall argues there is no necessary link between ruling classes and ruling ideas, because the question of what amounts to ruling ideas for a given epoch depends on hegemonic struggles within ideology and culture. I would argue that economy pronounces a particular form of culture and ideology that supports it (capitalist economics for example, in all the areas of the circuit from production to distribution to consumption, does not foster an appraisal of socialism which treats it as a viable

alternative to itself! One could argue there is no demand for it so there is no fostering of debate, but this is only partly true—both sides of the circuit are eclipsed on the question of alternatives—both the side that produces the context in which debate can occur, and the side which requires and needs the debate—both the capitalists and the workers). Economy though not the sole determinant of this restriction is a fundamental component of it, and ignoring economy and its role leaves post-structuralism grappling for imaginary straws to explain the gaps when culture fails to account for the limited choices of what can be chosen).

Ruling ideas are not guaranteed their dominance by their already given coupling with ruling classes. Rather, the effective coupling of dominant ideas *to* the historical bloc which has acquired hegemonic power in a particular period is what the process of ideological struggle is *intended to secure*. It is the object of the exercise, not the playing out of an already written and concluded script.<sup>90</sup>

Pre-determinacy is what is abandoned here—the idea that history has already precluded the struggle through the stages of economic growth. This kind of simple and simplistic determinism has long ago lost its colorful edge and attraction. We can argue with Hall that rather “material circumstances are the net of constraints, the ‘conditions of existence’ for practical thought and calculation about society”<sup>91</sup> but they do not spell out any specific outcome in advance—the outcome is “up for grabs” as Lukacs would have said—and is based on more than economic determinacy, on culture, society, discourse, and the battle for position in hegemonic negotiation between groups. None of these factors allows for a simple conclusion.

To bring this to a conclusion, Hall works backwards, from the dominance of Thatcherism in mid-1980s England and tracing why it is dominant back to an accounting of both the

failures of post-structuralism to account for it as well as the failures of Marxist interpretation regarding economic determinacy. He ends by arguing for a complex hegemonic approach to political struggles that also takes into account and actively pursues a change in capitalism with the understanding that capitalism unchanged means a “net of constraints” which will severely limit the efficacy of hegemonic political advocacy. We on the other hand started with Nietzsche, with the collapsing of definitions of identity thought into the question of equality, and proceeded down through the post-structuralists to the present struggle around hegemony, arguing that the abandonment of the economic question not only weakens hegemony, but prevents it in advance from achieving its aims. There can be no real avowal of difference and the achievement of a true democracy in a world torn in two by a capitalist circuit of exchange, expropriation, and loss, categories of which remain for the most part obscured and hidden from view, thereby making it seem acceptable on the surface level, globalization as a “positive” or joyous event. In the next chapter we will examine how post-colonialism repeats many of the errors already described in post-structuralism, transferring the Euro-American model of misreading to a non-European/non-American environment and how this transference, though offering what it purports to be voices of marginality and the subaltern, in effect simply reinvents the dilemma and the dead end by making the matter of power a matter of discourse. **Chapter 6—Post-colonialism**

Post-colonialism is one of the last of a series of schools of thought that has arisen as a consequence of the breakdown of western metaphysics and Euro-centric thought in philosophy. But it is the argument of this paper that in following the paradigm of western metaphysics with its elision of identity thought into the question of equality, post-colonialism simply perpetuates what it seeks to solve. The absence and rejection of economic analysis, the rejection of class-based social and political analysis, leads to it the same weightlessness that haunts post-structuralism and to a lesser extent cultural studies. In post-colonialism the dichotomy is reversed and the secondary marginalized term is made primary and privileged; but as Derrida would have noted, reversal of a binary opposition retains the opposition and the falseness or presumption of a break, of a clear difference between terms that are in fact mutually contaminated, professes separate what is in fact inseparable. It is the mutual interdependence and its grounding within a global economy that undercuts many of the strengths of this school of thinking.

## Said

In Edward Said's book Culture and Imperialism, we see this error promoted midway through the text. Said is extremely good at identifying the problem of western imperialism as a problem of identity thought and its war upon difference. The exclusion of the Other is an exclusion by the west of the non-westerner—very simply put, discursive theory through post-structuralism has opened up a recognition of the codes and institutional canons whereby nonwestern cultures and peoples have been systematically shut out, transformed into caricatures, or included on the peripheries but only as slaves, servants, and mirrors of their western masters.

But midway through his text Said elides Marx and Engels into this general western impulse and move against the east.

Even oppositional thinkers like Marx and Engels were no less capable of such pronouncements than French and British governmental spokesmen...When...Engels spoke of the Moors of Algeria as a 'timid race' because they were repressed but 'reserving nevertheless their cruelty and vindictiveness while in moral character they stand very low,' he was merely echoing French colonial doctrine. Conrad similarly used colonial accounts of lazy natives, much as Marx and Engels spun out their theories of Oriental and African ignorance and superstition.<sup>92</sup>

It is not the task of this paper to defend Marx and Engels against charges of colonialist prejudice—being products of their place and time, they were subject to the same general ignorance and chauvinism that their contemporaries displayed towards nonwestern peoples. What is this paper's task is to examine how Said's criticism fits into a larger gesture in post-colonialism in which the analysis of western arrogance starts to push an

economic analysis out of the picture precisely because it originated within a western context. Said's criticism of Marx and Engels has led his successors very often to a renunciation of Marxism altogether, because they feel it is too "western" and that Marx and Marxism are interchangeable terms, that it is possible to make identical the man and his work, something Said does not do. However because of his leveling off of oppositional thinkers like Marx and Engels with the imperialists they were enemies of, many post-colonialists chose not to see the distinction Said was implicitly making between individuals and the theories they espoused. If there was something wrong with the man there must in turn be something wrong with his theory. This of course devolves into the sin of essentialism, and the irony is that essentialism is precisely the kind of core identity-thought text that was responsible for doctrines espousing racism, colonialism, and the defense of slavery.

As long as identity and equality are made synonymous, the circle remains unbroken—we are left with porous barriers of division (north/south)—lines drawn in the sand, a sometimes superior marginal community offset by its European peers, but no solution to the problem of transformation, or a deadlock, a hybridity, without end. The true scope and condition of imperialism and its profound effects within the lives of the poorest of the south is omitted like a mute protest because equality has not been differentiated from the question of identity. In post-colonialism, the practice of difference remains a sacred cow, all other questions, economic ones included, get subsumed beneath this one question of non-identity.

There are profound, powerful and continuing economic reasons for the exclusion of the non-west and non-south. The North dominates the Southern countries not simply through cultural imperialism but through an economic undercurrent that carries cultural imperialism like pollution is carried from land to land by an ocean current. Without the economic factor in which Africa was pillaged, Asia reduced to a market of raw resources, and Latin America coerced into single commodity producing societies, cultural imperialism would be resisted, ignored, rejected, and laughable. It would fail to have the effect it has—in fact cultural constructions of the South would have no importance or effect if they weren't supported and backed up by money and guns. Again we have put the cart before the horse by examining the effect of identity thought in the production of Other, when in fact we must acknowledge immediately that this production is carried out through the implementation of a form of economic domination that produces inequality.

Said displaces the distinction between identity thought and equality, and by doing so the displacement becomes a core component of post-colonialist theory.

### **Bhabha**

A more fully developed example of this displacement is found in the work of Homi Bhabha—Bhabha attempts to take post-structuralism, and especially deconstructive textual analysis, and apply it to the social critique of post-colonialism.

His first move is to reject the dialectic and move theory towards metonymy—there is a parallel here, a rejection of non-western thought in which he sees the dialectic as an

example of domination and subjugation, and an adoption of a non-western “co-existence” form of thinking in which the autonomy of the Other is preserved through the side by side irreducibility of metonymy. A similar form of thought is at work in Laclau’s adoption of textual analysis to the concept of hegemony where identity groups exist in a chain of empty signifiers, none subsuming the other but all competing to establish the right to speak on behalf of all through hegemonic bloc building.

Taking my lead from the ‘doubly inscribed’ subaltern instance, I would argue that it is the *dialectical* hinge between the birth and death of the subject that needs to be interrogated. Perhaps the charge that a politics of the subject results in a vacuous apocalypse is itself a response to the poststructuralist probing of the notion of progressive negation—or sublation—in dialectical thinking.<sup>93</sup>

Yes, if we are thinking Hegel; no if we are thinking critical theory. Negative dialectics is the backwards movement of Hegelian dialectics—rather than a progressive charge forward which includes the destruction of the other through its subsumption by the same, negative dialectics fosters the concept of a “stand still” where recognition of what is (and what could be) depends on the irreducibility of the subject to the object, of the nonidentity between Same and Other. There is movement in the sense of a stalemate, if one is looking at it from the vantage point of western metaphysics—nothing seems to happen, but that is only true if domination and instrumentalization are one’s definitions of progress. This standstill, rather, insures the continuation of thought and its openness, that it not become a closed text or system, for it is within this negative standstill that accidental or unintentional truth, in response to Husserl’s concept of intentionality earlier discussed, has the potential of erupting. New configurations are possible, new knowledge breaks forward into view, when the subject respects the irreducible distance

between itself and the object under gaze—and by extension, when the subject respects the distance between itself and the Other.

But the flipside to this discussion is the economic: when Bhabha discusses hybridity, which is a concept very much similar to Adorno's discussion of non-identity, he does not appear to recognize that acknowledgement of culture's hybridity is dependent upon an economic setting which can allow it—in other words, knowing that the sharp cultural divides depicted in identity thought are illusory depends on social and class factors that have nothing to do with culture per se. They depend upon power and in this particular instance, the ownership and control of labor power.

The work of the word impedes the question of the transparent assimilation of cross-cultural meanings in a unitary sign of 'human' culture. In-between culture, at the point of its articulation of identity or distinctiveness, comes the question of signification. This is not simply a matter of language; it is the question of culture's representation of difference—manners, words, rituals, customs, time—inscribed *without* a transcendent subject that knows, outside of a mimetic social memory, and across the—ouboum—kernel of non-sense.<sup>94</sup>

Yes and no—language and cultural representation of difference do provoke what Bhabha calls a “doubling” of cultural inscription which has the effect of creating not a copy but a discordant or slightly “off” echo of the original—as the colonial culture is imitated and repeated in the colonized culture, its doubling creates a hybrid, something that resembles the original in some respects but which takes on aspects of the colonized culture so that it is actually no longer the same but a chimera. This doubling can be seen in all manner of instances, from religious practices in which original native beliefs and customs have been synchronistically absorbed by the foreign, dominant religion, to forms of parliament and



democracy that absorb tribal configurations of power. The hybrid fosters a beveled mirror to the conqueror shining back a warped and only slightly recognizable image—this reflection produces a discomfort in the certainty of control in the dominant party’s ability to maintain power.

But what is missing is what propelled colonialism in the first place, what maintained its continuation up to the present time, what secures its economic flow and distribution of goods, resources, and materials around the world for manufacture into commodities that are then sold upon the global market. None of the discussion of hybridity makes sense unless we examine this aspect or context of the colonial question—if anything it becomes desperate resorting to non-economic ways of coding non-western discourse and forms of possible resistance to imperialism without actually addressing the cause and reason for colonialism. Or rather we return to what we have said regarding Stuart Hall—that it is a compilation of two dramas at work—the discursive which made it possible for western or northern cultures and peoples to see non-western and southern peoples as culturally other (and as property) and therefore somehow inferior and primitive, making conquering of them not only easy morally but a “duty” (Christianity’s desire to “save” the savage and so forth), and the economic in terms of its need for markets, resources and cheap labor which has been the propelling force of expansion and travel through the mercantilist age up to the present time of oil dependency and occupancy of countries invested with large supplies of fossil fuels by the United States and Great Britain. These two dramas are part of one circuit, they are interdependently linked with one another and are both irreducible and inseparable—we can speak of them, in reflection, as distinct moments in a circle or cycle of circulation, but they make no sense to us apart from one another. They are the

propulsion which drives the maddening machine that flattens those cultures and peoples foreign to us and appropriates them, interprets them, translates them into degrading and subjugated forms for our use and amusement. The moral mission to save the “lost” other is the hypocritical residue of guilt which accompanies this economic greed.

Bhabha uses the same term that Laclau uses to describe the metonymic process:

incommensurableness.

An incommensurable doubleness ensues between history as the ‘homeland’ of the human sciences—its cultural area, its chronological or geographical boundaries—and the claims of historicism to universalism.<sup>95</sup>

Incommensurable becomes a term that substitutes for non-identical—the doubleness opened up by the western imperialist project of subjugation, creating and manifesting chimerical copies of itself that in turn empower the native informant and the subaltern as it resists, is collapsed into a non-spoken *aporia* regarding economic inequality between the powers that be, between the north and south, between the rich nations and people and their southern impoverished counterparts. By not recognizing the distinction between non-identity and inequality, it becomes possible to see this encounter between north and south as contingent—and being contingent, the difference between both challenges and begins to shatter the myths of rationalism that have been the excuse the west has used to justify its expansion. “It is the ‘rationalism’ of these ideologies of progress that increasingly comes to be eroded in the encounter with the contingency of cultural difference.”<sup>96</sup> I would argue, on the contrary, that it is the growing recognition of what underlies that rationalist excuse to invade other countries which is undermining the west

in its mythology of progress. It is the economic and material greed of the west which has led it abroad, and it is that greed which is undoing its conviction of identity.

Placing too much emphasis on cultural reflection in hybridic forms of resistance idealizes what is really a material and economic transaction—this does not say cultural hybridity is a purely determined package of effects brought about by the master/slave relationship of north and south, but it does recognize the tremendous importance of economy in the constructing of these cultural exchanges. In the age of globalization this role of economy has in some sense been lost in transparency, a certain invisibility has occurred the more naturalized and customary capitalist exchange has become, so that what is discussed is what is visible, the contingency arising out of cultural hybridity, and not the economic structures which dictate that hybridity and its formation.

The Other and the Same exist in the interstitial “in between” of cultural formations, according to Bhabha—we could say that this is similar to Benjamin and Adorno’s concept that truth exists in the in between of object to subject, the negative distance or nonidentity of the two. As long as we speak of this incommensurable gap between the Same and the Other, we are still within the parameters of critical theory as well, we are still speaking of identity and nonidentity. For Bhabha the gap of the in between is where hybridity occurs—it is in the accident, the contingent connections and interminglings, the unexpected blendings between two rigid and therefore untrue national stances—the colonialist’s and the colonized’s. As soon as these rigid stances are asserted they are immediately transgressed by their proximity to one another—no culture is really autonomous—every culture is infiltrated by others—the borders have holes in them, they

allow for trespassings and influences which show up in custom, language, cuisine, religion, and dress—they show up in explicit and not so explicit ways. The more either side asserts purity, the less pure they are, the more cosmopolitan and global, the more hybridic.

The problem is not of an ontological cast, where differences are effects in the past or the future. Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements—the stubborn chunks—as the basis of cultural identifications. What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, ‘opening out’, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race. Such assignations of social differences—where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between—find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory.<sup>97</sup>

The problem lies precisely in Bhabha’s choice of including class in the above statement, for as we have seen in Laclau’s political work, inclusion of class in a chain of incommensurable and empty signifiers, on par and equal to other forms of identities, belies the actual nature of the role of the economic in the formation of subjecthood, Otherness, and colonialism (as well as resistance to colonialism). It is possible then, to reassert the nonidentity that Bhabha is speaking of in terms of social and cultural encounters, the interstitial in-between in which the encounter occurs and in which truth comes to the forefront accidentally and without plan or purpose, while at the same time acknowledging a context that oversees and partially determines this encounter in terms of the question of economics, survival, hunger, poverty, and freedom. These latter aspects of the question of class have a profound impact on the formation of cultural stance and identity, and upon the encounter of the Same and the Other. What would be an encounter culturally between two equals? This has never happened. The prospects are invigorating

and worth considering—the encounter of two equals in which neither side is reduced into appropriation by its alterity is something along the lines of what Benjamin and Adorno were thinking when they discussed the role of objective rationality. It would mean a true adherence and respect for the operation of difference. It would also mean the abandonment of privilege and primacy towards any side, or signifier, in the chain of metonymy of culture side by side culture. But since this kind of equality does not exist, the concept of metonymy falsifies and camouflages actually existing conditions of existence between the cultures of the world.

Again, without an adequate economic analysis to this phenomena, post-colonialist theory and cultural studies suffer the same fate as post-structuralism by focusing too much weight upon one side of the issue: discourse, and too little weight on the other side: economy. When Bhabha discusses circulation as a production of “meaning as rumor or conspiracy, with its perverse, psychic affects of panic” which “constitutes the intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance”<sup>98</sup> he prefaces circulation with the adjective “indeterminate.”<sup>99</sup> But we could argue that this cultural form of circulation in the production of discourse, knowledge and identity as a form of possible resistance to domination by a colonial power is itself *highly* determined by another form of circulation which involves capital and labor power, the exchange of resources for commodities, the imposition of a model of economic activity that permeates all forms of social and cultural activity (as Stuart Hall would say, creating a mimetic effect upon our adoption of certain ways of living). Characterizing cultural circulation as indeterminate mystifies what is actually a highly determined form of discursive exchange.

Bhabha's criticisms of class categories in identity politics as being "auto referential" and "narcissistic" miss the point. "Class categories that provide a clear view to the stream's rocky bottom are then caught in an autotelic disavowal of their own discursive and epistemic limits."<sup>100</sup> Yes, this would be true if class were the key category for understanding difference. But class is the key category for understanding inequality, not difference. The mixing and confusing of the two problems creates a conflict where there is none, a matter of having to choose sides when no choice is required, and a dangerous and irresponsible dismissal of one half of the dynamic without which the other half is weakened and made impotent. It is not that other identities are "paler shades of authenticity" compared to class categories, but rather that it is not possible to secure their autonomy in a world divided economically—difference is drowned by inauthenticity when it occurs within a world mutilated by commodity based exchange. It will always be a matter of "catching up" with those in power—each minority struggling to secure at least partial representation at the top so as to have its interests recognized legally and economically, whereas that there is a top and a bottom is the problem that is bypassed entirely.

A democratic hegemonic plain of economic equality would constitute the thriving and potential realization of true difference amongst identities. To work within the economic model given to us under capitalism is in a sense to commit ourselves to failure when it comes to the hegemonic and post-colonial project. When Bhabha asserts that "affiliative solidarity is formed through the ambivalent articulations of the realms of the aesthetic, the fantasmatic, the economic and the body political"<sup>101</sup> he reduces the question of equality to a question of difference and identity, blurring the distinction and making them

one problem with one approach (camouflaged as a pluralistic response). But such pluralism is already predetermined in capitalism by the questions of money, income, wealth, poverty, and hunger—the kind of intersubjective community, discursively working together through their ambivalences towards an articulation that can fend off the colonial project, is idealist because it marks this community as comprised of economically equal components. But any empirical glance at the world will demonstrate that the world is anything but equal. The further removed from an analysis that understands the economic apart from but interdependent upon the cultural, the more despairing the hopefulness professed.

### **Spivak**

Like Stuart Hall in cultural studies, the one who comes closest to our position regarding economy and discourse in post-colonialist studies is Gayatri Spivak. This is most likely due to her insistence on retaining Marx along with her adoption of deconstruction, the combination of the two theories creating something that closely parallels what we have been discussing. Unwilling to discard Marx as western and colonial, Spivak instead subjects him to a new rereading that examines both his fallacies and weakness (his historical placement in the text of western imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and retains the primary crux of his theory of value as useful for an understanding of the position of the subaltern in the world of the post-colonial.

In the beginning of her monumental book Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Spivak suggests the necessity of a reading of theory that combines the Marxist with the post-colonialist:

If we attempt to read Marx and Foucault together by using “value” as a lever, then it might be possible to suggest that, in the analysis of overall strategies, the coding of the economic as the most important impersonal motor of the strategies of power and the organization of knowledge is not in fact dispensable.<sup>102</sup>

For Spivak economy is the most important way by which power appears, as value, coded as value and demonstrated as value. But it is not the only way power appears, hence her retention of Foucault with Marx. This combination of the two comes very close to the reading of difference and equality that this paper is attempting to suggest. The problem is that instead of rooting her reason for doing so in a textual analysis that is historically grounded and then preceded from that aberration to the present time, she instead tries to use post-structural textual arguments for justifying the retention of Marx as “strategic”, in a sense, using Foucault to reject what Foucault (and those after him) has said about Marx. She is partly successful in doing this by inscribing a deconstructive hinge or addition into the ploy which offsets Foucault from dominating her narrative while still retaining what is useful to her (much as Derrida did so precisely in his essay on Foucault in *Writing and Difference*). If Spivak has relied solely on Foucault to offset Foucault’s own arguments about Marxism she would have failed—she must in any case acknowledge his point, which is a criticism of the “science” of Marxism as such, and admit Marxism’s contingency. But there is a tension here where it remains ambiguous exactly how much of Marx’s historicism and science she discards and how much she retains, the deconstructive hinge (another way of saying it is suture) allows her to play with two



fields of approach simultaneously without fully rejecting or accepting any component of either side.

An interesting way for her to explain this is to contrast the global with the local—for example economic for the global in terms of context, and gender (and other forms of identity formation) in terms of the local. “For if the economic is among the most important in the field of overall strategy, gendering is one of the most important in the expanded form of the local.”<sup>103</sup> This leads her to a geographic or rather spatial topography in which the global assumes a Marxist analytic and the local assumes a post-structuralist one:

Although *Anti-Oedipus* never actually picks up the notion of the value-form, it comes closest to working with the possibilities of the theory of value as the contentless immediately codable in Marx. This for the authors is “desiring-production.” Just as “value” itself is a misleading word because, strictly speaking, it is catachrestic, so is “desire” misleading because of its paleonymic burden of originary phenomenal passion—from philosophical intentionality on the one hand to psychoanalytic definitive lack on the other.<sup>104</sup>

This corrective reading is necessary for “desire” without the context of “value” leaves us with ideology. Desire becomes the mark of deficit, psychoanalytically—a deficit that is rarely ever explained within the context of class (it is with interest that we see the adoption of Lacan in much of post-structuralist political thought, when psychoanalysis itself arose out of the practices and conditions of the bourgeoisie, a class which denied itself as a class, thus it arose out of a self-reflective denial or blind spot—psychoanalysis has never questioned its class standing, its premises and conclusions rooted in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist expansion. Intentionality too arose out of a

bourgeois construction and invention of the autonomous subject, capable of an epistemology in which the object can be captured, seized, and “known” –in itself. This errs on two sides: the presumption of the subject as autonomous, an invention only a class not beset by the question of hunger and physical survival could assume, and the presumption of objects that can be translated into usefulness for the knowing subject—the question of appropriation and instrumentality).

For desire to be more than a bourgeois myth, invention, or smoke-screen, it must be read within the contours and context of value, regarding the question of capital, of circulation, exchange, and labor power-expenditure. Spivak is able to state this in her specific and careful reading of the post-structuralists, but she does not explain to us why this is necessary. Bourgeois philosophy always required correctives because its ground of presumption, the starting point of its enterprise, always begins off the back of a system created through the enslavement of the vast majority of the world—it professes a discourse that requires reason, or logic, or totality as its narrative line of cohesion and development, while doing so within a context that is irrational, illogical, and shattered. This rationalist deployment of objectives—the return to Eden mythology of a successful conclusion to the problem being considered—stems from an origin which is broken and lost (spatially/geographically shattered and temporally irretrievable).

This leads Spivak to a suspicion of the post-structural, and by extension, the post-colonial. The suspicion is over the possibility of a recapturing of the spirit of the subaltern, or the Other, from its imprisonment discursively at the hands of imperialism. The post-colonial cannot achieve this recapturing through a discursive means because the

Other is already a servant of the Same, and this is not a discursive problem but an economic one: “no perspective critical of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been an incommensurable and discontinuous other into a domesticated other that consolidates the imperialist self.”<sup>105</sup> Incommensurability becomes mythology in post-colonialism, because the primary function of imperialism—economic subjugation and appropriation of the Other into servitude—is ignored. Difference then becomes an empty place-holder, something that serves mythology—or under capitalism, mythology is now ideology—and reproduces it, even in resistance to it. Resistance becomes mythologized, like Che t-shirts—the Other as other is commoditized in its difference, so that difference and incommensurability become simply another advertising slogan that pacifies actual resistance to the economic machine.

The privileging of incommensurability is therefore dependent upon an unexamined privilege of the Same—an assumption of the Same in which the Same stands in for the world in its difference. The Other becomes a trope of the Same—a secondary offshoot of a presumed epistemologically dominant origin that is being challenged. But the challenge to the canon of western metaphysics is still a challenge of a canon—it still wrestles with inventions of capitalism, just as psychoanalysis and the other “human sciences” were inventions of a class that did not identify itself as a class. Any rebuttal within this world is a rebuttal contaminated by the presumptions of this world—this is where philosophy finally fails, it cannot challenge what constitutes it without imploding in self-reflection—Marx understood this, as has every revolutionary since him. To use the tools of the master to undo the dominance of the master is still to be working within

the rules, the laws, the parameters of social order defined by that master. Philosophy can only engage in an endless, seemingly infinite competition within the confines of an analytical merry-go-round.

A restricted use of a critical or resistant approach may lead to the discovery that the basis of a truth-claim is no more than a trope...it is a trope that passes itself off as truth and claims that woman or the racial other is merely a kind of troping of that truth of man—in the sense that they must be understood *as* unlike (non-identical with) it and yet *with* reference to it....As it establishes the truth of this discovery, however, it begins to perform the problems inherent in the institution of epistemological production, of the production, in other words, of any “truth” at all. By this logic, varieties of feminist theory and practice must reckon with the possibility that, like any other discursive practice, they are marked and constituted by, even as they constitute, the field of their production.<sup>106</sup>

The procedure of deconstruction, which inspired the post-colonialist project, argues that binary oppositions are porous, that any boundary asserted is immediately transgressed at the moment it is asserted, so the possibility of domination in terms of questions of privilege (the privilege of presence over absence, speech over writing, and so forth) becomes “impossible”. Deconstruction would not argue that the reversal of the dichotomy is a political possibility since it too would be a contaminated reversal. This led those who followed deconstruction in the hopes of a political form of advocacy and practice into a kind of despair since all deconstruction can do is diagnose, it cannot prescribe.

The responses to this dilemma have, as we have seen, varied from disavowal of the project of emancipation altogether, to an incorporation of hegemony as an alternative, metonymic form of political activism, to a kind of pragmatic liberalism focused on coalition building and affirmative action advocacy. Reform has gained dominance over

revolution once the question of inequality is removed from its economic roots and made into a matter of civil society (Gramsci stripped of his skeleton). But precisely the warning deconstruction warned against, the impossibility of advocacy at all within a binary division, thwarts these attempts towards change—they are always and will always remain forms of change within a context that remains the same. As long as the economic structure within which these kinds of reformation take place does not alter or develop into a new form, reformation becomes simply a kind of troping, as Spivak has argued, and academia becomes a playground of theoretical gaming devoid of any actual impact or importance for the vast majority of the world’s population: a kind of frivolous and superficial “sport”.

But this is the point where we part with Spivak for in her words, it is not simply a reversal of the polarities involved but their displacement—yet the displacement she practices is not from a context that is economic, but rather one which is also discursive, and thus repeats the very problems she is so articulate in describing.

But a just world must entail normalization; the promise of justice must attend not only to the seduction of power, but also to the anguish that knowledge must suppress difference as well as difference, that a fully just world is impossible, forever deferred and different from our projections, the undecidable in the face of which we must risk the decision that we can hear the other.<sup>107</sup>

This is true if we see justice as a matter of discourse; once we suggest that justice is a question of economics, then difference (and difference) have the opportunity to truly flourish, and actually cannot flourish in an unjust world of inequality. It is not the establishment of a totality through the eradication of the other for the benefit of

identity—it is the establishment of equality through the redistribution of wealth, through the abandonment of commodity-based exchange, which affects nothing of difference but in fact provides the possibilities for its germination to occur. Difference under conditions of inequality is a perverse and twisted creation that always bears the contamination of the dominant trope, the master dialogue, which sentences it to an eternity of combat and reaction, of self-defense and running skirmishes in the popular field of hegemonic power struggles—difference under these conditions can never “rest”, can never “win”, it is always a residue, an afterthought permanently in danger of extermination by the central powers that be. As long as capitalism is the economic structure of exchange, the form and model of motion, activity, development, and knowing, difference will be subject to this condition of being peripheral and inferior, always grappling for pieces of power like so many crumbs from the collective table.

When Spivak argued against the possibility of a retrieval of the subaltern due to the loss and shattering of the origin of western discourse (that both created the subaltern as Other and removed it to the periphery of discursive imperialist practice), she was responding to the question of identity from the standpoint of ideal. Within that context the search for a lost spiritual and cultural homeland is indeed futile, given cultural porosity and mutual contamination, given that discourse is always an ambiguity. But if we were to reexamine this lost origin from the economic standpoint, then the shattering of the world takes on a new meaning—the two-dimensionality of life, as Marcuse argued, requires two things—that thought not become one-dimensional, and that economy become a practice amongst equals. This material renovation of the origin is not the ideal or discursive search for a mythological lost totality, it is the reparation of wrongs. And such an amends makes

possible the wholeness and fruition of the subaltern as alterity, no longer struggling in resistance to its subsumption by the Same, but truly respected and truly its own.

In an odd twist, we can add that Marx's comment in the Theses on Feuerbach, that the ruling ideas of an epoch are those of the ruling classes, still has merit despite its attack by people in cultural studies for the hint of determinism implicit in the concept. Because in the colonial period, the Enlightenment thrived along lines of an opposition between a European "man" who was directed by rationality and transcendental reason, and a dehumanization of the non-European as animal or beast. From Voltaire to Hume and Kant, the philosophers of reason characterized the African as nothing more than an ape. This corresponded quite well with the practice of the ruling classes from feudalism into industrial capitalism—first the African, Latin American and Asian were seen as animals without souls, then they were characterized as subjects without voice as blatant enslavement gave way to more invisible forms of rape and pillage of foreign lands by European trade companies, imperialist armies, and missionaries. The ruling ideas of this epoch of transition from explicit forms of domination and control to implicit forms of the same was a schizophrenic reason, divided along the lines of a self-reflection that viewed the European as being the pinnacle of civilization and logic, mixed with an instrumental contempt for anything non-European. As European ruling logic became more sophisticated with the onslaught of capitalism and capitalist forms of democratic rule, the enslavement of the southern peoples became more subtle and underground through the use of cultural practices as domination. This we are still seeing to this day.

The ruling classes (academia not excluded) are dispersed throughout the globe and there are many centers, no longer solely one emanating from the north. Post-colonialism reflects this dispersal and multiplicity. The centers of power today are multiple, and the emergence of multiple voices from cultures that were once colonized reflects this reversal of discourse and direction, but a center of power is still a center of power, and in both cases—18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment or 21<sup>st</sup> century post-colonialism, it is still a discourse of the bourgeoisie speaking of its own interests, priorities and needs, and ignoring those matters which might threaten its dominance over the majority of the world's population. Their discourse, the silence of the millions, remains to be heard.

## **Epilogue**

Returning to the original theme that guided this discussion—we have seen how an elision of two definitions in a single term used by Nietzsche, “gleich”, has devolved over time into the jettisoning of economic critique from the analysis of society, knowledge, truth, and discourse conducted by contemporary philosophy. Similarity and equality, once being interchangeable, became equal enemies to critical philosophy which began to view identity-thought as responsible for most of the disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A crucial component for thinking through these disasters was thereby lost—in favoring the secondary term of the philosophic dichotomy of Same and Other, philosophy simply repeated the dichotomy on the other foot, arguing now from the vantage point of the marginalized and abused rather than from the imaginary center of identity. Equality was seen as a subdivision of identity, and as such it had no place in philosophy—in a sense we could say Marx's call (and move) from philosophy as a bourgeois discipline, into



economics was rejected and the reversed was followed—staying firmly within the parameters of a bourgeois context, the context that cannot see itself as a context, philosophy simply spun its wheels in parochial debates over textuality and semiotics. The colossal problem of a world torn asunder by commodity-based exchange, as the context and conditions under which discourse arises and is used, became eclipsed—perhaps because of the impossible contortions involved in philosophy trying to be self-analytical and critical—it was asking of the discipline too much.

## **Chapter 6—Post-colonialism**

Post-colonialism is one of the last of a series of schools of thought that has arisen as a consequence of the breakdown of western metaphysics and Euro-centric thought in philosophy. But it is the argument of this paper that in following the paradigm of western metaphysics with its elision of identity thought into the question of equality, post-colonialism simply perpetuates what it seeks to solve. The absence and rejection of economic analysis, the rejection of class-based social and political analysis, lends to it the same weightlessness that haunts post-structuralism and to a lesser extent cultural studies. In post-colonialism the dichotomy is reversed and the secondary marginalized term is made primary and privileged; but as Derrida would have noted, reversal of a binary opposition retains the opposition and the falseness or presumption of a break, of a clear difference between terms that are in fact mutually contaminated, professes separate what is in fact inseparable. It is the mutual interdependence and its grounding within a global economy that undercuts many of the strengths of this school of thinking.

### **Said**

In Edward Said's book Culture and Imperialism, we see this error promoted midway through the text. Said is extremely good at identifying the problem of western imperialism as a problem of identity thought and its war upon difference. The exclusion of the Other is an exclusion by the west of the non-westerner—very simply put, discursive theory through post-structuralism has opened up a recognition of the codes and institutional canons whereby nonwestern cultures and peoples have been systematically

shut out, transformed into caricatures, or included on the peripheries but only as slaves, servants, and mirrors of their western masters.

But midway through his text Said elides Marx and Engels into this general western impulse and move against the east.

Even oppositional thinkers like Marx and Engels were no less capable of such pronouncements than French and British governmental spokesmen...When...Engels spoke of the Moors of Algeria as a 'timid race' because they were repressed but 'reserving nevertheless their cruelty and vindictiveness while in moral character they stand very low,' he was merely echoing French colonial doctrine. Conrad similarly used colonial accounts of lazy natives, much as Marx and Engels spun out their theories of Oriental and African ignorance and superstition.<sup>108</sup>

It is not the task of this paper to defend Marx and Engels against charges of colonialist prejudice—being products of their place and time, they were subject to the same general ignorance and chauvinism that their contemporaries displayed towards nonwestern peoples. What is this paper's task is to examine how Said's criticism fits into a larger gesture in post-colonialism in which the analysis of western arrogance starts to push an economic analysis out of the picture precisely because it originated within a western context. Said's criticism of Marx and Engels has led his successors very often to a renunciation of Marxism altogether, because they feel it is too "western" and that Marx and Marxism are interchangeable terms, that it is possible to make identical the man and his work, something Said does not do. However because of his leveling off of oppositional thinkers like Marx and Engels with the imperialists they were enemies of, many post-colonialists chose not to see the distinction Said was implicitly making between individuals and the theories they espoused. If there was something wrong with

the man there must in turn be something wrong with his theory. This of course devolves into the sin of essentialism, and the irony is that essentialism is precisely the kind of core identity-thought text that was responsible for doctrines espousing racism, colonialism, and the defense of slavery.

As long as identity and equality are made synonymous, the circle remains unbroken—we are left with porous barriers of division (north/south)—lines drawn in the sand, a sometimes superior marginal community offset by its European peers, but no solution to the problem of transformation, or a deadlock, a hybridity, without end. The true scope and condition of imperialism and its profound effects within the lives of the poorest of the south is omitted like a mute protest because equality has not been differentiated from the question of identity. In post-colonialism, the practice of difference remains a sacred cow, all other questions, economic ones included, get subsumed beneath this one question of non-identity.

There are profound, powerful and continuing economic reasons for the exclusion of the non-west and non-south. The North dominates the Southern countries not simply through cultural imperialism but through an economic undercurrent that carries cultural imperialism like pollution is carried from land to land by an ocean current. Without the economic factor in which Africa was pillaged, Asia reduced to a market of raw resources, and Latin America coerced into single commodity producing societies, cultural imperialism would be resisted, ignored, rejected, and laughable. It would fail to have the effect it has—in fact cultural constructions of the South would have no importance or effect if they weren't supported and backed up by money and guns. Again we have put

the cart before the horse by examining the effect of identity thought in the production of Other, when in fact we must acknowledge immediately that this production is carried out through the implementation of a form of economic domination that produces inequality.

Said displaces the distinction between identity thought and equality, and by doing so the displacement becomes a core component of post-colonialist theory.

### **Bhabha**

A more fully developed example of this displacement is found in the work of Homi Bhabha—Bhabha attempts to take post-structuralism, and especially deconstructive textual analysis, and apply it to the social critique of post-colonialism.

His first move is to reject the dialectic and move theory towards metonymy—there is a parallel here, a rejection of non-western thought in which he sees the dialectic as an example of domination and subjugation, and an adoption of a non-western “co-existence” form of thinking in which the autonomy of the Other is preserved through the side by side irreducibility of metonymy. A similar form of thought is at work in Laclau’s adoption of textual analysis to the concept of hegemony where identity groups exist in a chain of empty signifiers, none subsuming the other but all competing to establish the right to speak on behalf of all through hegemonic bloc building.

Taking my lead from the ‘doubly inscribed’ subaltern instance, I would argue that it is the *dialectical* hinge between the birth and death of the subject that needs to be interrogated. Perhaps the charge that a politics of the subject results in a

vacuous apocalypse is itself a response to the poststructuralist probing of the notion of progressive negation—or sublation—in dialectical thinking.<sup>109</sup>

Yes, if we are thinking Hegel; no if we are thinking critical theory. Negative dialectics is the backwards movement of Hegelian dialectics—rather than a progressive charge forward which includes the destruction of the other through its subsumption by the same, negative dialectics fosters the concept of a “stand still” where recognition of what is (and what could be) depends on the irreducibility of the subject to the object, of the nonidentity between Same and Other. There is movement in the sense of a stalemate, if one is looking at it from the vantage point of western metaphysics—nothing seems to happen, but that is only true if domination and instrumentalization are one’s definitions of progress. This standstill, rather, insures the continuation of thought and its openness, that it not become a closed text or system, for it is within this negative standstill that accidental or unintentional truth, in response to Husserl’s concept of intentionality earlier discussed, has the potential of erupting. New configurations are possible, new knowledge breaks forward into view, when the subject respects the irreducible distance between itself and the object under gaze—and by extension, when the subject respects the distance between itself and the Other.

But the flipside to this discussion is the economic: when Bhabha discusses hybridity, which is a concept very much similar to Adorno’s discussion of non-identity, he does not appear to recognize that acknowledgement of culture’s hybridity is dependent upon an economic setting which can allow it—in other words, knowing that the sharp cultural divides depicted in identity thought are illusory depends on social and class factors that

have nothing to do with culture per se. They depend upon power and in this particular instance, the ownership and control of labor power.

The work of the word impedes the question of the transparent assimilation of cross-cultural meanings in a unitary sign of 'human' culture. In-between culture, at the point of its articulation of identity or distinctiveness, comes the question of signification. This is not simply a matter of language; it is the question of culture's representation of difference—manners, words, rituals, customs, time—inscribed *without* a transcendent subject that knows, outside of a mimetic social memory, and across the—ouboum—kernel of non-sense.<sup>110</sup>

Yes and no—language and cultural representation of difference do provoke what Bhabha calls a “doubling” of cultural inscription which has the effect of creating not a copy but a discordant or slightly “off” echo of the original—as the colonial culture is imitated and repeated in the colonized culture, its doubling creates a hybrid, something that resembles the original in some respects but which takes on aspects of the colonized culture so that it is actually no longer the same but a chimera. This doubling can be seen in all manner of instances, from religious practices in which original native beliefs and customs have been synchronistically absorbed by the foreign, dominant religion, to forms of parliament and democracy that absorb tribal configurations of power. The hybrid fosters a beveled mirror to the conqueror shining back a warped and only slightly recognizable image—this reflection produces a discomfort in the certainty of control in the dominant party's ability to maintain power.

But what is missing is what propelled colonialism in the first place, what maintained its continuation up to the present time, what secures its economic flow and distribution of goods, resources, and materials around the world for manufacture into commodities that

are then sold upon the global market. None of the discussion of hybridity makes sense unless we examine this aspect or context of the colonial question—if anything it becomes desperate resorting to non-economic ways of coding non-western discourse and forms of possible resistance to imperialism without actually addressing the cause and reason for colonialism. Or rather we return to what we have said regarding Stuart Hall—that it is a compilation of two dramas at work—the discursive which made it possible for western or northern cultures and peoples to see non-western and southern peoples as culturally other (and as property) and therefore somehow inferior and primitive, making conquering of them not only easy morally but a “duty” (Christianity’s desire to “save” the savage and so forth), and the economic in terms of its need for markets, resources and cheap labor which has been the propelling force of expansion and travel through the mercantilist age up to the present time of oil dependency and occupancy of countries invested with large supplies of fossil fuels by the United States and Great Britain. These two dramas are part of one circuit, they are interdependently linked with one another and are both irreducible and inseparable—we can speak of them, in reflection, as distinct moments in a circle or cycle of circulation, but they make no sense to us apart from one another. They are the propulsion which drives the maddening machine that flattens those cultures and peoples foreign to us and appropriates them, interprets them, translates them into degrading and subjugated forms for our use and amusement. The moral mission to save the “lost” other is the hypocritical residue of guilt which accompanies this economic greed.

Bhabha uses the same term that Laclau uses to describe the metonymic process: incommensurableness.



An incommensurable doubleness ensues between history as the ‘homeland’ of the human sciences—its cultural area, its chronological or geographical boundaries—and the claims of historicism to universalism.<sup>111</sup>

Incommensurable becomes a term that substitutes for non-identical—the doubleness opened up by the western imperialist project of subjugation, creating and manifesting chimerical copies of itself that in turn empower the native informant and the subaltern as it resists, is collapsed into a non-spoken *aporia* regarding economic inequality between the powers that be, between the north and south, between the rich nations and people and their southern impoverished counterparts. By not recognizing the distinction between non-identity and inequality, it becomes possible to see this encounter between north and south as contingent—and being contingent, the difference between both challenges and begins to shatter the myths of rationalism that have been the excuse the west has used to justify its expansion. “It is the ‘rationalism’ of these ideologies of progress that increasingly comes to be eroded in the encounter with the contingency of cultural difference.”<sup>112</sup> I would argue, on the contrary, that it is the growing recognition of what underlies that rationalist excuse to invade other countries which is undermining the west in its mythology of progress. It is the economic and material greed of the west which has led it abroad, and it is that greed which is undoing its conviction of identity.

Placing too much emphasis on cultural reflection in hybridic forms of resistance idealizes what is really a material and economic transaction—this does not say cultural hybridity is a purely determined package of effects brought about by the master/slave relationship of north and south, but it does recognize the tremendous importance of economy in the constructing of these cultural exchanges. In the age of globalization this role of economy

has in some sense been lost in transparency, a certain invisibility has occurred the more naturalized and customary capitalist exchange has become, so that what is discussed is what is visible, the contingency arising out of cultural hybridity, and not the economic structures which dictate that hybridity and its formation.

The Other and the Same exist in the interstitial “in between” of cultural formations, according to Bhabha—we could say that this is similar to Benjamin and Adorno’s concept that truth exists in the in between of object to subject, the negative distance or nonidentity of the two. As long as we speak of this incommensurable gap between the Same and the Other, we are still within the parameters of critical theory as well, we are still speaking of identity and nonidentity. For Bhabha the gap of the in between is where hybridity occurs—it is in the accident, the contingent connections and interminglings, the unexpected blendings between two rigid and therefore untrue national stances—the colonialist’s and the colonized’s. As soon as these rigid stances are asserted they are immediately transgressed by their proximity to one another—no culture is really autonomous—every culture is infiltrated by others—the borders have holes in them, they allow for trespassings and influences which show up in custom, language, cuisine, religion, and dress—they show up in explicit and not so explicit ways. The more either side asserts purity, the less pure they are, the more cosmopolitan and global, the more hybridic.

The problem is not of an ontological cast, where differences are effects in the past or the future. Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements—the stubborn chunks—as the basis of cultural identifications. What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, ‘opening out’, remaking the

boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race. Such assignments of social differences—where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between—find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory.<sup>113</sup>

The problem lies precisely in Bhabha’s choice of including class in the above statement, for as we have seen in Laclau’s political work, inclusion of class in a chain of incommensurable and empty signifiers, on par and equal to other forms of identities, belies the actual nature of the role of the economic in the formation of subjecthood, Otherness, and colonialism (as well as resistance to colonialism). It is possible then, to reassert the nonidentity that Bhabha is speaking of in terms of social and cultural encounters, the interstitial in-between in which the encounter occurs and in which truth comes to the forefront accidentally and without plan or purpose, while at the same time acknowledging a context that oversees and partially determines this encounter in terms of the question of economics, survival, hunger, poverty, and freedom. These latter aspects of the question of class have a profound impact on the formation of cultural stance and identity, and upon the encounter of the Same and the Other. What would be an encounter culturally between two equals? This has never happened. The prospects are invigorating and worth considering—the encounter of two equals in which neither side is reduced into appropriation by its alterity is something along the lines of what Benjamin and Adorno were thinking when they discussed the role of objective rationality. It would mean a true adherence and respect for the operation of difference. It would also mean the abandonment of privilege and primacy towards any side, or signifier, in the chain of metonymy of culture side by side culture. But since this kind of equality does not exist,

the concept of metonymy falsifies and camouflages actually existing conditions of existence between the cultures of the world.

Again, without an adequate economic analysis to this phenomena, post-colonialist theory and cultural studies suffer the same fate as post-structuralism by focusing too much weight upon one side of the issue: discourse, and too little weight on the other side: economy. When Bhabha discusses circulation as a production of “meaning as rumor or conspiracy, with its perverse, psychic affects of panic” which “constitutes the intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance”<sup>114</sup> he prefaces circulation with the adjective “indeterminate.”<sup>115</sup> But we could argue that this cultural form of circulation in the production of discourse, knowledge and identity as a form of possible resistance to domination by a colonial power is itself *highly* determined by another form of circulation which involves capital and labor power, the exchange of resources for commodities, the imposition of a model of economic activity that permeates all forms of social and cultural activity (as Stuart Hall would say, creating a mimetic effect upon our adoption of certain ways of living). Characterizing cultural circulation as indeterminate mystifies what is actually a highly determined form of discursive exchange.

Bhabha’s criticisms of class categories in identity politics as being “auto referential” and “narcissistic” miss the point. “Class categories that provide a clear view to the stream’s rocky bottom are then caught in an autotelic disavowal of their own discursive and epistemic limits.”<sup>116</sup> Yes, this would be true if class were the key category for understanding difference. But class is the key category for understanding inequality, not difference. The mixing and confusing of the two problems creates a conflict where there

is none, a matter of having to choose sides when no choice is required, and a dangerous and irresponsible dismissal of one half of the dynamic without which the other half is weakened and made impotent. It is not that other identities are “paler shades of authenticity” compared to class categories, but rather that it is not possible to secure their autonomy in a world divided economically—difference is drowned by inauthenticity when it occurs within a world mutilated by commodity based exchange. It will always be a matter of “catching up” with those in power—each minority struggling to secure at least partial representation at the top so as to have its interests recognized legally and economically, whereas that there is a top and a bottom is the problem that is bypassed entirely.

A democratic hegemonic plain of economic equality would constitute the thriving and potential realization of true difference amongst identities. To work within the economic model given to us under capitalism is in a sense to commit ourselves to failure when it comes to the hegemonic and post-colonial project. When Bhabha asserts that “affiliative solidarity is formed through the ambivalent articulations of the realms of the aesthetic, the fantasmatic, the economic and the body political”<sup>117</sup> he reduces the question of equality to a question of difference and identity, blurring the distinction and making them one problem with one approach (camouflaged as a pluralistic response). But such pluralism is already predetermined in capitalism by the questions of money, income, wealth, poverty, and hunger—the kind of intersubjective community, discursively working together through their ambivalences towards an articulation that can fend off the colonial project, is idealist because it marks this community as comprised of economically equal components. But any empirical glance at the world will demonstrate

that the world is anything but equal. The further removed from an analysis that understands the economic apart from but interdependent upon the cultural, the more despairing the hopefulness professed.

## **Spivak**

Like Stuart Hall in cultural studies, the one who comes closest to our position regarding economy and discourse in post-colonialist studies is Gayatri Spivak. This is most likely due to her insistence on retaining Marx along with her adoption of deconstruction, the combination of the two theories creating something that closely parallels what we have been discussing. Unwilling to discard Marx as western and colonial, Spivak instead subjects him to a new rereading that examines both his fallacies and weakness (his historical placement in the text of western imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and retains the primary crux of his theory of value as useful for an understanding of the position of the subaltern in the world of the post-colonial.

In the beginning of her monumental book Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Spivak suggests the necessity of a reading of theory that combines the Marxist with the post-colonialist:

If we attempt to read Marx and Foucault together by using “value” as a lever, then it might be possible to suggest that, in the analysis of overall strategies, the coding of the economic as the most important impersonal motor of the strategies of power and the organization of knowledge is not in fact dispensable.<sup>118</sup>

For Spivak economy is the most important way by which power appears, as value, coded as value and demonstrated as value. But it is not the only way power appears, hence her retention of Foucault with Marx. This combination of the two comes very close to the reading of difference and equality that this paper is attempting to suggest. The problem is that instead of rooting her reason for doing so in a textual analysis that is historically grounded and then preceded from that aberration to the present time, she instead tries to use post-structural textual arguments for justifying the retention of Marx as “strategic”, in a sense, using Foucault to reject what Foucault (and those after him) has said about Marx. She is partly successful in doing this by inscribing a deconstructive hinge or addition into the ploy which offsets Foucault from dominating her narrative while still retaining what is useful to her (much as Derrida did so precisely in his essay on Foucault in *Writing and Difference*). If Spivak has relied solely on Foucault to offset Foucault’s own arguments about Marxism she would have failed—she must in any case acknowledge his point, which is a criticism of the “science” of Marxism as such, and admit Marxism’s contingency. But there is a tension here where it remains ambiguous exactly how much of Marx’s historicism and science she discards and how much she retains, the deconstructive hinge (another way of saying it is suture) allows her to play with two fields of approach simultaneously without fully rejecting or accepting any component of either side.

An interesting way for her to explain this is to contrast the global with the local—for example economic for the global in terms of context, and gender (and other forms of identity formation) in terms of the local. “For if the economic is among the most important in the field of overall strategy, gendering is one of the most important in the

expanded form of the local.”<sup>119</sup> This leads her to a geographic or rather spatial topography in which the global assumes a Marxist analytic and the local assumes a post-structuralist one:

Although *Anti-Oedipus* never actually picks up the notion of the value-form, it comes closest to working with the possibilities of the theory of value as the contentless immediately codable in Marx. This for the authors is “desiring-production.” Just as “value” itself is a misleading word because, strictly speaking, it is catachrestic, so is “desire” misleading because of its paleonymic burden of originary phenomenal passion—from philosophical intentionality on the one hand to psychoanalytic definitive lack on the other.<sup>120</sup>

This corrective reading is necessary for “desire” without the context of “value” leaves us with ideology. Desire becomes the mark of deficit, psychoanalytically—a deficit that is rarely ever explained within the context of class (it is with interest that we see the adoption of Lacan in much of post-structuralist political thought, when psychoanalysis itself arose out of the practices and conditions of the bourgeoisie, a class which denied itself as a class, thus it arose out of a self-reflective denial or blind spot—psychoanalysis has never questioned its class standing, its premises and conclusions rooted in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist expansion. Intentionality too arose out of a bourgeois construction and invention of the autonomous subject, capable of an epistemology in which the object can be captured, seized, and “known” –in itself. This errs on two sides: the presumption of the subject as autonomous, an invention only a class not beset by the question of hunger and physical survival could assume, and the presumption of objects that can be translated into usefulness for the knowing subject—the question of appropriation and instrumentality).



For desire to be more than a bourgeois myth, invention, or smoke-screen, it must be read within the contours and context of value, regarding the question of capital, of circulation, exchange, and labor power-expenditure. Spivak is able to state this in her specific and careful reading of the post-structuralists, but she does not explain to us why this is necessary. Bourgeois philosophy always required correctives because its ground of presumption, the starting point of its enterprise, always begins off the back of a system created through the enslavement of the vast majority of the world—it professes a discourse that requires reason, or logic, or totality as its narrative line of cohesion and development, while doing so within a context that is irrational, illogical, and shattered. This rationalist deployment of objectives—the return to Eden mythology of a successful conclusion to the problem being considered—stems from an origin which is broken and lost (spatially/geographically shattered and temporally irretrievable).

This leads Spivak to a suspicion of the post-structural, and by extension, the post-colonial. The suspicion is over the possibility of a recapturing of the spirit of the subaltern, or the Other, from its imprisonment discursively at the hands of imperialism. The post-colonial cannot achieve this recapturing through a discursive means because the Other is already a servant of the Same, and this is not a discursive problem but an economic one: “no perspective critical of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been an incommensurable and discontinuous other into a domesticated other that consolidates the imperialist self.”<sup>121</sup> Incommensurability becomes mythology in post-colonialism, because the primary function of imperialism—economic subjugation and appropriation of the Other into servitude—is ignored. Difference then becomes an empty

place-holder, something that serves mythology—or under capitalism, mythology is now ideology—and reproduces it, even in resistance to it. Resistance becomes mythologized, like Che t-shirts—the Other as other is commoditized in its difference, so that difference and incommensurability become simply another advertising slogan that pacifies actual resistance to the economic machine.

The privileging of incommensurability is therefore dependent upon an unexamined privilege of the Same—an assumption of the Same in which the Same stands in for the world in its difference. The Other becomes a trope of the Same—a secondary offshoot of a presumed epistemologically dominant origin that is being challenged. But the challenge to the canon of western metaphysics is still a challenge of a canon—it still wrestles with inventions of capitalism, just as psychoanalysis and the other “human sciences” were inventions of a class that did not identify itself as a class. Any rebuttal within this world is a rebuttal contaminated by the presumptions of this world—this is where philosophy finally fails, it cannot challenge what constitutes it without imploding in self-reflection—Marx understood this, as has every revolutionary since him. To use the tools of the master to undo the dominance of the master is still to be working within the rules, the laws, the parameters of social order defined by that master. Philosophy can only engage in an endless, seemingly infinite competition within the confines of an analytical merry-go-round.

A restricted use of a critical or resistant approach may lead to the discovery that the basis of a truth-claim is no more than a trope...it is a trope that passes itself off as truth and claims that woman or the racial other is merely a kind of troping of that truth of man—in the sense that they must be understood *as* unlike (non-identical with) it and yet *with* reference to it....As it establishes the truth of this

discovery, however, it begins to perform the problems inherent in the institution of epistemological production, of the production, in other words, of any “truth” at all. By this logic, varieties of feminist theory and practice must reckon with the possibility that, like any other discursive practice, they are marked and constituted by, even as they constitute, the field of their production.<sup>122</sup>

The procedure of deconstruction, which inspired the post-colonialist project, argues that binary oppositions are porous, that any boundary asserted is immediately transgressed at the moment it is asserted, so the possibility of domination in terms of questions of privilege (the privilege of presence over absence, speech over writing, and so forth) becomes “impossible”. Deconstruction would not argue that the reversal of the dichotomy is a political possibility since it too would be a contaminated reversal. This led those who followed deconstruction in the hopes of a political form of advocacy and practice into a kind of despair since all deconstruction can do is diagnose, it cannot prescribe.

The responses to this dilemma have, as we have seen, varied from disavowal of the project of emancipation altogether, to an incorporation of hegemony as an alternative, metonymic form of political activism, to a kind of pragmatic liberalism focused on coalition building and affirmative action advocacy. Reform has gained dominance over revolution once the question of inequality is removed from its economic roots and made into a matter of civil society (Gramsci stripped of his skeleton). But precisely the warning deconstruction warned against, the impossibility of advocacy at all within a binary division, thwarts these attempts towards change—they are always and will always remain forms of change within a context that remains the same. As long as the economic structure within which these kinds of reformation take place does not alter or develop into

a new form, reformation becomes simply a kind of troping, as Spivak has argued, and academia becomes a playground of theoretical gaming devoid of any actual impact or importance for the vast majority of the world's population: a kind of frivolous and superficial "sport".

But this is the point where we part with Spivak for in her words, it is not simply a reversal of the polarities involved but their displacement—yet the displacement she practices is not from a context that is economic, but rather one which is also discursive, and thus repeats the very problems she is so articulate in describing.

But a just world must entail normalization; the promise of justice must attend not only to the seduction of power, but also to the anguish that knowledge must suppress difference as well as difference, that a fully just world is impossible, forever deferred and different from our projections, the undecidable in the face of which we must risk the decision that we can hear the other.<sup>123</sup>

This is true if we see justice as a matter of discourse; once we suggest that justice is a question of economics, then difference (and difference) have the opportunity to truly flourish, and actually cannot flourish in an unjust world of inequality. It is not the establishment of a totality through the eradication of the other for the benefit of identity—it is the establishment of equality through the redistribution of wealth, through the abandonment of commodity-based exchange, which affects nothing of difference but in fact provides the possibilities for its germination to occur. Difference under conditions of inequality is a perverse and twisted creation that always bears the contamination of the dominant trope, the master dialogue, which sentences it to an eternity of combat and reaction, of self-defense and running skirmishes in the popular field of hegemonic power

struggles—difference under these conditions can never “rest”, can never “win”, it is always a residue, an afterthought permanently in danger of extermination by the central powers that be. As long as capitalism is the economic structure of exchange, the form and model of motion, activity, development, and knowing, difference will be subject to this condition of being peripheral and inferior, always grappling for pieces of power like so many crumbs from the collective table.

When Spivak argued against the possibility of a retrieval of the subaltern due to the loss and shattering of the origin of western discourse (that both created the subaltern as Other and removed it to the periphery of discursive imperialist practice), she was responding to the question of identity from the standpoint of ideal. Within that context the search for a lost spiritual and cultural homeland is indeed futile, given cultural porosity and mutual contamination, given that discourse is always an ambiguity. But if we were to reexamine this lost origin from the economic standpoint, then the shattering of the world takes on a new meaning—the two-dimensionality of life, as Marcuse argued, requires two things—that thought not become one-dimensional, and that economy become a practice amongst equals. This material renovation of the origin is not the ideal or discursive search for a mythological lost totality, it is the reparation of wrongs. And such an amends makes possible the wholeness and fruition of the subaltern as alterity, no longer struggling in resistance to its subsumption by the Same, but truly respected and truly its own.

In an odd twist, we can add that Marx’s comment in the Theses on Feuerbach, that the ruling ideas of an epoch are those of the ruling classes, still has merit despite its attack by people in cultural studies for the hint of determinism implicit in the concept. Because in

the colonial period, the Enlightenment thrived along lines of an opposition between a European “man” who was directed by rationality and transcendental reason, and a dehumanization of the non-European as animal or beast. From Voltaire to Hume and Kant, the philosophers of reason characterized the African as nothing more than an ape. This corresponded quite well with the practice of the ruling classes from feudalism into industrial capitalism—first the African, Latin American and Asian were seen as animals without souls, then they were characterized as subjects without voice as blatant enslavement gave way to more invisible forms of rape and pillage of foreign lands by European trade companies, imperialist armies, and missionaries. The ruling ideas of this epoch of transition from explicit forms of domination and control to implicit forms of the same was a schizophrenic reason, divided along the lines of a self-reflection that viewed the European as being the pinnacle of civilization and logic, mixed with an instrumental contempt for anything non-European. As European ruling logic became more sophisticated with the onslaught of capitalism and capitalist forms of democratic rule, the enslavement of the southern peoples became more subtle and underground through the use of cultural practices as domination. This we are still seeing to this day.

The ruling classes (academia not excluded) are dispersed throughout the globe and there are many centers, no longer solely one emanating from the north. Post-colonialism reflects this dispersal and multiplicity. The centers of power today are multiple, and the emergence of multiple voices from cultures that were once colonized reflects this reversal of discourse and direction, but a center of power is still a center of power, and in both cases—18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment or 21<sup>st</sup> century post-colonialism, it is still a discourse of the bourgeoisie speaking of its own interests, priorities and needs, and

ignoring those matters which might threaten its dominance over the majority of the world's population. Their discourse, the silence of the millions, remains to be heard.

## **Epilogue**

Returning to the original theme that guided this discussion—we have seen how an elision of two definitions in a single term used by Nietzsche, “gleich”, has devolved over time into the jettisoning of economic critique from the analysis of society, knowledge, truth, and discourse conducted by contemporary philosophy. Similarity and equality, once being interchangeable, became equal enemies to critical philosophy which began to view identity-thought as responsible for most of the disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A crucial component for thinking through these disasters was thereby lost—in favoring the secondary term of the philosophic dichotomy of Same and Other, philosophy simply repeated the dichotomy on the other foot, arguing now from the vantage point of the marginalized and abused rather than from the imaginary center of identity. Equality was seen as a subdivision of identity, and as such it had no place in philosophy—in a sense we could say Marx's call (and move) from philosophy as a bourgeois discipline, into economics was rejected and the reversed was followed—staying firmly within the parameters of a bourgeois context, the context that cannot see itself as a context, philosophy simply spun its wheels in parochial debates over textuality and semiotics. The colossal problem of a world torn asunder by commodity-based exchange, as the context and conditions under which discourse arises and is used, became eclipsed—perhaps because of the impossible contortions involved in philosophy trying to be self-analytical and critical—it was asking of the discipline too much.

## Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. (St. Martin's Press; New York: 1965), pp. 180-187).

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Truth and Lie in the Non-Moral Sense." *Philosophy and Truth, Selections From Nietzsche's Notebooks Of The Early 1870s*. Translated by Daniel Breazeale. (Humanities Press; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: 1979), p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. (Penguin Books; New York: 1976), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ueber Wahrheit und Luege*. (Insel Verlag; Frankfurt am Main: 2000), pp. 14-15.



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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. (Vintage; New York: 1989), p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson. (Columbia University Press; New York: 1983), pp. 8-9, 42-59, 61, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Laclau, Ernesto, et al. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. (Verso; New York: 2000), especially Laclau's second and third entry.

<sup>11</sup> Mbembe, Achille. *On The Postcolony*. (University of California Press; Berkeley: 2001), p. 5-6.

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<sup>13</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume One*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. (Vintage Books; New York: 1977), p. 198.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. (Penguin Books; New York: 1976), pp. 126-127.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. (University of Chicago Press; Chicago: 1978), p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

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- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.
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- <sup>28</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. (Verso; London: 2003), p. 34.
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- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> "Report on Globalization," BBC Website, Accessed July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2001.
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- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 9.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 10.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.
- <sup>44</sup> Hebdige, Dick. "Postmodern and 'the other side.'" *Stuart Hall Critical Dialogues*. (Routledge; London: 1996), pp. 174-200.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 184.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 191.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 191-192.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 193.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 195.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.
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- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- <sup>78</sup> Hall, Stuart. "The problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees." *Stuart Hall Critical Dialogues*. (Routledge; London: 1996), p. 31.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

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- <sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 40.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 41.
- <sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 44.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 200.
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- <sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 230.
- <sup>102</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, toward a history of the vanishing present*. (Harvard University Press; Mass: 1999), p. 104.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 105.
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- <sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 194.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 195.
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- <sup>115</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

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