argues that she is a philosopher who is redefining the terrain of philosophy. The author usefully outlines Irigaray's method of 'psycho-analysing the philosophers' and her use of psychoanalysis as a dynamic model. The second part discusses the marginalization of women in the social order. For advanced work.

Chapter 6

Lyotard and postmodernism

Introduction: meanings and characteristics

In this chapter I want to explore the many meanings and characteristics of the term postmodernism. After giving an outline of Lyotard's main theses about the postmodern condition, focusing especially on his views about scientific knowledge and aesthetics, I make some criticisms of his work. I conclude with a discussion on some aspects of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism.

Postmodernism is being talked and written about everywhere in contemporary Western societies. The term postmodernism is being used in many artistic, intellectual and academic fields. The figures usually associated with postmodernism include: Rauschenberg, Baselitz, Schnabel, Kiefer, Warhol and, perhaps, Bacon, in art; Jencks and Venturi in architecture; Artaud in drama; Barth, Barthelme and Pynchon in fiction; Lynch in film (*Blue Velvet*); Sherman in photography; Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard in philosophy. There are, of course, other subjects that should be mentioned: anthropology, geography, sociology . . . the list is endless, and the names of those included and excluded lead to vigorous debates and bitter controversies. But one thing is clear: postmodernism is of great interest to a wide range of people because it directs our attention to the changes, the major transformations, taking place in contemporary society and culture. The term is at once fashionable and elusive.

Let us begin by looking briefly at the following 'family' of terms: modernity and postmodernity, modernization, modernism and postmodernism, words which are often used in confusing and

interchangeable ways. We should be aware that many writers in this field change register from one term to the next and often switch usages.

Modernity

Modernity is generally held to have come into being with the Renaissance and was defined in relation to Antiquity. From the point of view of German sociological theory, which is very influential, modernity implies the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world. (By differentiation is meant, for example, the separation of fact from value, of the ethical from the theoretical spheres.) For Weber, Tönnies and Simmel these were the processes which brought into being the modern capitalist industrial state. In short, modernity can be taken as a summary term, referring to that cluster of social, economic and political systems brought into being in the West from somewhere around the eighteenth century onwards.

Postmodernity

Postmodernity suggests what came after modernity; it refers to the incipient or actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity. Some thinkers assume that it is a movement towards a post-industrial age, but there are many ambiguities: should the postmodern be regarded a part of the modern? Is it a continuity or a radical break? Is it a material change or does it indicate a mood, a state of mind?

I know there are dangers in thinking in terms of binary oppositions but for teaching purposes I often polarize modernism and postmodernism, modernity and postmodernity. I think that postmodernity emphasizes diverse forms of individual and social identity. It is now widely held that the autonomous subject has been dispersed into a range of plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language. Instead of a coercive totality and a totalizing politics, postmodernity stresses a pluralistic and open democracy. Instead of the certainty of progress, associated with 'the Enlightenment project' (of which Marxism is a part), there is now an awareness of contingency and ambivalence. The productiveness of industrial technology which Marx so much admired, and which he hoped to tame by means of communism, has ceded place to universal consumerism. Puritan asceticism has given way to the pleasure principle.

Modernization

This term is often used to refer to the stages of social development which are based upon industrialization. Modernization is a diverse unity of socio-economic changes generated by scientific and technological discoveries and innovations, industrial upheavals, population movements, urbanization, the formation of national states and mass political movements, all driven by the expanding capitalist world market.

Modernism

Modernism concerns a particular set of cultural or aesthetic styles associated with the artistic movement which originated around the turn of the century and have dominated the various arts until recently. Modernism developed in conscious opposition to classicism; it emphasized experimentation and the aim of finding an inner truth behind surface appearance. The figures usually categorized as modernists include: Joyce, Yeats, Proust, Kafka in literature; Eliot and Pound in poetry; Strindberg and Pirandello in drama; Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, the Expressionist, Futurist, Dadaist and Surrealist movements in painting; Schoenberg and Berg in music.

The basic features of modernism can be summarized as: an aesthetic self-consciousness and reflexiveness; a rejection of narrative structure in favour of simultaneity and montage; an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous and uncertain, open-ended nature of reality; and the rejection of the notion of an integrated personality in favour of an emphasis upon the Freudian 'split' subject. One of the problems with trying to understand modernism is that many of these features appear in definitions of postmodernism as well. Another problem with defining modernism is the question of how far back into the nineteenth century should one go?

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is the name for a movement in advanced capitalist culture, particularly in the arts. There is a sense in which if one sees modernism as the culture of modernity, postmodernism is the culture of postmodernity. The term postmodernism originated among artists and critics in New York in the 1960s and was taken up by European theorists in the 1970s. One of them, Jean-François Lyotard, in a famous book

entitled *The Postmodern Condition*, attacked the legitimating myths of the modern age ('the grand narratives'), the progressive liberation of humanity through science, and the idea that philosophy can restore unity to learning and develop universally valid knowledge for humanity. Postmodern theory became identified with the critique of universal knowledge and foundationalism. Lyotard believes that we can no longer talk about a totalizing idea of reason for there is no reason, only reasons.

Among the central features associated with postmodernism in the arts are: the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between élite and popular culture; a stylistic eclecticism and the mixing of codes. There is parody, pastiche, irony and playfulness. Many commentators stress that postmodernists espouse a model which emphasizes not depth but surface. They are highly critical of structuralism and Marxism and are antagonistic to any theory that 'goes beyond' the manifest to the latent. The decline of the originality and genius view of the artistic producer has been replaced by the assumption that art can only be repetitious. It is also said that in postmodernism there is: a shift of emphasis from content to form or style; a transformation of reality into images; the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents. There are continual references to eclecticism, reflexivity, self-referentiality, quotation, artifice, randomness, anarchy, fragmentation, pastiche and allegory. Moreover, with the development of postmodernism in recent years, there has been a move to 'textualize' everything: history, philosophy, jurisprudence, sociology and other disciplines are treated as so many optional 'kinds of writing' or discourses.

The postmodern condition

I now want to discuss the question of social change in contemporary societies by drawing on the recent work of the French thinker Jean-François Lyotard whom I briefly introduced in Chapter 4. I think that an examination of his thesis can help us to understand some of the main concerns of postmodernism.

I will focus on Lyotard's reflections on science, the changing nature of knowledge in computerized societies, the differences between narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge, the ways in which knowledge is legitimated and sold, and the social changes that may take place in the future.

Many people are aware that Western societies since the Second World War have radically changed their nature in some way. To describe these changes social theorists have used various terms: media society, the society of the spectacle, consumer society, the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption, post-industrial society. A fashionable description of such societies is that they are postmodern. Lyotard is a post-structuralist who adopts a postmodernist stance. Postmodernism is in part a description of a new type of society but also, in part, a new term for post-structuralism in the arts. (In this chapter I will use postmodernism and post-structuralism synonymously.)

In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard argues that during the last forty years the leading sciences and technologies have become increasingly concerned with language: theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, computers and their languages, problems of translation, information storage and data banks.[1]

The technological transformations are having a considerable impact on knowledge. The miniaturization and commercialization of machines are already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available and exploited.

Lyotard believes that the nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. The status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postmodern age. He predicts that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable into quantities of information will be abandoned and the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language. The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete. Knowledge is already ceasing to be an end in itself. It is and will be produced in order to be sold.

It is widely accepted that computerized knowledge has become the principal *force of production* over the last few decades. This has already had a noticeable effect on the composition of the work-force of the most highly developed countries. (There is a decrease in the number of factory and agricultural workers and an increase in professional, technical and white-collar workers.)[2] Knowledge will be the major component in the world-wide competition for power and it is conceivable that nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled for control over territories in the past. In the postmodern age science will probably strengthen its pre-eminence

in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states and the gap between developed and developing countries will grow even wider.

But already in multinational corporations, which are really new forms of the circulation of capital, investment decisions have passed beyond the control of nation-states. Lyotard suggests that power and knowledge are simply two aspects of the same question: who decides what knowledge is? Who knows what needs to be decided?[3]

In the computer age the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government. It is suggested that the functions of regulation, and therefore of reproduction, are being and will be further withdrawn from administrators and entrusted to machines. Increasingly the central question is: who will have access to the information these machines must have in storage to guarantee that the right decisions are made?

For Lyotard knowledge is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of beauty (auditory or visual sensibility), etc. Knowledge is what makes someone capable of forming not only 'good' denotative utterances but also 'good' prescriptive and 'good' evaluative utterances. But how are they to be assessed? They are judged to be good if they conform to the relevant criteria (of justice, beauty, truth and efficiency) accepted in the social circle of the 'knower's' interlocutors.

It is important to mention here that Lyotard, who has been greatly influenced by Wittgenstein's notion of language games, makes the following observations.[4] Each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put. The rules of language games do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are objects of a contract, explicit or not, between players; if there are no rules, there is no game. Every utterance is thought of as a 'move' in a game. Messages have quite different forms and effects depending on whether they are, for example, denotatives, prescriptions, evaluatives, performatives, etc.[5]

Lyotard believes that language games are incommensurable. He distinguishes the denotative game (in which what is relevant is the true/false distinction) from the prescriptive game (in which the just/unjust distinction pertains) and from the technical game (in which the criterion is the efficient/inefficient distinction). It seems to me that Lyotard sees language games as essentially embodying a conflictual relationship

between tricksters. I said earlier that we always tend to act according to the way in which we conceive of things. One pervasive metaphor in our arguments in war. We say some positions are indefensible, we talk of attacking, demolishing, shooting down other people's arguments. We can win or lose arguments. I maintained in Chapter 4 that we could always use other metaphorical concepts than that of war. For Lyotard, however, to speak is to fight:

> In a discussion between two friends the interlocutors use any available ammunition . . . questions, requests, assertions, and narratives are launched pell-mell into battle. The war is not without rules, but the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance.[6]

Narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge

Scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in competition and conflict with another kind of knowledge which Lyotard calls narrative. In traditional societies there is a pre-eminence of the narrative form. Narratives (popular stories, myths, legends and tales) bestow legitimacy upon social institutions, or represent positive or negative models of integration into established institutions. Narratives determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question.

In traditional societies a narrative tradition is also the tradition of the criterion defining a threefold competence – 'know-how', 'knowing how to speak' and 'knowing how to hear' – through which the community's relationship to itself and its environment is played out. In the narrative form statements about truth, justice and beauty are often woven together. What is transmitted through these narratives is the set of rules that constitute the social bond.

Lyotard discusses the retreat of the claims of narrative or story-telling knowledge in the face of those of the abstract, denotative or logical and cognitive procedures generally associated with science. In the science language game the sender is supposed to be able to provide proof of what s/he says, and on the other hand s/he is supposed to be able to refute any opposing or contradictory statements concerning the same referent. Scientific rules underlie what nineteenth-century science calls verification, and twentieth-century science falsification.[7] They allow a

horizon of consensus to be brought to the debate between partners (the sender and the addressee). Not every consensus is a sign of truth, but it is presumed that the truth of a statement necessarily draws a consensus. Now, scientists need an addressee, a partner who can verify their statements and in turn become the sender. Equals are needed and must be created.

Didactics is what ensures that this reproduction takes place. Its first presupposition is that the student does not know what the sender knows; obviously this is why s/he has something to learn. Its second presupposition is that the student can learn what the sender knows and become an expert whose competence is equal to that of the teacher. As the students improve their skills, experts can confide in them what they do not know but are trying to learn. In this way students are introduced to the game of producing scientific knowledge. In scientific knowledge any already accepted statement can always be challenged. Any new statement that contradicts a previously approved statement regarding the same referent can be accepted as valid only if it refutes the previous statement.

The main difference between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge is that scientific knowledge requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others be excluded. Both science and non-scientific (narrative) knowledge are equally necessary. Both are composed of sets of statements; the statements are 'moves' made by the players within the framework of generally applicable rules. These rules are specific to each particular kind of knowledge, and the 'moves' judged to be 'good' in one cannot be the same as those judged 'good' in another (unless it happens that way by chance). It is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge or vice versa: the relevant criteria are different.

Lyotard argues that narrative knowledge certifies itself without having recourse to argumentation and proof. Scientists, however, question the validity of narrative statements and conclude that they are never subject to argumentation or proof. Narratives are classified by the scientist as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends fit only for women and children.

Here there is an interesting twist in Lyotard's argument. He says that scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative kind of knowledge,

which from its point of view is no knowledge at all. In short, there is a recurrence of the narrative in the scientific.[8]

The state spends large amounts of money to enable science to pass itself off as an epic. The state's own credibility is based on that epic, which it uses to obtain the public consent its decision-makers need. Science, in other words, is governed by the demand of legitimation. The two myths which have acted as justifications for institutional scientific research – that of the liberation of humanity and that of the speculative unity of all knowledge – are also national myths. The first, political, militant, activist, is the tradition of the French eighteenth century and the French Revolution. The second is the German Hegelian tradition organized around the concept of totality. Lyotard examines these two myths as versions of the narrative of legitimation of knowledge. The subject of the first of these versions is humanity as the 'hero' of liberty. Lyotard writes: 'All peoples have a right to science. If the social subject is not already the subject of scientific knowledge, it is because that has been forbidden by priests and tyrants. The right to science must be reconquered.' The state resorts to the narrative of freedom every time it assumes direct control over the training of 'the people' under the name of the 'nation', in order to point the people down the path of progress.

Lyotard remarks:

> In Stalinism, the sciences only figure as citations from the metanarrative of the march towards socialism, which is the equivalent of the life of the spirit. But on the other hand Marxism can . . . develop into a form of critical knowledge by declaring that socialism is nothing other than the constitution of the autonomous subject and that the only justification for the sciences is if they give the empirical subject (the proletariat) the means to emancipate itself from alienation and repression.[9]

According to Lyotard these (older) master narratives no longer function in contemporary society. He argues that the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. The decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives of speculation and emancipation can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the *ends* of action to its *means*.

The mercantilization of knowledge

With the Industrial Revolution it was found that a technical apparatus requires an investment; but since it optimizes the efficiency with which the task to which it is applied is carried out, it also optimizes the surplus-value from this improved performance. It is at this moment that science becomes a force of production, a moment in the circulation of capital.

An important aspect of research is the production of proof. Proof needs to be proven. A scientific observation depends on facts being registered by sense organs. But the range and powers of discrimination are limited. This is where technology comes in. Technical devices follow the principle of optimal performance, maximizing output and minimizing input. Technology is, therefore, a game pertaining not to the true, the just or the beautiful, but to efficiency. A technical 'move' is 'good' when it does better and/or expends less energy than another. Devices that optimize the performance of the human body for the purpose of producing proof require additional money. The game of science becomes the game of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right.[10] It is thus that an equation between wealth, efficiency and truth is established.

To put it in another way, the goal in science is no longer truth, but performativity – that is, the best possible input/output equation. Scientists, technicians and instruments are bought not to find truth, but to augment power. Since performativity increases the ability to produce proof, it also increases the ability to be right; the technical criterion cannot fail to influence the truth criterion.

The shift of attention from ends of action to its means, from truth to performativity, is reflected in present-day educational policy. It has been clear for some time that educational institutions are becoming more functional; the emphasis is on skills rather than ideals. It is probable that in the near future knowledge will no longer be transmitted *en bloc* to young people, once and for all; rather it will be served 'à la carte' to adults as a part of their job retraining and continuing education.

To the extent that learning is translatable into computer language and the traditional teacher is replaceable by memory banks, didactics (teaching) will be entrusted to machines linking traditional memory banks (libraries, etc.) and computer data banks to terminals placed at the students' disposal. Lyotard argues that pedagogy would not necessarily suffer. The students would have to learn to use the terminals and the new languages; they would have to be taught what is the relevant memory bank for what needs to be known.

It is only in the context of the grand narratives of legitimation – the life of the spirit and/or the emancipation of humanity – that the partial replacement of teachers by machines may seem inadequate or even intolerable. Lyotard remarks that it is probable that these narratives are already no longer the principal driving force behind interest in acquiring knowledge. The question now being asked by the student, the state or the university is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?' In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: 'Is it saleable?' And in the context of power-growth: 'Is it efficient?'

It is clear that education must provide not only for the reproduction of skills but also for their progress. Therefore training must be given in all the procedures that can increase one's ability to connect the fields jealously guarded from one another by the traditional organization of knowledge. What is vitally important for students to have is the capacity to actualize the relevant data for solving a problem here and now, and to organize that data into an efficient strategy. Data banks are the encyclopaedia of tomorrow; they are 'nature' for postmodern men and women. What is important is arranging the data in a new way. This capacity to articulate what used to be separate can be called imagination. It is imagination which allows one either to make a new move (a new argument) within the established rules or to invent new rules, that is to say, a new game.

Lyotard writes that countless scientists have seen their invention of new rules ignored or repressed, sometimes for decades, because that invention too abruptly destabilized the accepted positions, not only in the university and scientific hierarchy but also in the discipline. The more striking the invention, the more likely it is to be denied the minimum consensus, precisely because it changes the rules of the game upon which consensus had been based.[11] Lyotard argues that such behaviour is terrorist. By terror he means the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from one's language game. He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted but because the other players' ability to participate has been threatened: 'Adapt your aspirations to our ends – or else. . . .'

Bourgeois art and its function in society

Having given an exposition of Lyotard's book, I want to place his thesis

in the context of the controversy about modernism and postmodernism. But before I do that I want to contextualize the controversy. The debate about postmodernism is partly about the arts and so in this section I will say something about the institution of art in bourgeois society and the bitter struggle waged against it in the 1920s by the avant-garde.

The best way I can think of understanding the recent development of art is by a glance at Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.[12] Distinguishing between sacral, courtly and bourgeois art, Bürger suggests the following historical typology:

Sacral Art (for example, the art of the High Middle Ages) served as a cult object. It was wholly integrated into the social institution 'religion', and was produced collectively as a craft.
Courtly Art (for example, the art of the court of Louis XIV) served the glory of the prince. It was part of the life-praxis of courtly society, just as sacral art was part of the life-praxis of the faithful. Courtly art is different from sacral art in that the artist produced as an individual and developed a consciousness of the uniqueness of his individuality.
Bourgeois Art. Whereas in different ways both sacral and courtly art are integral to the life-praxis of the recipient, bourgeois art forms a sphere which lies outside the praxis of life.

The tension between art as an institution and the content of individual works tends to disappear in the second half of the nineteenth century. All that which is dissociated from the praxis of life now becomes the content of works of art. The terminal point is reached in aestheticism, a movement in which art becomes the content of art.

Aestheticism, Bürger writes, must be seen in connection with the tendency towards the division of labour in bourgeois society. Gradually the artist also turns into a specialist. As the social subsystem 'art' defines itself as a distinct sphere, the positive aspect is aesthetic experience. Its negative side is the artist's loss of any social function.

What, then, is the function of art in bourgeois society? Herbert Marcuse has argued that works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works.[13] In his seminal essay 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' Marcuse has described art's function in bourgeois society as a contradictory one: on the one hand it shows 'forgotten truths' (thus it protests against a reality in which these truths have no validity), on the other, such truths are detached from reality.

The term 'affirmative' therefore characterizes the contradictory function of a culture that retains 'remembrance of what could be', but is simultaneously a justification of the established form of existence. Through the enjoyment of art the atrophied bourgeois individual can experience the self as personality. But because art is detached from daily life, this experience remains without tangible effect – it cannot be integrated into that life.

Let me recapitulate Marcuse's argument. All those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life, because the principle of competition pervades all spheres, can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are excluded from life and preserved in art. In bourgeois society art has a contradictory role, it projects the image of a better life and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails. But by realizing the image of a better order in *fiction*, which is semblance only, it neutralizes those forces that make for change. Marcuse demonstrates that bourgeois culture exiles humane values to the realm of the imagination and thus precludes their potential realization. Art thus stabilizes the very social conditions against which it protests.

As long as art interprets reality or provides satisfaction of residual needs only in the imagination it is, though detached from the praxis of life, still related to it. It is only in aestheticism that the tie to society, still existent up to this moment, is severed. The term 'the autonomy of art' is used to describe *the detachment of art* as a special sphere of human activity from the praxis of life. But somehow this concept blocks recognition of the social determinacy of the process. The idea of the relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society has become transformed into the erroneous idea that the work of art is totally independent of society. We should remember that this detachment of art from practical contexts is a historical process; it is socially conditioned. Perhaps the reason that the artist's product could acquire importance as something special, 'autonomous', lies in the continuation of the handicraft mode of production after the division of labour – and the separation of workers from their means of production – had become the norm.

The main features of the avant-garde

Only after art has detached itself completely from the praxis of life can

two things be seen: the progressive separation of art from real life contexts and the crystallization of a distinctive sphere of experience – the aesthetic.

Let us now turn to the historic avant-garde and its attempt to negate the autonomy of art.[14] The production of the autonomous work of art is generally seen as the act of an individual – who is often a genius. The avant-garde's response to this is *the negation of the category of individual creation*. For example, Marcel Duchamp, by signing mass-produced objects, mocked a society in which the signature meant more than the quality of the work.

The avant-garde did not develop a style; there is no such thing as a Dadaist or Surrealist style. One of the characteristics of the avant-garde is the availability to it of and its mastery over artistic techniques of past epochs. It is through the efforts of the avant-garde that the historical *succession* of techniques and styles has been replaced by a *simultaneity* of the radically disparate. For the Surrealists a general openness to impressions is not enough. They attempt to bring the extraordinary about. In the avant-garde movements *shocking the recipient* becomes the dominant principle of artistic intent. Moreover, the Surrealists emphasize the role of *chance*. Starting from the experience that a society organized on the basis of a means–ends rationality increasingly restricts the individual's scope, the Surrealists attempted to discover elements of the unpredictable in daily life.

The avant-garde is totally opposed to society as it is. Bürger writes:

> Since the Surrealists do not see that a given degree of control over nature requires social organization, they run the risk of expressing their protest against bourgeois society at a level where it becomes protest against sociality as such. It is not the specific object, profit as the governing principle of bourgeois-capitalist society, that is being criticized but means–ends rationality as such. Paradoxically, chance, which subjects man to the totally heteronomous, can thus seem a symbol of freedom.[15]

It is with the avant-garde movements that self-criticism begins. The main point is that they no longer criticized schools that preceded them, but criticized *art as an institution*. The avant-garde turns against both the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy. This protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences – art's lack of social impact.

Of course, we now know that the attack of the historic avant-garde on art as an institution failed.[16] Art as an institution continues to survive. Ironically, the procedures invented by the avant-garde with anti-artistic intent are now being used for artistic ends by the postmodernists.

Modernism and postmodernism

As I said at the beginning of the chapter, there is a general feeling among many thinkers that at some point after the Second World War a new kind of society began to emerge. The society is labelled in various ways depending on the way it is analysed: consumer society, post-industrial society, society of the spectacle, postmodernist society, etc. Post-structuralists, on the whole, argue that this new society is post-Marxist. They assert that Marxist theory is now outmoded; it does not and cannot apply to the new social developments. This argument often overlaps with another one concerning modernism and postmodernism. The crucial question in these debates is: has the Enlightenment project failed? Should we, like the post-structuralists and postmodernists, declare the entire project of modernity a lost cause? Or should we try to hold on to the intentions and aims of the Enlightenment and of cultural modernism?

The project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law and autonomous art. Philosophers like Condorcet wanted to use this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life. They hoped that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings.

But what has happened is in marked contrast to the hopes and ideals of the Enlightenment. Gradually each domain has been institutionalized; science, morality and art have become autonomous domains separated from the life-world. The structures of cognitive–instrumental, of moral–practical and of aesthetic–expressive rationality have come under the control of special experts.[17]

In America, France and elsewhere, cultural modernism is now under attack from many different quarters. An American neo-conservative, Daniel Bell, made a powerful critique some years ago of modernity.[18]

According to Bell modernist culture had infected the values of everyday life. Because of the forces of modernism the principle of unlimited self-realization, the demand for authentic self-experience and the subjectivism of a hyperstimulated sensitivity have come to be dominant. This unleashes hedonistic motives irreconcilable with the discipline of professional life in society. Neo-conservatives like Bell see hedonism, the lack of social identification, the lack of obedience, narcissism, the withdrawal from status and achievement competition as the result not of successful capitalist modernization of the economy but of cultural modernism.

More recently, the Enlightenment project has been denounced by the French 'new philosophers' and their contemporary English and American counterparts. It has also been attacked, less stridently but with more intellectual sharpness, by the post-structuralists. I believe that their work should be included among the manifestations of postmodernism.

The concept of postmodernism is ambiguous and is not yet widely understood. It has probably emerged as a specific reaction against the established forms of high modernism. For some thinkers postmodernism is a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new features in culture. The concept seems to be connected with the appearance, between the 1950s and the 1960s, of a new social and economic order. Sometimes a useful distinction is made between premodernists, those who want to withdraw to a position anterior to modernity, antimodernists and postmodernists. In my opinion post-structuralists like Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard are postmodernists. There are so many similarities between post-structuralist theories and postmodernist practices that it is difficult to make a clear distinction between them.

The main features of postmodernism

We may be able to understand postmodernism better by returning to Lyotard and seeing what he means by 'modern'. Lyotard uses the term 'modern'

> to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject or the creation of wealth.[19]

To put it another way:

> Societies which anchor the discourses of truth and justice in the great historical and scientific narratives (récits) can be called modern. The French Jacobins don't speak like Hegel but the just and the good are always found caught up in a great progressive odyssey.[20]

Postmodernists distrust metanarratives; there is a deep suspicion of Hegel, Marx and any form of universal philosophy.

For Lyotard, then, the postmodern condition is one in which the *grands récits* of modernity – the dialectic of Spirit, the emancipation of the worker, the accumulation of wealth, the classless society – have all lost credibility.[21] He goes on to define a discourse as modern when it appeals to one or another of these *grands récits* for its legitimacy. The *grands récits* are master narratives – narratives of mastery, of man seeking his *telos* in the conquest of nature. The Marxist master narrative ('the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity') is only one version among many of a modern narrative of mastery. The advent of postmodernity signals a crisis in a narrative's legitimizing function, its ability to compel consensus.

Lyotard is critical of Marxism because he holds that it wishes to create a homogeneous society which can only be brought about through the use of coercion. He believes that the individualistic, fragmented society that we have today is here to stay. Yet, oddly enough, he seems to be nostalgic for a premodern (traditional) society. As I said earlier, traditional societies stress narrative, that is to say, myth, magic, folk wisdom and other attempts at explanation.[22] Lyotard believes that there is a conflict between narrative and science (theoretical knowledge). Narrative is disappearing and there is nothing to replace it. He seems to want the flexibility of narrative knowledge – in which the aesthetic, cognitive and moral are interwoven – and yet want also to retain the individualism which developed with capitalism.

Lyotard argues that art, morality and science (the beautiful, the good and the true) have become separated and autonomous. A characteristic of our times is the fragmentation of language games. There is no metalanguage. No one can grasp what is going on in society as a whole. He seems to be saying that there is no one system of domination. There are parallels between these ideas and some right-wing theorists (like Hayek) who argue that society works much better in terms of micro-events; a society that is left to market forces is better than a consciously planned society.

In short, the argument of Lyotard (and some other post-structuralists) is this: big stories are bad, little stories are good. Instead of a truth/falsity distinction Lyotard adopts a small/grand narrative criterion. Narratives are bad when they become philosophies of history. Grand narratives have become associated with a political programme or party, while little narratives are associated with localized creativity. (The stress on the local has often been associated with the conservative tradition, with the thinking of Edmund Burke and others.) These ideas are similar to those held by Foucault, who is also against grand narratives and supports the idea of local struggles. But what puzzles me is this: why are the post-structuralists so frightened of the universal? And why is Lyotard telling us yet another grand narrative at the end of grand narrative?

Two significant features of postmodernism, as described by the American critic Fredric Jameson, are 'pastiche' and 'schizophrenia'.[23] Jameson begins by explaining that the great modernisms were predicated on the invention of a personal, private style. The modernist aesthetic was organically linked to the conception of an authentic self and a private identity which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unmistakable style. The post-structuralists argue against this; in their view the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism are ideological. Not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth, it never really existed in the first place; it was just a mystification. And so, in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible all that is left, Jameson suggests, is pastiche. The practice of pastiche, the imitation of dead styles, can be seen in the 'nostalgia film'. It seems that we are unable to focus on our present. We have lost our ability to locate ourselves historically. As a society we have become incapable of dealing with time.

Postmodernism has a peculiar notion of time. Jameson explains what he means in terms of Lacan's theory of schizophrenia. The originality of Lacan's thought in this area is to have considered schizophrenia as a language disorder. Schizophrenia emerges from the failure of the infant to enter fully into the realm of speech and language. For Lacan the experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity is an effect of language. It is because language has a past and a future, because the sentence moves in time, that we can have what seems to us a concrete or lived experience of time. But since the schizophrenic does not know language articulation in that way, he or she does not have our experience of temporal continuity either, but is condemned to live in a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no future on the horizon. In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence.

On the one hand, then, the schizophrenic does have a more intense experience of any given present of the world than we do, since our own present is always part of some larger set of projects which includes the past and the future. On the other hand, the schizophrenic is 'no one', has no personal identity. Moreover, he or she does nothing since to have a project means to be able to commit oneself to a certain continuity over time. The schizophrenic, in short, experiences a fragmentation of time, a series of perpetual presents. Jameson contends that experiences of temporal discontinuity, similar to those described above, are evoked in postmodernist works such as the compositions of John Cage and the texts of Samuel Beckett.

Totality or fragmentation

You may have noticed that I have made several references to totality and fragmentation. I have said that Lyotard repudiates the big stories, the metanarratives of Hegel and Marx; he believes that no one can grasp what is going on in a society as a *whole*. It seems fashionable nowadays to say that there is no single theoretical discourse which is going to offer an explanation for all forms of social relations or for every mode of political practice. Postmodernists and others are always making this point against Marxism: they insist that it has totalizing ambitions and resent its claim to provide explanations for all aspects of social experience.

Rejecting totality, Lyotard and other postmodernists stress fragmentation – of language games, of time, of the human subject, of society itself. One of the fascinating things about the rejection of organic unity and the espousal of the fragmentary is that this belief was also held by the historic avant-garde movements. They too wanted the dissolution of unity. In their activities the coherence and autonomy of the work was deliberately called into question or even methodically destroyed.

Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory has been used as an aid to understanding avant-gardiste (non-organic) works of art.[24] Benjamin described how the allegorist pulls an element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. (Allegory is thus

essentially a fragment, the opposite of the organic symbol.) Then the allegorist joins several isolated fragments and thereby creates meaning. This is posited meaning and does not derive from the original context of the fragments.

These elements of Benjamin's concept of allegory accord with what is called montage, the fundamental principle of avant-garde art. Montage presupposes fragmentation of reality; it breaks through the appearance of totality and calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments. The avant-gardiste work proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artefact. The opposite holds true for the organic work: it seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. In the organic work of art the material is treated as a whole, while in the avant-gardiste work the material is torn out of the life totality and isolated. The aesthetic avant-gardist fragment *challenges* people to make it an integrated part of their reality and to relate it to their experience. The best example of this principle is probably the Brechtian play. A play by Brecht does not aim at organic unity but consists of interruptions and juxtapositions which disrupt conventional expectations and force the audience into critical speculation.

The question as to whether a work of art should be an organic unity or consist of fragments is perhaps best understood by having a look at the debate between Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno.[25] The contrast between organic and non-organic work underlies both Lukács's and Adorno's theories of the avant-garde. Whereas Lukács holds on to the organic work of art ('realism') as an aesthetic norm and from that perspective rejects avant-gardiste works as decadent, Adorno elevates avant-gardiste, non-organic work to a historical norm and condemns all efforts to create a realistic art in our time.

While Lukács adopted Hegel's view that the organic work of art (for example, the realistic novels of Goethe, Balzac, Stendhal) constitutes a type of perfection, Adorno believed that the avant-garde work is the only possible authentic expression of the contemporary state of the world, the historically necessary expression of alienation in late capitalist society. Like Adorno, Lukács believed that the work of the avant-garde is the expression of alienation in capitalist society, but he was very scathing about the blindness of bourgeois intellectuals who could not see the real historical counterforces working towards a structural transformation of society.

Adorno, however, did not have this political perspective. He believed that instead of baring the contradictions of society in our time, the

organic work promotes, by its very form, the illusion of a world that is whole.[26] For him avant-gardiste art is a radical protest that rejects all false reconciliation with what exists and is therefore the only art form that has historical legitimacy. Lukács, on the other hand, acknowledges its character as protest but condemns avant-gardiste art because that protest remains abstract, without historical perspective and blind to the real counterforces that are striving to overcome capitalism. He rejects the idea that avant-gardiste work allows ruptures and 'gaps' of reality to show through the fragmentary nature of the work itself.

But an important similarity between Lukács and Adorno should be noted: they both argue within the institution of art and are unable to criticize it as an institution for that very reason. I hope that I have said enough to signal that the Lukács–Adorno debate really consists of two antagonistic theories of culture. Adorno not only sees late capitalism as definitely stabilized but also feels that historical experience has shown the hopes placed in socialism to be ill-founded. In this respect he is very much like most of the postmodernists.

It could be said that there are two main traditions or modes of understanding the avant-garde. The first mode of thought is associated with Adorno, Artaud, Barthes, Breton and Derrida. (Many writers have pointed out that the philosophies of Derrida and Adorno display interesting similarities.) The other mode of thought is associated with Benjamin and Brecht.

It is largely from the work of Benjamin that we have learnt that the social effect of a work of art cannot simply be gauged by considering the work itself but that it is decisively determined by the institution within which the work functions. It is art as an institution which determines the measure of political effect avant-garde works can have and which determines that art in bourgeois society continues to be a realm distinct from the praxis of life. Art as an institution neutralizes the political content of the individual work. It prevents the contents of works that press for radical change in a society – the abolition of alienation – from having any practical effect. Received in the context of artefacts whose shared characteristic is their apartness from the praxis of life, 'organic' works of art tend to be perceived as 'mere' art products.

It should be remembered that had there never been any avant-garde movements, Brecht's and Benjamin's reflections regarding a restructuring of the production apparatus would not have been possible. Brecht never shared the intention of the historic avant-garde artists to destroy art as an institution. Though he despised the theatre of the educated

bourgeoisie, he did not conclude that the theatre should be abolished altogether: instead he proposed radically to change it.[27]

I believe that there are so many difficulties with the positions of Lukács and Adorno that they are both unsatisfactory. I want to suggest that one possible way out of the situation may be through the use of the materialist theories inspired by Benjamin and Brecht.

In the next section I will discuss Lyotard's view of language games and his interpretation of 'the sublime'. After that, there are some criticisms of Lyotard, and the chapter ends with a discussion on the relationship between feminism and postmodernism.

On language games and the sublime

I want to draw attention to three features of postmodernist thought. Firstly, there is a tendency to reduce all truth-claims to the level of rhetorics, narrative strategies or Foucauldian discourses conceived as existing solely by virtue of the differences or rivalries between them, so that no single claimant can assert itself at the expense of any other.

Secondly, a related point, there is often an appeal, especially in Lyotard, to the Wittgensteinian notion of 'language games' (sometimes called 'forms of life'). A belief in heterogeneous language games, each involving a different set of cognitive, historical or ethico-political criteria, implies that it is not possible to decide between rival interpretations.

Thirdly, there is a turn towards the Kantian sublime as a means of devaluing cognitive truth-claims and elevating the notion of the *unrepresentable* (that is to say, intuitions that cannot be 'brought under' adequate concepts) to absolute pride of place in the ethical realm. In other words there has been a move to aestheticize politics by removing ethical and political questions as far as possible from the realm of truth and falsehood.[28] I will discuss some of these points by focusing on Lyotard's views on language games and the sublime.

Precursors of the postmodern critique of philosophy were found in Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein (and the more 'deviant' authors like Artaud, Bataille and Sade). As I have just mentioned, Lyotard adopts a Wittgensteinian language games approach to knowledge proposing that we conceive of various discourses as language games with their own rules, structure and moves. Different language games are thus governed by different criteria and rules, and none is privileged.

Language games for Lyotard are indeed the social bond which holds society together, and he characterizes social interaction primarily in terms of making a move in a game, playing a role and taking a part in various discrete language games. In these terms he characterizes the self as the interaction of all the language games in which it participates. Lyotard's model of a postmodern society is thus one in which one struggles within various language games in an agonistic environment characterized by diversity and conflict.

While the post-structuralist historian Foucault drew on Nietzsche, Lyotard, the postmodernist philosopher, draws on Wittgenstein and Kant. Kant wanted to prevent any confusion between the realms of cognitive understanding and practical reason (ethics). He was also careful to distinguish between truth-claims entailing the existence of adequate grounds and those 'ideas of reason' which could never be confirmed or falsified by any such standard. For some recent commentators, Lyotard among them, this has opened the way to a postmodern reading of Kant that stresses the absolute heterogeneity, the lack of any common ground for judgement between the various 'phrase-regimes', 'discourses' or 'language games' involved.

Lyotard adopts a pluralist outlook wherein each litigant respects the other's difference of viewpoint, even to the extent of suspending his or her own truth-claims. In his view we fail to respect the diversity of language games if we take just one (for example, the cognitive) and treat it as enjoying a privileged status vis-à-vis questions of historical truth and ethical accountability. Lyotard believes that if things belong to heterogeneous language games then any attempt to convince the other party would amount to a form of speech-act coercion, an injustice or infraction of the conversational ground-rules. In short, Lyotard argues that issues of fact have absolutely no bearing on issues of ethical judgement.

Let us now consider Lyotard's treatment of the Kantian sublime, a topic whose significance extends far beyond the realm of the aesthetic. For Kant, the sublime is that which exceeds all our powers of representation, an experience for which we can find no adequate sensuous or conceptual mode of apprehension, and which differs from the beautiful in so far as it affords no sense of harmonious balance or agreement between these faculties.[29] The sublime figures for Kant as a means of expressing (by analogy) what would otherwise be strictly inexpressible.

The Kantian sublime serves as a reminder of the gulf that opens up – the 'differend', as Lyotard terms it – between truth-claims lacking any

common measure of justice by which to resolve their dispute.[30] Lyotard remarks that applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend (an irreducible conflict of interests) would wrong at least one of them, and both of them if neither side admits the rule.

In other words the sublime comes to figure, for Lyotard, as an index of the radical heterogeneity that inhabits our discourses of truth and value, or the kinds of injustice that inevitably result when one such 'phrase-regime' – most often the cognitive – seeks to monopolize the whole conversation. Lyotard argues that we are confronted with issues that cannot be resolved within the 'phrase-regime' of cognitive judgement and whose character is much better grasped by analogy with the Kantian discourse on aesthetics, especially where that discourse invokes the sublime as a figure for modes of experience or feeling that exceed all the powers of sensuous (phenomenal) cognition on the one hand, and conceptual understanding on the other. For Lyotard, the sublime brings us up against that limit point of thought where judgement has to recognize its own lack of resources, or the absence of agreed-upon criteria, for dealing with cases that exceed all the bounds of rule-governed, 'rational' adjudication.

Critics of Lyotard, like Christopher Norris, argue that there is a widespread tendency to exploit Kant's notion of the sublime to a point far beyond anything licensed by Kant. Where Lyotard parts company with Kant is in promoting the aesthetic sublime to a position of transcendent authority.

Lyotard's version of the Kantian sublime mystifies issues of social and ethico-political judgement by treating them, in effect, as modalities of aesthetic understanding, questions that cannot be settled except by suspending all reference to matters of empirical truth and falsehood. This reading of the sublime offers a pretext for aestheticizing politics by imposing the maximum possible distance between issues of actual or historical truth and issues of ethico-political justice. In Norris's view, what results from Lyotard's postmodernist reading of the sublime is an outlook of extreme cognitive scepticism, along with a politics completely cut off from questions of real-world relevance and accountability.[31]

Some criticisms of Lyotard's work

Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition* is on one level about the status of science and technology, about technocracy and the control of

information. But on another level it is a thinly veiled polemic against Jürgen Habermas, who stands for a 'totalizing' and dialectical tradition. Habermas thinks that the totality of life has become splintered and argues that the cognitive, ethical and political discourses should come closer together. He wants, in short, to defend modernity against the neo-conservative postmodernists.

In contrast, Lyotard's main target is the Hegelian-Marxist concept of totality. He is scornful of Habermas's vision of a transparent, fully communicational society and sees language situations as an unstable exchange between speakers, as the 'taking of tricks', the trumping of an adversary. He repudiates, in short, Habermas's notion of a consensus community. Lyotard's view of science and knowledge is that of a search not for consensus but for 'instabilities'; the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine from within the very framework in which the previous 'normal science' had been conducted.

Lyotard thinks that Habermas makes the assumption that it is possible for all speakers to come to agreement on which rules are universally valid for language games, when it is clear that language games are incommensurable, subject to heterogeneous sets of pragmatic rules. He argues that the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation, as elaborated by Habermas, is inadequate: it is a conception based on the validity of the narrative of emancipation.[32] Lyotard writes, 'We no longer have recourse to the grand narrative – we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse'.[33] In his view the little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention.

Lyotard assumes the breaking up of the narratives without describing how and why this theoretical collapse has taken place and why he is himself polemicizing against these discourses. There are many sorts of grand narratives, but Lyotard tends to lump all of them together. Even if some of the narratives of legitimation are dubious, why should we reject all grand narratives?

Many postmodernists fail to specify what causes the rupture in society and history that produces the postmodern condition. Theorists who reject master narratives, or historical, periodizing social theory, are naturally going to have difficulty producing such a narrative, and thus find themselves in an aporetic situation.

Lyotard rejects totalizing social theories, the master narratives, because he believes they are reductionist and simplistic. Yet he himself

is offering a theory of the postmodern condition which presupposes a dramatic break from modernity. But surely the concept of postmodernism presupposes a master narrative, a totalizing perspective? While Lyotard resists grand narratives, it is impossible to discern how one can have a theory of postmodernism without one.

Some critics of Lyotard believe that he goes too quickly from the premise that philosophy cannot ground social criticism to the conclusion that criticism itself must be local, ad hoc and non-theoretical.

Lyotard insists that the field of the social is heterogeneous and non-totalizable. As a result he rules out the sort of critical social theory which employs general categories like gender, race and class. From his perspective, such categories are too reductive of the complexity of social identities to be useful. In short, there is no place in Lyotard's universe for critiques of relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race and class.

In Lyotard's view there is nothing to be gained in the critical analysis of large-scale institutions and social structures. He contends that sociological synthesis must be abandoned for playful deconstruction and the privileging of the aesthetic mode.

Influenced by Nietzsche, post-structuralists like Lyotard attack philosophy as an imposition of truth. (Nietzsche is famous for his attack on truth; all perspectives, he said, are illusory.) At one time Lyotard supported Marxism but he now sees it as one of the 'grand narratives' he is against. He writes about the force of language beyond truth and wants to develop a theory of philosophical fiction – a discourse that tries to persuade without the traditional notion of 'argument'. In Lyotard's work problems of power are put to one side, and his views have led him to a form of relativism.

There is an ambiguity throughout Lyotard's work and that of other post-structuralists who have been influenced by Nietzsche's critique of systems. Lyotard argues that all theoretical conceptualizations, such as history, are coercive; in his view any interpretation of history is dogmatic. He does not make a distinction between large-scale theories and dogmatism; it is taken for granted that any large-scale theory is dogmatic. Now, it could be argued that some Marxist theories are dogmatic but that, given time and effort, the dogmatism could be dissolved. However, the post-structuralists never consider this possibility.

Why is this? Richard Rorty has suggested an explanation. He has

criticized writers like Foucault and Lyotard for their extraordinary *dryness*:

> It is a dryness produced by a lack of identification with any social context, any communication. Foucault once said that he would like to write 'so as to have no face'. He forbids himself the tone of the liberal sort of thinker who says to his fellow citizens: '*We* know that there must be a better way to do things than this; let us look for it together.' There is no 'we' to be found in Foucault's writing, nor in those of many of his French contemporaries . . . It is as if thinkers like Foucault and Lyotard are so afraid of being caught up in one more metanarrative about the fortunes of 'the subject' that they cannot bring themselves to say 'we' long enough to identify with the culture of the generation to which they belong.[34]

Politically, it is clear that thinkers like Lyotard and Foucault are neo-conservatives. They take away the dynamic upon which liberal social thought has traditionally relied. They offer us no theoretical reason to move in one social direction rather than another. On the whole, post-structuralists think of rationality as a limiting framework. They are against what they call the imperialism of reason. Lyotard's intellectual trajectory has brought him to the position where he now wants to abstain from anything that is connected with the 'metanarrative of emancipation'.

Feminism and postmodernism

In a number of recent discussions it has been said that few women have engaged in the modernism/postmodernism debate and that feminists have little or nothing to say about postmodernism. Meagan Morris believes that this curious *doxa* emerges from texts by male critics referring primarily to each other commenting on the rarity of women's speech. She feels strongly about the continued, repeated, basic exclusion of women's work from a highly invested field of intellectual and political endeavour. Morris is scathing about those male critics who construct bibliographies that do not mention the work of Catherine Clément, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Shosana Felman, Jane Gallop, Sarah Kofman, Alice Jardine, Michele Le Doeuff, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jacqueline Rose – and many others. As Morris has argued, since feminism has acted as one of the enabling conditions of discourse *about* postmodernism, it is therefore appropriate to use feminist work to frame discussions of postmodernism.[35]

Feminism and postmodernism have emerged as two of the most important political–cultural currents of the last decade. First, let us note the similarities: both have offered deep and far-reaching criticisms of philosophy, and of the relation of philosophy to the larger culture. Both have tried to develop new paradigms of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings. But there are differences as well. Postmodernists offer sophisticated criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anaemic. Feminists offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson have suggested that each of these tendencies has much to learn from the other; each is in possession of valuable resources which can help remedy the deficiencies of the other.

I will give a brief précis of their article 'Social Criticism without Philosophy'.[36] I think this will be useful because it provides a brief recapitulation of Lyotard's thesis, gives examples of some feminist theories which are now considered (reductive and) essentialist and, finally, makes a few suggestions about the integration of feminism and postmodernism.

Lyotard and other postmodernists begin by arguing that Philosophy with a capital 'P' is no longer a viable or credible enterprise. With the demise of foundationalism, philosophy (or theory) can no longer function to ground politics and social criticism. The modern conception must give way to a new postmodern one in which criticism floats free of any universalist theoretical ground. No longer anchored philosophically, the character of social criticism becomes more pragmatic, ad hoc, contextual and local.

Lyotard offers a 'postmodern' conception of what he calls the 'social bond'. What holds the social bond is a weave of criss-crossing threads of discursive practices, no single one of which runs continuously throughout the whole. Individuals are the nodes where such practices intersect and, so, they participate in many simultaneously. It follows that social identities are complex and heterogeneous. They cannot be mapped on to one another nor on to the social totality. Indeed, strictly speaking, there is no social totality and there is no possibility of a totalizing social theory.

Feminists, like postmodernists, have sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings. Practical imperatives, however, have led some feminists to adopt modes of theorizing which resemble the sorts of

philosophical metanarrative criticized by postmodernists. In some early feminist writings theory was often understood as the search for the one key factor which would explain sexism cross-culturally and illuminate all of social life. Many of the social theories feminists have used share some of the essentialist and ahistorical features of metanarratives; they are insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity, and they falsely universalize features of the theorist's own era, society, culture, class, 'race' or gender.

Fraser and Nicholson give three examples of such feminist theorizing. The first example: in the late 1960s many Marxist men argued that gender issues were secondary because they could be subsumed under class. Against this view, a radical feminist, Shulamith Firestone, resorted to an ingenious tactical manoeuvre: she invoked biological differences between men and women to explain sexism.[37] This enabled her to turn the tables on the Marxists by claiming that gender conflict was the most basic form of human conflict and the source of all other forms, including class conflicts. Now, from a postmodernist perspective appeals to biology to explain social phenomena are essentialist and monocausal. They are essentialist in so far as they project on to all women and men qualities which develop under historically specific social conditions. They are monocausal in so far as they look to one set of characteristics (such as women's physiology or men's hormones) to explain women's oppression in all cultures.

The second example draws on anthropology. In the 1970s anthropologists began to argue that appeals to biology do not allow us to understand the enormous diversity of forms which both gender and sexism assume in different cultures. One promising approach, that of Michelle Rosaldo, was based on the argument that common to all societies was some sort of separation between a 'domestic sphere' and a 'public sphere', the former associated with women and the latter with men.[38] Although the theory focused on differences between men's and women's spheres of activity rather than on differences between men's and women's biology, it was essentialist and monocausal none the less. It posited the existence of a domestic sphere in all societies and thereby assumed that women's activities were basically similar in content and significance across cultures.

The third example is the theory developed by Nancy Chodorow, who posited a cross-cultural activity, mothering, as the relevant object of investigation.[39] She asked the question: how does mothering produce a new generation of women with the psychological inclination to mother

and a new generation of men not so inclined? The answer she gave was in terms of 'gender identity': female mothering produces women whose deep sense of self is 'relational' and men whose deep sense of self is not.

A criticism of this theory is that it posits the existence of a single activity, mothering, and stipulates that this basically unitary activity gives rise to two distinct sorts of deep selves, one relatively common across cultures to women, the other relatively common across cultures to men. From a postmodernist perspective Chodorow's thesis is essentialist because she states that women everywhere differ from men in their greater concern with 'relational interaction'. The idea of a cross-cultural, deep sense of self, specified differently for women and men, is deeply problematic. Moreover, while her concept of 'gender identity' gives substance to the idea of sisterhood, it does so at the cost of repressing differences among women.

By these and other examples Fraser and Nicholson lucidly demonstrate that many feminists have used categories to construct a universalistic social theory which projects the socially dominant views of their own society on to others, thereby distorting important features of both.

Fraser and Nicholson's main argument is that feminist theory must become postmodernist. They assert, contra Lyotard, that postmodern feminist theory could include large-scale narratives and analyses of macrostructures. Such a theory would be comparativist rather than universalizing. It would dispense with the idea of a subject of history, and would replace unitary notions of 'woman' with plural complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others such as class, 'race', ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. In short, postmodern feminist theory would be pragmatic, and tailor its methods and categories to the specific task at hand.

Fraser and Nicholson believe that, on the one hand, there is decreasing interest in grand social theories; on the other hand, essentialist vestiges persist in the continued use of ahistorical categories without reflection as to how, when and why such categories originated and were modified over time. They suggest that this tension is symptomatically expressed in the work of French psychoanalytic feminists and believe that Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva propositionally deny essentialism even as they performatively enact it.

Further reading

T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

A lively, comprehensive account of modern literary theory. There is a clear explanation of structuralism, semiotics, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and the need for political criticism. A brilliant and successful popularization.

H. Foster, *Postmodern Culture*, London: Pluto Press, 1985.

A famous collection of nine key essays on postmodernism by Baudrillard, Said, Habermas and others. An excellent introduction to the main debates.

D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

An ambitious materialist study of postmodernity. Harvey is interested not only in political and social ideas but in art, literature and architecture. He begins with an analysis of modernity, modernism, modernization. After looking at the political–economic transformation of late-twentieth-century capitalism, he considers postmodernity. The most stimulating argument concerns the nature of 'time–space compression' and how we experience it.

F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991.

A fundamental text which covers culture, ideology, video, architecture, theory, economics, film. It deals with not just the cultural but the political and social implications of postmodernism. A big book in every sense, it is both demanding and rewarding.

M. Morris, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, London: Verso, 1988.

A book of twelve essays on Baudrillard, Daly, Le Doeuff, Foucault, Lyotard, photography, postmodernity, politics and the film *Crocodile Dundee*. It contains a comprehensive bibliography of women's writing on feminism, theories of reading and postmodernism.

R. Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, London: Routledge, 1981.

A most useful anthology of contemporary criticism, it gives examples of the work of various critics who have absorbed and developed the ideas of

Lacan, Derrida and Foucault. Among the texts discussed in this informative book are works by Wordsworth, Poe, Joyce, Nietzsche and Freud.

The following writings are from a feminist point of view:

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Chapter 7

Baudrillard and some cultural practices

Baudrillard

Jean Baudrillard's provocative and controversial works have recently become very fashionable. He is a sociologist who obviously loves *ideas* (he has so many of them) and his writings contain many stimulating insights. His work is valuable because he has evolved a theory that tries to comprehend the nature and impact of mass communications.

Baudrillard began his writings as an effort to extend the Marxist critique of capitalism to areas that were beyond the scope of the theory of the mode of production. He found that the productivist metaphor in Marxism was inappropriate for comprehending the status of commodities in the post-war era. Later, as we shall see, he gradually abandoned Marxism and adopted the tenets of postmodernism.

The early work: commodity as sign

In *The System of Objects* (1968) Baudrillard explores, from a neo-Marxist perspective, the possibility that consumption has become the chief basis of the social order.[1] He argues that consumer objects constitute a classification system and that they have their effect in structuring behaviour. Advertising codes products through symbols that differentiate them from other products, thereby fitting the object into a series. The object has its effect when it is consumed by transferring its 'meaning' to the individual consumer. A potentially infinite play of signs is thus instituted which orders society while providing the individual with an illusory sense of freedom.