

## Introduction

### Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism: Rethinking the Boundaries of Educational Discourse

Modern citizenship was formulated in a way that played a crucial role in the emergence of modern democracy, but it has become an obstacle to making it wider and more pluralistic. Many of the new rights that are being claimed by women or ethnic minorities are no longer rights that can be universalized. They are the expression of specific needs and should be granted to particular communities. Only a pluralistic conception of citizenship can accommodate the specificity and multiplicity of democratic demands and provide a pole of identification for a wide range of democratic forces. The political community has to be viewed, then, as a diverse collection of communities, as a forum for creating unity without denying specificity. (Mouffe 1989, 7)

Chantal Mouffe's comments suggest we have entered a new age, one that is marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority,

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identity, and ethics. This new age has been described, for better or worse, by many theorists in a variety of disciplines as the age of postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> It is a period torn between the ravages and benefits of modernism; it is an age in which the notions of science, technology, and reason are associated not only with social progress but also with the organization of Auschwitz and the scientific creativity that made Hiroshima possible (Poster 1989). It is a time in which the humanist subject seems to no longer be in control of his or her fate. It is an age in which the grand narratives of emancipation, whether from the political Right or Left, appear to share an affinity for terror and oppression. It is also a historical moment in which culture is no longer seen as a reserve of white men whose contributions to the arts, literature, and science constitute the domain of high culture. We live at a time in which a strong challenge is being waged against a modernist discourse in which knowledge is legitimized almost exclusively from a European model of culture and civilization. In part, the struggle for democracy can be seen in the context of a broader struggle against certain features of modernism that represent the worst legacies of the Enlightenment tradition. And it is against these features that a variety of oppositional movements have emerged in an attempt to rewrite the relationship between modernism and democracy. Two of the most important challenges to modernism have come from divergent theoretical discourses associated with postmodernism and feminism.

Postmodernism and feminism have challenged modernism on a variety of theoretical and political fronts, and I will take these up shortly, but there is another side to modernism that has expressed itself more recently in the ongoing struggles in Eastern Europe. Modernism is not merely about patriarchy parading as universal reason, the increasing intensification of human domination over nature in the name of historical development, or the imperiousness of grand narratives that stress control and mastery (Lyotard 1984). Nor is modernism simply synonymous with forms of modernization characterized by the ideologies and practices of the dominating relations of capitalist production. It exceeds this fundamental but limiting rationality by offering the ideological excesses of democratic possibility. By this I mean, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) have pointed out, modernism becomes a decisive point of reference for advancing certain and crucial elements of the democratic revolution. Beyond its claims to certainty, foundationalism, and epistemological essentialism, modernism provides the theoretical elements for analyzing both the

limits of its own historical tradition and for developing a political standpoint in which the breadth and specificity of democratic struggles can be expanded through the modernist ideals of freedom, justice, and equality. As Mark Hannam points out, modernism does have a legacy of progressive ambitions which have contributed to substantive social change, and these ambitions need to be remembered in order to be reinserted into any developing discourses on democracy. For Hannam (1990) these include: "economic redistribution towards equality, the emancipation of women, the eradication of superstition and despotism, wider educational opportunities, the improvement of the sciences and the arts, and so forth. Democratization was one of these ambitions and frequently was perceived to be a suitable means towards the realization of other, distinct ambitions" (113). What is important to note is that the more progressive legacies of modernism have been unleashed not in the West, where they have been undermined by modernism's undemocratic tendencies, but in Eastern Europe where the full force of political modernism has erupted to redraw the political and cultural map of the region. What this suggests is neither the death of modernism, nor the facile dismissal of the new oppositional discourses that have arisen within postmodernism and feminism, but a rethinking of how the most critical aspects of these discourses can be brought to bear to deepen the democratic possibilities within the modernist project itself. For what is at stake here is not simply the emergence of a new language in order to rethink the modernist tradition, but also the reconstruction of the political, cultural, and social preconditions for developing a radical conception of citizenship and pedagogy.

That we live in an age in which a new political subject is being constructed can be seen most vividly in the events that have recently taken place in Eastern Europe. Within a matter of months, the Berlin wall has fallen; the Stalinist communist parties of the Eastern bloc are, for all intent and purposes, in disarray; the Soviet Union is radically modifying an identity forged in the legacy of Leninism and Bolshevism; the master narratives of Marxism are being refigured within the shifting identities, and cultural practices, and imaginary possibilities unleashed in the nascent discourse of a radical democracy. In Eastern Europe, the theoretical and political preconditions for a postmodern citizen are being constructed, even if only at the present they exist as a faint glimmer. This is a political subject that rejects the authoritarianism of master narratives, that refuses traditions that allow only for a reverence of what already is, that denies those instrumental and

universalized forms of rationality which eliminate the historical and the contingent, that opposes science as a universal foundation for truth and knowledge, and that discredits the Western notion of subjectivity as a stable, coherent self. What these shifting perspectives and emergent social relations have done is to radicalize the possibilities of freedom, and to affirm the capacity of human beings to shape their own destinies as part of a larger struggle for democracy.

In the Western industrial countries, the revolutions in Eastern Europe for freedom, equality, and justice appear in the dominant media as the valiant struggle of the Other against enslavement through communism. But in the United States these are events that take place on the margins of civilization, related but not central to the political and cultural identity of the West except as mimesis. In the mass media, the struggles for equality and freedom in Eastern Europe have been analyzed through the lens of a modernist discourse that reproduces highly problematic notions of the Enlightenment tradition. For example, many Western theorists view the redrawing of the political and social borders of Eastern Europe in reductionist modernist terms as the "end of history," a metaphor for the already unquestionable triumph of capitalist liberal democracy. In this scenario, the ideological characteristics that define the center of civilization through the discourse of the Western democracies has now been extended to the culturally and politically "deprived" margins of civilization. This is a curious position, because it fails to recognize that what the revolutions in Eastern Europe may be pointing to is not the "end of history" but to the exhaustion of those hierarchical and undemocratic features of modernism that produce state oppression, managerial domination, and social alienation in various countries in both the East and the West. It is curious because the "end of history" ideology, when applied to the Western democracies, is quite revealing; that is, it points to a political smugness which presupposes that democracy in the West has reached its culmination. Of course, beneath this smugness lies the indifference of Western-style democracy toward substantive political life; in effect, what has become increasingly visible in this argument is the failure of democracy itself. Hannam captures this point, "Formal democracy has failed because it has generated indifference towards many of the substantive goals of political activity. Western democracy believes itself to be at its own endpoint; it has given up the ambition of social change, of which it was once a central, but never an exclusive part" (Hannam 1990, 113).

While Western ruling groups and their apologists may choose to see only the triumph of liberal ideology beneath the changes in Eastern Europe, there is more being called into question than they suspect. In fact, the revolutions in Eastern Europe call into question not only the master narrative of Marxism, but all master narratives that make a totalizing claim to emancipation and freedom. In this case, the events taking place in Eastern Europe and in other places like South Africa represent part of a broader struggle of oppressed peoples against all totalizing forms of legitimation and cultural practice that deny human freedom and collective justice. What the West may be witnessing in Eastern Europe is the emergence of a new discourse, one that does not pit socialism against capitalism, but democracy against all forms of totalitarianism. In opposition to a limited modernist version of democracy, the struggles in Eastern Europe implicitly suggest the conditions for creating a radical democracy, one in which people control the social and economic forces that determine their existence. In this case, the struggle for democracy exceeds its modernist framework by extending the benefits of freedom and justice beyond the strictly formal mechanisms of democracy. What appears at work in these revolutions is a discourse that has the potential to deepen the radical implications of modernism through considerations of a rather profound set of questions: What set of conditions are necessary to create social relations for human liberation within historically specific formations? How might individual and social identities be reconstructed in the service of human imagination and democratic citizenship? How can the assertion of history and politics serve to deconstruct all essentialisms and totalizing rationalities? How can political and social identities be constructed within a politics of difference that is capable of struggling over and deepening the project of radical democracy while constantly asserting its historical and contingent character? Put another way, what can be done to strengthen and extend the oppositional tendencies of modernism?

I want to argue that modernism, postmodernism, and feminism represent three of the most important discourses for developing a cultural politics and pedagogical practice capable of extending and theoretically advancing a radical politics of democracy. While acknowledging that all three of these discourses are internally contradictory, ideologically diverse, and theoretically inadequate, I believe that when posited in terms of the interconnections between *both* their differences and the common ground they share

for being mutually correcting, they offer critical educators a rich theoretical and political opportunity for rethinking the relationship between schooling and democracy. Each of these positions have much to learn from the theoretical strengths and weaknesses of the other two discourses. Not only does a dialogical encounter among these discourses offer them the opportunity to re-examine the partiality of their respective views, such an encounter also points to new possibilities for sharing and integrating their best insights as part of broader radical democratic project. Together these diverse discourses offer the possibility for illuminating how critical educators might work with other cultural workers in various movements to develop and advance a broader discourse of political and collective struggle. At stake here is an attempt to provide a political and theoretical discourse which can move beyond a postmodern aesthetic and a feminist separatism in order to develop a project in which a politics of difference can emerge within a shared discourse of democratic public life. Similarly, at issue is also the important question of how the discourses of modernism, postmodernism, and feminism might be pursued as part of a broader political effort to rethink the boundaries and most basic assumptions of a critical pedagogy consistent with a radical cultural politics.

I want to develop these issues through the following approach: First, I will analyze in schematic terms some of the central assumptions which characterize various modernist traditions, including Jurgen Habermas's spirited defense of social and political modernism. Second, I will analyze some of the central issues that postmodernism has made problematic in its encounter with modernism. Third, I will highlight the most progressive aspects of what can be loosely labeled as postmodern feminist theory to be used in the service of advancing both its own critical tendencies and the most radical aspects of modernism and postmodernism. Finally, I will indicate how these three discourses might contribute to developing some important principles in the construction of a critical pedagogy for democratic struggle. It is to these issues that I will now turn.

## MAPPING THE POLITICS OF MODERNISM

To invoke the term modernism is to immediately place oneself in the precarious position of suggesting a definition that is itself open to enormous debate and little agreement (Groz 1986;

Appignanensi and Bennington 1986). Not only is there a disagreement regarding the periodization of the term, there is enormous controversy regarding to what it actually refers.<sup>2</sup> To some it has become synonymous with terroristic claims of reason, science, and totality (Lyotard 1984). To others it embodies, for better or worse, various movements in the arts (Newman 1985). While to some of its more ardent defenders, it represents the progressive rationality of communicative competence and support for the autonomous individual subject (Habermas 1981, 1983, 1987). It is not possible within the context of this chapter to provide a detailed history of the various historical and ideological discourses of modernism even though such an analysis is essential to provide a sense of the complexity of both the category and the debates that have emerged around modernism.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I want to focus on some of the central assumptions of modernism. The value of this approach is that it serves not only to highlight some of the more important arguments that have been made in the defense of modernism but also provides a theoretical and political backdrop for understanding some of the central features of various postmodernist and feminist discourses. This is particularly important with respect to postmodernism, which presupposes some idea of the modern and also of various feminist discourses, which have increasingly been forged largely in opposition to some of the major assumptions of modernism, particularly as these relate to notions such as rationality, truth, subjectivity, and progress.

The theoretical, ideological, and political complexity of modernism can be grasped by analyzing its diverse vocabularies with respect to three traditions: the social, aesthetic, and political. The notion of social modernity corresponds with the tradition of the new, the process of economic and social organization carried out under the growing relations of capitalist production. Social modernity approximates what Matei Calinescu (1987) calls the bourgeois idea of modernity, which is characterized by:

The doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time (a measurable time, a time that can be bought and sold and therefore has, like any other commodity, a calculable equivalent in money), the cult of reason, and the ideal of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success. (41)

Within this notion of modernism, the unfolding of history is linked to the "continual progress of the sciences and of techniques, the rational division of industrial work, [which] introduces into social life a dimension of permanent change, of destruction of customs and traditional culture" (Baudrillard 1987, 65). At issue here is a definition of modernity which points to the progressive differentiation and rationalization of the social world through the process of economic growth and administrative rationalization. Another characteristic of social modernism is the epistemological project of elevating reason to an ontological status. Modernism in this view becomes synonymous with civilization itself, and reason is universalized in cognitive and instrumental terms as the basis for a model of industrial, cultural, and social progress. At stake in this notion of modernity is a view of individual and collective identity in which historical memory is devised as a linear process, the human subject becomes the ultimate source of meaning and action, and a notion of geographical and cultural territoriality is constructed in a hierarchy of domination and subordination marked by a center and margin legitimated through the civilizing knowledge/power of a privileged Eurocentric culture (Aronowitz 1987, 1988).

The category of aesthetic modernity has a dual characterization that is best exemplified in its traditions of resistance and formal aestheticism (Newman 1986). But it is in the tradition of opposition, with its all consuming disgust with bourgeois values and its attempt through various literary and avant-garde movements to define art as a representation of criticism, rebellion, and resistance that aesthetic modernism first gained a sense of notoriety. Fueling this aesthetic modernism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an alienation and negative passion whose novelty was perhaps best captured in Bakunin's anarchist maxim, "To destroy is to create" (cited in Calinescu 1987, 117). The cultural and political lineaments of this branch of aesthetic modernism is best expressed in those avant-garde movements which ranged from the surrealists and futurists, to the conceptualist artists of the 1970s. Within this movement, with its diverse politics and expressions, there is an underlying commonality and attempt to collapse the distinction between art and politics and to blur the boundaries between life and aesthetics. But in spite of its oppositional tendencies, aesthetic modernism has not fared well in the latter part of the twentieth century. Its critical stance, its aesthetic dependency on the presence of bourgeois norms, and its apocalyptic tone became increasingly recognized as artistically



fashionable by the very class it attacked (Barthes 1972).

The central elements that bring these two traditions of modernism together constitute a powerful force for shaping not only the academic disciplines and the discourse of educational theory and practice, but also for providing a number of points where various ideological positions share a common ground. This is especially true in modernism's claim for the superiority of high culture over and against popular culture, its affirmation of a centered if not unified subject, its faith in the power of the highly rational, conscious mind, and its belief in the unequivocal ability of human beings to shape the future in the interest of a better world. There is a long tradition of support for modernism and some of its best representatives are as diverse as Marx, Baudelaire, and Dostoevsky. This notion of the self based on the universalization of reason and the totalizing discourses of emancipation have provided a cultural and political script for celebrating Western culture as synonymous with civilization itself and progress as a terrain that only needed to be mastered as part of the inexorable march of science and history. Marshall Berman (1982, 1988) exemplifies the dizzying heights of ecstasy made possible by the script of modernism in his own rendition of the modernist sensibility.

Modernists, as I portray them, are simultaneously at home in this world and at odds with it. They celebrate and identify with the triumphs of modern science, art, technology, communications, economics, politics—in short, with all the activities, techniques, and sensibilities that enable mankind to do what the Bible said God could do—to “make all things new.” At the same time, however, they oppose modernization's betrayal of its own human promise and potential. Modernists demand more profound and radical renewals: modern men and women must become the subjects as well as the objects of modernization; they must learn to change the world that is changing them and to make it their own. The modernist knows this is possible: the fact that the world has changed so much is proof that it can change still more. The modernist can, in Hegel's phrase, “look the negative in the face and live with it.” The fact that “all that is solid melts into air” is a source not of despair, but of strength and affirmation. If everything must go, then let it go: modern people have the power to create a better world than the world they have lost. (Berman 1988, 11)

Of course, for many critics of modernism, the coupling of social and aesthetic modernism reveals itself quite differently. Modernist art is criticized for becoming nothing more than a commercial market for the museums and the corporate boardrooms and a depoliticized discourse institutionalized within the universities. In addition, many critics have argued that under the banner of modernism reason and aesthetics often come together in a technology of self and culture that combines a notion of beauty, which is white, male, and European with a notion of mastery that legitimates modern industrial technologies and the exploitation of vast pools of labor from the "margins" of Second and Third World economies. Robert Merrill (1988) gives this argument a special twist in claiming that the modernist ego with its pretensions to infallibility and unending progress has actually come to doubt its own promises. For example, he argues that many proponents of modernism increasingly recognize that what has been developed by the West in the name of mastery actually indicates the failure of modernism to produce a technology of self and power that can deliver on the promises of providing freedom through science, technology, and control. He writes:

[A loss of faith in the promises of modernism]...is no less true for corporate and governmental culture in the United States which displays a...desperate quest for aestheticization of the self as modernist construct—white, male, Christian, industrialist—through monumentally styled office buildings, the Brooks Brothers suit (for male and female), designer food, business practices which amount only to the exercise of symbolic power, and most of all, the Mercedes-Benz which as the unification in design of the good (here functional) and the beautiful and in production of industrial coordination and exploitation of human labor is pre-eminently the sign that one has finally achieved liberation and mastery, "made it to the top" (even if its stylistic lines thematize what can only be called a fascist aesthetics). (Merrill 1988, ix)

It is against the claims of social and aesthetic modernism that the diverse discourses of postmodernism and feminism have delivered some of their strongest theoretical and political criticism, and these will be taken up shortly. But there is a third tradition of modernism that has been engaged by feminism but generally ignored by postmodernism. This is the tradition of political

modernism. Political modernism, unlike its related aesthetic and social traditions, does not focus on epistemological and cultural issues as much as it develops a project of possibility out of a number of Enlightenment ideals (Laclau 1988; Mouffe 1988). It should be noted that political modernism constructs a project that rests on a distinction between political liberalism and economic liberalism. In the latter, freedom is conflated with the dynamics of the capitalist market place, whereas in the former, freedom is associated with the principles and rights embodied in the democratic revolution that has progressed in the West over the last three centuries. The ideals that have emerged out of this revolution include "the notion that human beings ought to use their reason to decide on courses of action, control their futures, enter into reciprocal agreements, and be responsible for what they do and who they are" (Warren 1988, ix-x). In general terms, the political project of modernism is rooted in the capacity of individuals to be moved by human suffering so as to remove its causes, to give meaning to the principals of equality, liberty, and justice, and to increase those social forms that enable human beings to develop those capacities needed to overcome ideologies and material forms that legitimate and are embedded in relations of domination.

The tradition of political modernism has largely been taken up and defended in opposition to and against the discourse of postmodernism. Consequently, when postmodernism is defined in relation to the discourse of democracy it is either pitted against the Enlightenment project and seen as reactionary in its political tendencies (Berman 1982; Habermas 1983, 1987), is grafted onto a notion of economic liberalism that converts it into an apology for rich Western democracies (Rorty 1985), or it is portrayed in opposition to the emancipatory project of Marxism (Eagleton 1985/86; Anderson 1984) and Feminism (Hartsock 1987; Christian 1987). In what follows, I want to examine some of the challenges that Jurgen Habermas (1983, 1987) presents to various versions of postmodernism and feminism through his defense of modernity as an unfinished emancipatory project (1983).

### *Habermas and the Challenge of Modernism*

One of the most vigorous defenders of the legacy of modernism has been Jurgen Habermas (1981, 1983, 1987). Habermas's work is important because in forging his defense of modernism as part of a critique of the postmodernist and poststructuralist dis-

courses that have emerged in France since 1968, he has opened up a debate between these seemingly opposing positions. Moreover, Habermas has attempted to revise and reconstruct the earlier work of his Frankfurt School colleagues, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, by revising their pessimistic view of rationality and democratic struggle.

Habermas identifies postmodernity less as a question of style and culture than as one of politics. The postmodern rejection of grand narratives, its denial of epistemological foundations, and its charge that reason and truth are always implicated in relations of power are viewed by Habermas as both a retreat and a threat to modernity. For Habermas, postmodernism has a paradoxical relation with modernism. On the one hand, it embodies the worst dimensions of an aesthetic modernism. That is, it extends those aspects of the avant-garde which "live [in] the experience of rebelling against all that is normative" (Habermas 1983, 5). In this sense, postmodernism echoes surrealism's attempt to undermine the cultural autonomy of art by removing the boundaries that separate it from everyday life. On the other hand, postmodernism represents a negation of the project of social modernity by rejecting its language of universal reason, rights, and autonomy as a foundation for modern social life. For Habermas, postmodernism's argument that realism, consensus, and totality are synonymous with terror represents a form of political and ethical exhaustion that unjustifiably renounces the unfinished task of the rule of reason (Habermas 1979). In Habermas's terms, the postmodernist thinkers are conservatives whose philosophical roots are to be found in various irrationalist and counter-Enlightenment theories that resemble a peculiar political kinship with fascism. According to Habermas, postmodernism undermines the still unfolding project of modernity, with its promise of democracy through the rule of reason, communicative competence, and cultural differentiation. Postmodernism is guilty of the dual crime, in this case, of rejecting the most basic tenets of the modernist ethos and failing to recognize its most emancipatory contributions to contemporary life. In the first instance, postmodernism recklessly overemphasizes the play of difference, contingency, and language against all appeals to universalized and transcendental claims. For the postmodernist, theory without the guarantee of truth redefines the relationship between discourse and power and in doing so destabilizes the modernist faith in consensus and reason. For Habermas, the latter represents a revolt against a substantive view of reason

and subjectivity and negates the productive features of modernism.

For Habermas, modernity offers the promise of integrating the differentiating spheres of science, morality, and art back into society, not through an appeal to power, but through the rule of reason, the application of a universal pragmatics of language, and the development of forms of learning based on dictates of communicative competence. While Habermas accepts the excesses of technological rationality and substantive reason, he believes that it is only through reason that logic of scientific-technological rationality and domination can be subordinated to the imperatives of modernist justice and morality (Kellner 1988). Habermas (1982) admires Western culture and argues that "bourgeois ideals" contain elements of reason that should be at the center of a democratic society. He writes:

I mean the internal theoretical dynamic which constantly propels the sciences—and the self-reflection of the sciences as well—beyond the creation of merely technologically exploitable knowledge; furthermore, I mean the universalist foundations of law and morality which have also been embodied (in no matter how distorted and imperfect a form) in the institutions of constitutional states, in the forms of democratic decision-making, and in individualistic patterns of identity formation; finally, I mean the productivity and the liberating force of an aesthetic experience with a subjectivity set free from the imperatives of purposive activity and from the conventions of everyday perception. (Habermas 1982, 18)

Central to Habermas's defense of modernity is his important distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality. Instrumental rationality represents those systems or practices embodied in the state, money, and various forms of power which work through "steering mechanisms" to stabilize society. Communicative rationality refers to the world of common experience and discursive intersubjective interaction, a world characterized by various forms of socialization mediated through language and oriented toward social integration and consensus. Habermas accepts various criticisms of instrumental rationality, but he largely agrees that capitalism, in spite of its problems, represents more acceptable forms of social differentiation, rationalization, and modernization than have characterized past stages of social

and instrumental development. On the other hand, he is adamant about the virtues of communicative rationality, with its emphasis on the rules of mutual understanding, clarity, consensus, and the force of argument. Habermas views any serious attack on this form of rationality as in itself being irrational. In effect, Habermas's notion of communicative rationality provides the basis not only for his ideal speech situation but also for his broader view of social reconstruction. Rationality, in this case, with its distinctions between an outer world of systemic steering practices and a privileged inner world of communicative process represents in part a division between a world saturated with material power expressed in the evolution of ever growing and complex subsystems of rational modernization and one shaped by universal reason and communicative action. At the core of this distinction is a notion of democracy in which struggle and conflict are not based on a politics of difference and power, but on a conceptual and linguistic search for defining the content of what is rational (Ryan 1989). Habermas's defense of modernity is not rooted in a rigorous questioning of the relationship between discourses, institutional structures and the interests they produce and legitimate within specific social conditions. Instead, he focuses on linguistic competence and the principle of consensus with its guiding problematic defined by the need to uproot the obstacles to "distorted communication." This points not only to a particular view of power, politics, and modernity, it also legitimates, as Stanley Aronowitz points out, a specific notion of reason and learning.

He [Habermas] admonishes us to recognize [modernity's] unfinished tasks: the rule of reason. Rather than rules of governance based on power or discursive hegemonies, we are exhorted to create a new imaginary, one that would recognize societies able to resolve social conflicts, at least provisionally, so as to permit a kind of collective reflexivity. Characteristically, Habermas finds that the barriers to learning are not found in the exigencies of class interest, but in distorted communication. The mediation of communication by interest constitutes here an obstacle to reflexive knowledge. "Progressive" societies are those capable of learning—that is, acquiring knowledge that overcomes the limits of strategic or instrumental action. (Aronowitz 1987/88, 103)

Habermas's work has been both opposed and taken up by a number of critical and radical groups. He has been highly criticized by feminists such as Nancy Fraser (1985) and embraced by radicals who believe that his search for universal values represents a necessary ingredient in the struggle for human emancipation (Epstein 1990). In many respects, his writing provides a theoretical marker for examining how the debate over foundationalism and democracy, on the one hand, and a politics of difference and contingency, on the other, has manifested itself as a debate on the Left between those who line up for or against different versions of modernism or postmodernism.

A more constructive approach to both the specifics of Habermas's work as well as to the larger issue of modernism is that neither should be accepted or rejected as if the only choice was one of complete denial or conversion. In Habermas's case, for example, he is both right and wrong in his analyses of modernism and postmodernism. He is right in attempting to salvage the productive and emancipatory aspects of modernism and for attempting to develop a unifying principle which provides a referent point for engaging and advancing a democratic society. He is also right in claiming that postmodernism is as much about the issue of politics and culture as it is about aesthetics and style (Huyssen 1986). In this sense, Habermas provides a theoretical service by trying to keep alive as part of a modernist discourse the categories of critique, agency, and democracy. For better or worse, Habermas injects into the modernist versus postmodernist debate the primacy of politics and the role that rationality might play in the service of human freedom and the imperatives of democratic ideology and struggle. As Thomas McCarthy points out, Habermas

believes that the defects of the Enlightenment can only be made good by further enlightenment. The totalized critique of reason undercuts the capacity of reason to be critical. It refuses to acknowledge that modernization bears developments as well as distortions of reason. Among the former, he mentions the "unthawing" and "reflective refraction" of cultural traditions, the universalization of norms and generalization of values, and the growing individuation of personal identities—all prerequisites for that effectively democratic organization of society through which alone reason can, in the end, become practical. (McCarthy 1987, xvii)

It is around these concerns that postmodern theorists have challenged some of the basic assumptions of modernism. For Habermas, these challenges weaken rather than mobilize the democratic tendencies of modernism. But as I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this introduction, Habermas is wrong in simply dismissing all forms of postmodernism as anti-modernist and neo-conservative. Moreover, given his own notion of consensus and social action, coupled with his defense of Western tradition, his view of modernity is too complicitous with a notion of reason that is used to legitimate the superiority of a culture that is primarily white, male, and Eurocentric. Habermas speaks from a position that is not only susceptible to the charge of being patriarchal but is also open to the charge that his work does not adequately engage the relationship between discourse and power and the messy material relations of class, race, and gender. Postmodern and feminist critiques of his work cannot be dismissed simply because they might be labeled as anti-modern or anti-rationalist. In what follows, I want to take up some of the challenges that postmodernism has developed in opposition to some of the central assumptions of modernism.

## POSTMODERN NEGATIONS

If postmodernism means putting the Word in its place...if it means the opening up to critical discourse the line of enquiry which were formerly prohibited, of evidence which as previously inadmissible so that new and different questions can be asked and new and other voices can begin asking them; if it means the opening up of institutional and discursive spaces within which more fluid and plural social and sexual identities may develop; if it means the erosion of triangular formations of power and knowledge with the expert at the apex and the "masses" at the base, if, in a word, it enhances our collective (and democratic) sense of possibility, then I for one am a postmodernist. (Hebdige 1989, 226).

Hebdige's guarded comments regarding his own relationship to postmodernism are suggestive of some of the problems that have to be faced in using the term. As the term is increasingly employed both in and out of the academy to designate a variety of discourses, its political and semantic currency repeatedly becomes



an object of conflicting forces and divergent tendencies. Postmodernism has not only become a site of conflicting ideological struggles—denounced by different factions on both the Left and the Right, supported by an equal number of diverse progressive groups, and appropriated by interests that would renounce any claim to politics—its varied forms also produce both radical and reactionary elements. Postmodernism's diffuse influence and contradictory character is evident within many cultural fields—painting, architecture, photography, video, dance, literature, education, music, mass communications—and in the varied contexts of its production and exhibition. Such a term does not lend itself to the usual topology of categories that serve to inscribe it ideologically and politically within traditional binary oppositions. In this case, the politics of postmodernism cannot be neatly labeled under the traditional categories of Left and Right.

In spite of the fact that many groups are making a claim for its use this should not suggest that the term has no value except as a buzzword for the latest intellectual fashions. On the contrary, its widespread appeal and conflict-ridden terrain indicate that something important is being fought over, that new forms of social discourse are being constructed at a time when the intellectual, political, and cultural boundaries of the age are being refigured amidst significant historical shifts, changing power structures, and emergent alternative forms of political struggle. Of course, whether these new postmodernist discourses adequately articulate rather than reflect these changes is the important question.

I believe that the discourse of postmodernism is worth struggling over, and not merely as a semantic category that needs to be subjected to ever more precise definitional rigor. As a discourse of plurality, difference and multinarratives, postmodernism resists being inscribed in any single articulating principle in order to explain either the mechanics of domination or the dynamic of emancipation. At issue here is the need to mine its contradictory and oppositional insights so that they might be appropriated in the service of a radical project of democratic struggle. The value of postmodernism lies in its role as a shifting signifier that both reflects and contributes to the unstable cultural and structural relationships that increasingly characterize the advanced industrial countries of the West. The important point here is not whether postmodernism can be defined within the parameters of particular politics, but how its best insights might be appropriated with a progressive and emancipatory democratic politics. I want to

argue that while postmodernism does not suggest a particular ordering principle for defining a particular political project, it does have a rudimentary coherence with respect to the set of "problems and basic issues that have been created by the various discourses of postmodernism, issues that were not particularly problematic before but certainly are now" (Hutcheon 1988, 5). Postmodernism raises questions and problems so as to redraw and re-present the boundaries of discourse and cultural criticism. The issues that postmodernism has brought into view can be seen, in part, through its various refusals of all "natural laws" and transcendental claims that by definition attempt to "escape" from any type of historical and normative grounding. In fact, if there is any underlying harmony to various discourses of postmodernism it is in their rejection of absolute essences. Arguing along similar lines, Ernesto Laclau (1988b) claims that postmodernity as a discourse of social and cultural criticism begins with a form of epistemological, ethical, and political awareness based on three fundamental negations.

The beginning of postmodernity can...be conceived as the achievement of multiple awareness: epistemological awareness, insofar as scientific progress appears as a succession of paradigms whose transformation and replacement is not grounded in any algorithmic certainty; ethical awareness, insofar as the defense and assertion of values is grounded on argumentative movements (conservational movements, according to Rorty), which do not lead back to any absolute foundation; political awareness, insofar as historical achievements appear as the product of hegemonic and contingent—and as such, always reversible—articulations and not as the result of immanent laws of history. (Laclau 1988b, 21)

Laclau's list does not exhaust the range of negations that postmodernism has taken up as part of the increasing resistance to all totalizing explanatory systems and the growing call for a language that offers the possibility to address the changing ideological and structural conditions of our time. In what follows, I shall address some of the important thematic considerations that cut across, what I define as a series of postmodern negations. I shall address these negations in terms of the challenge they present to what can be problematized as either oppressive or productive features of modernism. *Copyrighted Material*