

## CHAPTER ONE



# The Problem of Change

“Change is far more radical than we are at first inclined to suppose.”

—Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1)

Over the past thirty years, the postmodern critique of foundational thinking has become a commonplace in theoretical scholarship across the humanities and social sciences. Even these days, amid various proclamations of the end of theory, it is entirely common for scholars to deconstruct so-called foundational and metaphysical premises or, at very least, to attempt to overcome some pernicious dualism. But despite the massive proliferation of such work, I want to claim that some of the most crucial implications of this postmodern critique have gone largely unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it may be that only now, amid the alleged end of theory and the supposed overcoming of postmodernism that this other postmodern challenge might begin to be heard.

Succinctly put, this other challenge forces us to grapple with what I call “the problem of change.”<sup>2</sup> While most contemporary critiques are directed toward realizing some particular change—whether in social dynamics, institutional structures, or even just in intellectual landscapes—most also fail to attend to the implications of the movement of change that drives such work. Another way of saying this is that despite the incessant and justifiable concern for problematizing a whole series of binary operations throughout the social field, the one binary that has remained firmly intact is that between “the same” and “the different.”

Recognizing the persistence of this binary can help to complicate the often antagonistic and usually caricatured relationship between a supposedly innovative, anti-foundationalist postmodernism and an allegedly conservative, traditionalist humanism. Indeed, one of the major goals of this book is to offer a style of engagement that might allow us to reconsider the impasses between these positions (and their many variants) by encouraging us to attend to the very relationship between tradition (the same) and innovation (the different). As we all know, contributors to these debates—both within the academy and without—have engaged in seemingly endless and sometimes vitriolic exchanges about both the means for achieving transformation and the ends to which such transformation should be directed. Very few, however, have paid sustained attention to the movement of transformation itself. That is, despite the fact that these debates have often explicitly focused on the importance of particular ethical and political changes, we seem to have overlooked the possibility that the movement of change itself might harbor important ethical and political implications.

Yet if one focuses on the movement of change, it quickly becomes apparent that the myriad different approaches to contemporary scholarship actually have a great deal more in common than is usually presumed. While the many polarized positions certainly differ on a number of important matters, the one thing they generally share is a fundamental commitment to a dialectical image of change.

While one might quite reasonably devote an entire book to explaining the notion of dialectical change, what I am referring to here is simply a style of engagement in which negation is the generative principle of transformation. That is, whether the stakes are a new concept, a different social structure, a divergent form of subjectivity, a fresh reading, or an innovative technology, difference and novelty only emerge by somehow overcoming or negating particular others—outdated concepts, oppressive social structures, limited subjectivities, or simply undesirable propositions. The important point here is that the negative movement of dialectical change is the generative engine for whatever “difference” or “novelty” results.

To take a familiar example from the field of rhetoric, in his most recent book Edward Schiappa writes that, “The Postmodern challenge is not merely to reverse our evaluation of such pairs as rational/emotional, literal/figurative, truth/opinion, physis/nomos, and Philosophy/Sophistry . . . We do not overcome such binary oppositions by preferring one over the other; we only overcome them by moving beyond the Hegelian framework” (63). The logic of this argument is, I suspect, quite recognizable by now: while reversing our evaluations of such pairs

certainly produces something different, this difference only emerges by repeating the same dialectical negation. For instance, the supposedly innovative position that attempts to reclaim the sophists from their degraded, platonic history effectively repeats the dialectical negation that engineered their degradation in the first place. While such reevaluation certainly changes the valence attached to the sophists (once they were degraded and dismissed as individualists or relativists; now they are privileged and engaged as pragmatists or postmodernists), it does so by more or less explicitly reproducing the same oppositional relation between Plato and the sophists.<sup>3</sup>

There are two crucial points that I want to emphasize here. First, while this postmodern challenge is a response to dualism and to binary opposition, it is not simply a logical intervention into a static system of terms or positions. Positions are not inert places; they are constellations of actions (whether potential or actual). And binary oppositions are not a problem just because they are binaries, but because they are active and mobile embodiments of particular power dynamics that act through negation. *What is at issue in binary oppositions is not the abstract existence of opposite terms, but the pragmatic movement of negation through which such oppositions are generated and maintained.* We might better say that binary oppositions such as the ones Schiappa lists above are merely freeze-frame images of particular encounters, schematic diagrams that offer a momentary picture of what are, in practice, active engagements and enacted responses. As a response to binaries, then, this postmodern challenge is a response to the ethical and political dynamics of negation that occur within such active engagements.

Second, this postmodern challenge is not simply a call to change the content of our evaluations—as important as such a project undoubtedly is in particular cases—but to problematize the styles of engagement through which such evaluations emerge in the first place. That is, this postmodern challenge challenges us to somehow question the entire “Hegelian framework” of dialectical negation that enables any particular evaluation or any particular content. Rather than privileging “the same” or “the different” in any given relation, it points to the importance of attending to the movement from “the same” to “the different.”

What is at stake here is not any particular claim, nor is it the content of any particular postmodern proposition (about subjectivity, agency, reason, etc.). What is at stake in *this* postmodern challenge is the pragmatic possibility of somehow responding “differently” in any particular encounter. In short, what is at stake is the possibility of inventing a style of engagement that is irreducible to the dialectical movement of negation.

But the dialectical movement of negation is not merely a homogeneous, univocal movement. In order to indicate the vast scope of this challenge and to introduce some important complications of the problem of change, I'd like to briefly and schematically describe three dominant styles of engagement through which such negation functions, styles which I term Advocacy, Critique, and Synthesis.

*1. Advocacy: Emphasizing a Traditionally Privileged Concept*

In this first style of engagement, one emphasizes a traditionally privileged concept and negates its traditionally underprivileged counterpart. It is essential to add that what I am here calling "advocacy" occurs whether it is done explicitly or not or even whether it is done consciously or not. Any given action implicitly privileges a whole host of concepts that the subject need not be aware of or even consciously support. One doesn't have to wave a placard in order to implicitly privilege or advocate particular concepts.

But whether it is performed implicitly or explicitly, consciously or not, responding in this fashion refers to promoting the political and conceptual structures that have assumed the dominant role throughout the history of the west. For instance, truth and knowledge assert their privilege by distinguishing themselves from mere interpretation or perspectival opinion. Against subjective and contingent practices, this style of engagement emphasizes historically dominant concepts such as objectivity and universality. Against the ethical concepts of difference or the other, it accentuates the importance of identity and self, etc.

We might justifiably call this response "conservative" in that it conserves, or rather, reproduces long-established power differences. It repeats customary imbalances by repeating particular acts of negation. In fact, the movement of negation is such an integral aspect of this conservative response that in addition to the positive content of its positions, this response may be defined by the dynamic that enables it, the movement of negation through which it encounters its others.

But while refusal and negation might appear to be ways of dissociating or separating, they are also structures of relations, ways of associating and joining. For instance, as a result of its incessant negation of its others, this conservative response is intrinsically dependent on them. In order to exist at all, it requires others that it can negate. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write in their analysis of modern forms of power, "The European Self . . . needs to confront its Other to feel and maintain its power, to remake itself continually" (129). Despite the car-

icatures one often sees of this conservative response, it is not really allergic to difference or otherness. In fact, in its demand to “remake itself continually,” it actually seeks out ever-new, ever-different others in order to reproduce itself through the same acts of negation. Its colonizing appetite demands the incessant parade of new forms of otherness, new styles of difference. Indeed, in what is in not a contradictory gesture, it is frequently a champion of terms such as “difference” and “otherness” (though as particular versions of “sameness” and “self”). My point here is that this conservative response is in no way some inert, static monolith, but is entirely active, engaged, and invested in encountering difference. But the style of engagement that enables it is one that only functions through a particular kind of repetitive movement: the repetition of negating particular others.

## *2. Critique: Advocating a Traditionally Underprivileged Concept*

The second response flips the dialectical coin and privileges the underdog. It begins by recognizing that the system of imbalances reproduced by the conservative position has resulted in countless injustices and outright atrocities. Far from being an abstract, conceptual operation, the act of refusing or negating otherness is precisely the dynamic that enables countless injustices—from gender, racial, and sexual discrimination to colonization, exploitation, and even outright genocide.

So this response seeks to change things by critiquing the conservative position, hoping to overcome its hegemony by supporting the concepts that have been historically derided. Against the privileging of a universal truth, it emphasizes the contingency of opinion. Against the privileging of the object, it promotes things like point-of-view and perspective. It denies the possibility of unmediated facts (and highlights interpretation), criticizes the concept of universality (and accentuates contingency), censures the western tradition’s privileging of the mind (and praises a renewed interest in the body), etc.

It would not be difficult to multiply examples of this type of critique in contemporary scholarship. Its objective is to change the traditional privileges, to overcome the conventional power structure by inverting the valence within any given binary. Through this response, the concept that has traditionally been negated and refused becomes dominant.

Nevertheless, as Schiappa’s example reminds us, this response only accomplishes such a change by reproducing the oppositional structure itself. While the content of this position is certainly different from that

of the conservative response detailed above, the structure of its relation to an opposing concept remains exactly the same: active negation. Because it attempts to change things by critiquing the conservative position, this response reproduces the very dynamics that enabled that conservative position. So if this nontraditional advocacy offers any kind of change, it only does so by repeating an oppositional, dialectical structure. It negates its others just as much as its others once negated it.

And this is not simply a logical fallacy, but a serious ethical and political concern, a concern that the new social or conceptual form will necessarily end up repeating the dangers of the old form (though with different targets) simply because such repetition is its generative principle. While this nontraditional position may succeed in reversing the polarity of binary terms, and even in generating a great many important transformations, it is still driven by the very same negation of its others that characterized the position it is trying to critique. Like the previous response, the style of change that it offers involves the repetition of that which it is trying to move beyond.

The interesting fact, however, is that much of the critique that issues from this position goes under the name of “postmodernism” or is offered in conjunction with a lineage of thinkers associated with this term. As a result, it may not be contradictory to claim that postmodernism itself, or at least this particular style of “oppositional postmodernism,” has not yet responded to the postmodern challenge. Or to phrase this a bit more precisely, the difference offered by such oppositional postmodernism only functions through the repetition of the very dialectical structure it is attempting to overcome.

### *3. Synthesis: Valorizing the Indeterminate “in-between”*

This third response recognizes the ethical and political dangers associated with taking either side in this interminable confrontation. Not wanting to become engaged in the movement of negation that engineers both positions, it attempts to overcome the oppositional movement itself by synthesizing these opposing poles. Brian Massumi, who refers to the debates between the two previous positions as “the chicken and egg scenario,” writes that this synthetic response “attempt[s] to defuse the chicken and egg scenario by valorizing the in-between. The ultimate aim is to find a place for change again” (69). This synthetic response, in other words, attempts to develop a sense of change that is not inherently dependent on the monotonous and dangerous movement of nega-

tion and refusal. As a result, it looks to the space *between* the poles, *between* opposing positions.

Through concepts such as “intersubjectivity,” “hybridity,” “dialogue,” or the recently popular terminology of “networks” and “ecologies,” this response focuses on the indeterminate space *between* positions. One need not privilege either objective truth or subjective perspective so much as recognize the ways in which subjects and objects are mutually constituted. What warrants attention is not the content of the nodes, but the generative, ambiguous space that exists between them, the blending of contingency and universality, the conjunction of interpretation and knowledge, the indistinguishable aspects of subjectivity and sociality. Thus, rather than simply reproducing an oppositional structure, this indeterminate in-between attempts to offer a way of disorienting the repetition of dialectical change.

And yet, in the very effort to render this in-between, the existence of poles are still presumed. The disorienting, synthetic move is already oriented by the positions that it synthesizes. For instance, the indeterminate space of intersubjectivity implicitly presumes the existence of subjects. The indistinguishable blending that occurs in contact zones or boundaries assumes that there is a distinguishable separation somewhere other than the boundaries. In short, to demonstrate the indeterminate or ambiguous in-between is to simultaneously reproduce the oppositional dynamics that characterize the nodes or poles “between” which something exists. Far from avoiding the negation of otherness, this response implicitly originates with it. And while the content of this response is certainly different from that of advocacy or critique, this content only changes by repeating the same negative relational structure.



So each of these three styles of engagements repeats the structure of negation and reproduces the ethical and political dangers that accompany such movement. Of course, each response clearly offers a very different content, from historically privileged concepts, to historically denigrated ones, to an indeterminate “in-between.” And it is important not to elide these differences and the particular effects that these contents have in particular situations. So while all three responses repeat the same negative movement of dialectical change, we might describe this movement as that of a “complex repetition” in that it functions with different targets and produces different contents.

In effect, however, this complex repetition indicates only that different others are negated in different ways. In each case, the more basic

structure of active opposition continues to be reproduced. Hence, if dialectics offers a diagram of change (indeed, it is *the* diagram of change), this change is fundamentally repetitive: all negation, all the time. The one thing that does not change is the movement of change itself. And the difference that emerges through this movement is subject to this same repetition, this repetition of the same. In other words, that which we refer to as “the different” or “the new” is merely a product of the monotonous, complex repetition of dialectical change.

That is why this postmodern challenge is not simply to pick one of these three responses. Regardless of the important, substantive distinctions between the three positions, they all function according to the same repetitive logic of change. Instead, we might consider an alternative, one to which both Schiappa’s and Hardt/Negri’s analyses point.

#### *4. Moving Beyond the Dialectic*

Because the previous responses structurally reproduce the movement of negation and refusal, they cannot offer an escape from its ethico-political dangers. In a seemingly odd reversal, transformation becomes the condition of stability. While so much attention has been directed at undermining foundations and unsettling grounds, we seem to have missed the point that the ground has never been anything other than change itself. In other words, that which we have always referred to as “stability” has never been some fixed, stationary condition. Nothing ever stops moving, including grounds and foundations. Instead, this stability refers to a particular kind of repetition, the complex repetition that characterizes dialectical change. So in order to move beyond this logic, it seems reasonable to think that the dialectic itself must be overcome. Rather than simply switching the valences among the different positions, this postmodernism challenges us to “deconstruct or replace” them. In Schiappa’s words, we are challenged to “mov[e] beyond the Hegelian framework” (63).

This is an extremely important point for contemporary scholarship throughout the humanities, and one that resonates with a growing body of scholarship across disciplines. For this postmodern challenge, in order to avoid repeating the dangerous ethico-political structure of active negation, the very nature of change must be at stake. In some sense, then, the dialectic itself—including each of its three modes of response and the structure of relations that define them—must be overcome.

For instance, Hardt and Negri’s influential attempt to conceptualize a new form of global power, Empire, is driven by this same demand to



overcome the repetitive movement of dialectics. The authors characterize Empire as a form of power in which “the dialectic between inside and outside comes to an end” (217). The reason for insisting on the importance of overcoming dialectics is also clear: according to their logic, it may be the case that the oppositional mode of left politics is not simply ineffective, but even dangerously complicit: “the postmodernist and postcolonial strategies that appear to be liberatory would not challenge but in fact coincide with and even unwittingly reinforce the new strategies of rule” (138). For Hardt and Negri, the importance of recognizing this new, nondialectical form of power is that it points toward the necessity of forging a politics that doesn’t simply reproduce the dynamics of negation and refusal, a politics that can overcome the very movement of dialectical change.

And yet, if this schematic treatment of the three dialectical styles of engagement teaches anything it is that dialectics is not so much a position or a theme as it is the movement of overcoming itself. In each case, the attempt to move beyond a particular position is characterized by a structural repetition—the repetition of refusal and negation. In other words, any effort to overcome binary logic or move beyond the Hegelian framework simply reproduces this framework. This is why Derrida cautions that, “Misconstrued, treated lightly, Hegelianism only extends its historical domination, finally unfolding its immense enveloping resources without obstacle” (1978, 251). Indeed, if deconstruction is involved with the *replacement* of binary oppositions—as Schiappa’s phrasing seems to indicate, and countless others have claimed—then it only repeats the movement of dialectical negation.<sup>4</sup>

After all, the movement of overcoming is merely a particular style of negation, an instance of dialectical change. And this applies even if the object of that negation is the dialectic itself. Even as it attempts to move beyond dialectical change—indeed, *precisely because it attempts to move beyond it*—such a response remains trapped in the complex repetition of dialectical change.<sup>5</sup> While the contents of the positions may change, the structure of negative relations stays the same.

In terms of Hardt and Negri’s effort to rethink the form of contemporary sovereignty, if this Empire defines a terrain in which “the dialectic between inside and outside *comes to an end*” (217, my emphasis), then it is implicitly constituted by the very dialectic it is attempting to overcome (once we were inside the era of dialectics; now we are outside of it). In other words, even as they attempt the important task of moving politics beyond dialectics, they are compelled to repeat its movement.<sup>6</sup> In short, any attempt to refuse dialectical change or to move beyond it is necessarily destined to remain trapped within

its repetitious negation and trapped by the ethical and political dangers it enables. Because dialectics is the repetitious movement of change, we simply cannot “move beyond” it.

Thus, this postmodern challenge is not only a more difficult challenge than much “oppositional postmodernism” has indicated, but it is even more difficult than the more subtle treatments offered by Schiappa or Hardt and Negri. Faced with the ethical and political dangers of dialectical change, the challenge is to invent a practical style of engagement that doesn’t just repeat the structure of negation and refusal. So while we obviously cannot just repeat any of the three styles of engagement offered by the dialectic, we also cannot reject these styles. A seemingly impossible bind: in order to avoid the negation that engineers the very possibility of change, this postmodern challenge teaches that we must not avoid it. We cannot simply repeat dialectical engagements and we cannot *not* repeat them. We cannot just advocate a position, critique a position, or synthesize positions—but neither can we reject advocacy, critique, and synthesis. What, then, can we do?

The major project of this book is to respond to this little question. That is, the following pages attempt to develop and to demonstrate a style of engagement that is irreducible to this repetitious dialectic of negation, a style that I referred to in the introduction as offering an “affirmative” sense of change. Now, it is extremely important that this affirmative change not be thought of as something that is simply *different from* dialectical negation—such a gesture would repeat the very problems that it wants to address (“that was the old version of change; this is the new one”). Instead, the key challenge for responding to “the problem of change” is to both articulate and demonstrate an affirmative sense of change that is neither the same as dialectical change nor different from it.

In order to clarify this apparent impossibility a bit, I will tentatively propose that there is a simpler kind of affirmative repetition that circulates within the dialectic’s recognizably complex repetition. And though I will talk about it as if it is somehow distinct, this simpler repetition is both irreducible to and inseparable from the movement of dialectical negation. For reasons that I will discuss in more detail at the end of chapter 2, I follow Deleuze and Derrida in thinking of this affirmative repetition as being composed of “singular rhythms.” These singular rhythms indicate an unidentifiable and unrecognizable dimension of repetition that circulates within the identifiable and recognizable movement of dialectical negation. So if the negative movement of dialectical change cannot be overcome and can only be repeated, this does not mean that all repetition is the same or that all repetition neces-

sarily reproduces the same. Instead, it only means that everything hinges on *how* one repeats (rather than *if* one repeats). In other words, in any particular encounter, everything depends on one's orientation within repetition: an orientation toward negation itself or an orientation toward the singular rhythms within negation.

Again, what is at stake in such "encounters" is not an abstract logical question, but the possibility of somehow responding differently in our actual encounters with the world, the possibility, for instance, of engaging in everyday practices such as reading, writing, and thinking through something other than the negation of otherness. In turning to the rhetorical tradition, and more specifically, to rhetorical invention, I found an extraordinary history of concepts and practices that engaged questions quite similar to these. I also found an extremely productive site through which I could both explain this affirmative sense of change and demonstrate its pragmatic movement. While chapter 2 provides a more extensive explanation of why the rhetorical tradition offers a particularly intriguing place to locate these questions, and why rhetorical invention is of particular interest, I would like to indicate two of the most salient reasons up front.

First, because of rhetoric's traditional concern for persuasion (rather than communication), it has been intimately involved with questions of force rather than questions of signification or meaning. One might say, following Deleuze, that the rhetorical tradition has demonstrated a sustained investment in the "asignifying" function of language, or the dimension of language that is irreducible to questions of meaning and understanding. So, like the simple repetition of singular rhythms, this asignifying orientation of rhetoric is never simply separate from the operations of signification, but is not exactly coextensive with them either. As a result, the sense of rhetoric that this book revisits is distinct from more familiar rhetorical turns, those that have been directed toward either meaning and indeterminacy (as was the case for the Yale school deconstruction of the mid-1980s) or toward the social construction of knowledge (as is most common for so-called anti-foundationalist and constructionist rhetorics these days).

Second, while rhetorical invention would seem, in some fairly straightforward ways, to be concerned with producing "the different" or "the new," actual practices of rhetorical invention have oscillated in some interesting ways. For instance, as a number of scholars have noted, invention cannot be adequately described by recourse to either subjective or objective poles—it is neither simply a subjective *creation* nor an objective *discovery*. In addition, invention has oscillated between the "old" and the "new" (or the "same" and the "different")

in that invention has functioned both as the recollection of preexisting knowledge and as the production of new knowledge. For my purposes, these series of oscillations (neither old nor new, subjective nor objective, signifying nor indeterminate) offer an intriguing movement that might indicate a productive site at which to begin responding to the problem of change.