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Modalities, politics

> We must avoid the temptation of supposing that what occurs today somehow pre-existed in a latent form merely waiting to be unfolded or explicated. Such thinking also conceives history as an evolutionary development and excludes crucial notions of rupture and mutation in history. My own conviction is that we must maintain two contradictory affirmations at the same time. On the one hand, we affirm the existence of ruptures in history, and on the other we affirm that these ruptures produce gaps or faults in which the most hidden and forgotten archives can emerge and constantly recur and work through history.
>
> —Jacques Derrida[1]

The meaning of community is in danger.

In essays and longer works ranging from "The Ends of Man" to *Glas*, Jacques Derrida has been occupied with the discourse of ends, of apocalypse: the end of the book, the end of philosophy, the end of the world. What is this "occupation"? To be occupied with the end is to profess it. To profess the end, to make of oneself a professor of the end, or to be made into such a professor (to be occupied with, i.e., by the end), is also to profess against the end. Which occupation will it be? Derrida's answer is that there is no choice here; thus his strategy is an apocalyptic anti-apocalypticism. I have already announced the strategy of this study.

Humanity is on the verge of *forever* losing the sense of community, even as this sense seems to have been recreated in thousands of diffuse ways. Though the word, "community," is a commonplace of public discourse, the word is a mere trace of its former self. These are apocalyptic words, it is true. These are words that already ring with the sound of original plentitude (i.e., the idea that there was a time when the meaning of community was not in danger), loss, illusions of recovery (false messiahs) and the hint of the possibility of real recovery. For this

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apocalyptic tone I would readily take responsibility, if such responsibility were really possible. This remains to be seen, for the meaning of responsibility is no less in danger than the meaning of community: the fate of the former is tied to that of the latter. The apocalyptic mission I have set for this study, then, is toward the rearticulation of the meaning and (therefore) possibility of community. The strategy that I will pursue is Derridean: an anti-apocalypticism just this side of apocalypse.

What is meant by the term, "apocalypse"? The usual, of course: the end of the world in fire and cataclysm. But something more is meant as well. It has everything to do with the meaning of community that is in danger. How can "meaning" be in danger? Certainly the end of the world represents a danger to meaning, but how could the end of meaning mean a danger to the world? We have, however, only spoken thus far of a particular meaning, that of community, being in danger. How the dangerous situation of this meaning is connected to the end of the world in fire is what this study will elaborate.

On "just this side" of apocalypse is where we find ourselves. Who?

At a later point in this chapter I will introduce the larger framework that will make the profession of community possible. To "begin" with such an "introduction," however, would be to betray the discourse with which we are already occupied, and whose many layers we can only begin to differentiate by the taking of a position within the discourse. That is to say, a position must be marked out—we are already occupied with it and by it—in society.

Postsecular socialism: some words in preparation

Why focus attention on the meaning of a word? So what if "community" has lost its meaning? Is it still not true that we (who?) live in some sort of social order, a society? "Society" or "community," what difference does it make?

What then, of hearing the word, "community"? One continually hears this word. Is it spoken falsely? What would it mean to answer this last question in the affirmative? For I do answer the question this way: the notion of *Gemeinschaft* is deployed, in our modern, Western, secular societies, in a *gesellschaftliche* way.[2]

All that has been generated is a series of questions. Each of these contains at least two more questions: that is, every question must come to grips with its terms and its conditions of presentation. For example: Who or what is this "humanity" that is possibly on the verge of losing the sense of community? Is this humanity itself a community, a society,

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or something else? Is "it" only one thing, or is humanity a series of entities, some of which are societies and some of which are communities? If so, what then is "humanity" apart from this series—is it more than merely a biological category, if that? Under what particular historical conditions are these questions raised? At the intersection of what discourses and what kinds of discourses?

A social *theory* cannot remain on the level of undefined, albeit apocalyptic, notions. Remaining on that level assumes that the apocalyptic "energy" of these terms will somehow do the work of securing an understanding of our situation in a time or place just this side of apocalypse. This is, I think, Heidegger's strategy, which he called "thinking." That strategy must itself be interrogated, by a Derridean strategy that is occupied with thinking, but on just this side of apocalypse. Though the term does not do full justice to Derrida's project, it would not be entirely wrong to call this apocalyptic anti-apocalypticism "philosophy." The term that Derrida will use, however, is "writing," and it is very important that we come to grips with this term.[3]

A social *theory* must "ascend to the social," as Marx might have put it. The means, it could even be said, the *material* of that ascendency, is an all-important consideration. Perhaps there is an identifiable historical dialectic of community and society, but there is no transcendent *force* to this dialectic, any more than there is a transcendent energy of apocalypse, that will "propel" humanity toward a new conception and instantiation of community. There "is" only that which exists on this side of the transcendent dialectic. Derrida is also occupied with this difference.

Fake notions of community, as found either in the fascism of the first half of this century or in more recent, even more technological variants, are the last gasp of a modernity run out of steam (or fossil fuels, plutonium, etc.). The emerging world order, which I will argue is appropriately called "postmodern," is taking shape as a secular society that is structurally precluded from regenerating itself with a sense of community, try as it might. This "hyper-secular" society must therefore bleed dry those human impulses that have as their aim the reinvention of community. This reinvention depends on memory. Accordingly, the essence of hyper-secular society is the destruction of memory.

Michel Foucault (1973) has argued that "humanity" is an invention of the modern West. Thus we find in this same West, which however we have yet to define, a century of crisis rhetoric: humanity in the West is in crisis, ergo, "humanity" is in crisis.[4] What is this crisis? I will argue that it is the near-complete destruction of memory, a destruction that has its roots in modernity. This may sound like the

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beginnings of a "conservative" argument. Rest assured that, in conventional terms, this is not the case (this is not another "back to Burke" critique of modernity). But the question of terms is ever-present: this *is* an argument about "conservation." There may be a form of "conservatism" that appears radical in its depth. I share some sympathy for this possibility, which I find best exemplified in ordinary people who wonder at how the fabric of life can be torn up, not rewoven, for seemingly no good reason. The fabric of life can be rewoven only in appreciation of its value, but there is no appreciation without memory.[5] The damage that has been done to memory has worked through the damage of the material of memory: language and appreciation or care. The West possesses the means to make this "brain damage" worldwide, and is certainly making full use of these means. Here the dissemination of meaning is the key issue.

Are there no examples of community in the West? My argument will be that there are examples; there are community structures to be found in the *margins* of the West. One very important example would be the Christian base communities in Latin America that have encouraged and been encouraged by liberation theology. But it is very important that we grasp what is exemplified by such examples.

Repositories of memory are of course not enough in and of themselves: there is the "archive," and then there is the *opening* of the archive. This opening is necessary both for the sense of "textuality" that is central to Derrida's work, and to the existence of communities as ongoing life projects. Memory, however, is the beginning of community. Perhaps one definition of "society" (*Gesellschaft*) is: "thought" without memory. An alternative formulation might be "speech without writing." I mean these terms in the senses specified in Derrida's earlier work. Speech, that is, that takes itself to be without writing, without the mediations of language, without the atmosphere and alterity of language. (Derrida uses the term, "speech," as emblematic of a supposed immediacy; "writing," in his argot, refers to the continual insinuation of the other, by means of the principle of contextuality. These terms, as they apply to the questions taken up in this study, will be explicated further in due course.) Perhaps speech will never truly exist without writing, and perhaps this truth comprehends the repository of human possibility. This study will be concerned with the proximity of writing, in Derrida's sense of the term: the closeness or distance of humanity from the retrieval of writing. I will argue that the future possibilities for community will be postsecular, *writerly*. The distance between humanity and community may be such that the latter is not *absolutely* irretrievable (which is almost like saying, "Where there's life, there's hope"), but

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still a distance so great that, for all practical purposes, humanity will not be able to reinvent community. This is the danger that looms large at present.[6]

"Postsecular" is also an appropriate term here in the sense that the future possibilities of community cannot consist merely in the retrieval of pre-secular forms of community. The postsecular community for which I will attempt to provide a philosophical ground will be based, in part, on an *appreciation* of the forms of solidarity found in pre-secular communities. Such an appreciation, however, if it is not mediated by the real achievements of modernity—of secular society and Enlightenment—can be, in the postmodern, high-tech world, extremely dangerous.

This distinction, between a possible, postsecular community, and a social entity that is only an amalgam of secular society and pre-secular community, helps show the difference between two twentieth century social experiments that are often taken to be identical by liberal social philosophy. I refer to Hitlerian fascism and Stalinist socialism (though I hesitate to call the former an "experiment"). Nazi Germany is an earlier stage of an emerging techno-capitalist *secular* society, papered over with images of community.[7] These images were undoubtedly very sick, in that their purpose was to negate the universalistic discourse of modern secular society by an appeal to the notion of a specific "community" (in this case the artificial community of "Aryans") as a kind of messianic tribe. (The messianic imagery—German culture as the pinnacle and savior of Western civilization—was also a kind of perverse mirror of and repository for secular universalism.) The more recent "Neo-Conservative Revolution" (Reagan, Thatcher, etc.) represents a later stage of this same secular gambit.[8]

Socialism in the Stalinist mold, on the other hand, represents an attempt to break with modernity with very little appreciation of its achievements. We might give a name to this attempt: "unenlightened socialism."[9]

That these phenomena, the social formations guided by Hitler and Stalin, were very similar in content, and somewhat in form, is a disturbing and formidably troublesome truth. But it is not a truth that either liberal politicians, or liberal social philosophers (even the more enlightened of them, e.g., John Rawls) are particularly well-equipped to analyze.[10]

In creating an unenlightened socialism, Stalin (and to some extent Lenin before him) was relying on the following set of identifications (even if they were not necessarily foregrounded in these terms): modernity=Enlightenment=bourgeois democracy=the discourse of rights=West-

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ern secular society=capitalism. Undoubtedly the paradigmatic conception that guides unenlightened socialists is the view that all but the last of these terms essentially add up to the last, capitalism—or that all the other terms besides capitalism are simply the "trappings" of capitalism. Because capitalism must be done away with (on this point I readily agree), these other ideas and institutions must be done away with as well—so the Stalinist argument goes. Everything hinges, however, on whether the terms under question are linked by relations of identity or relations of affinity or association. Clearly, there can be no argument, other than one that is entirely formal and ahistorical, that the association of, say, democracy, rights discourse, and capitalism is *no more than* an "association." To a great extent these three institutions are identified with one another, even if they are by no means identical. What is the form and *material* of this identification? This will be a central question in this study, because a postsecular socialism and the postsecular community can only be approached in terms that are deeply historical, terms informed by their historicality and historical debts—debts that are always collected.

If the social world is to be not only interpreted, but reconfigured as well, the material of historical identifications must be attended to. I will argue that this will mean an emphasis, in theory and practice, on forms of signification, especially language. Two questions will loom large in the background of this study: 1) What are the predominant forms of signification of modernity and postmodern secular society? 2) What *could* be the forms of signification of an emerging postsecular community? Though there are many theorists and many practical experiments that contribute to answering these questions, I propose that the work of Jacques Derrida provides the best staging ground for their full articulation.

The letter and the spirit

In two very important and closely-related respects the Soviet Union under Stalin was *not* a non-secular community. These two respects concern the questions of science and language (and, as part of the latter, the question of literature). Like Western societies that had passed through the periods of Enlightenment and modernity, the Soviet leadership was intoxicated with science, conceived as the only pathway to everything that could legitimately be called knowledge and truth. And, as in Western societies, the Soviet leadership sponsored a concomitant denigration of all other possible pathways to knowledge,

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truth, and understanding. The form of this denigration parallels the similar privileging of "reason" over "rhetoric" in Plato, and the privileging of autonomy over heteronomy in Descartes and Kant. This positivistic repression of language is perhaps *the* major theme in Derrida's work. In the name of a radical empiricism, "science," as the royal road to knowledge, rules out the sentential in the name of a language of "propositions" that are purportedly not subject to material taint. People in and of the world, who participate in the economy of the letter, are subject to this material taint (in Chapter 5 I call it "contamination"). This is not to speak in the name of some "folk wisdom" that is "deeper" than "modern science." If what is meant by "science" is "making our ideas clear" (Peirce), then science must be measured by the faith it keeps to the entire range of human expressions and experiences. The materiality of those experiences, and the materiality of the language that discloses them, must not be sacrificed to the supposed purity of the propositional "spirit."

The privileging of the "spirit" over the "letter," which is another form of the privileging of speech over writing, is an essential Enlightenment gesture, and it is also a deeply imbedded part of the Marxism fashioned by Lenin and Stalin.[11] In order to carry through the Bolshevik consolidation of power, Lenin had to make, in Gramsci's well-known phrase, "a revolution against *Capital*." In this revolutionary struggle, Lenin (e.g., 1967) on many occasions appealed to the "spirit rather than the letter" of Marxism. This is a well-known metaphor, of course, dating at least back to its invocation by Paul in the New Testament ("The letter kills, but the spirit gives life"). Many important social endeavors (some progressive, some reactionary) have been empowered by this metaphor, all the while suppressing the irony that the suppression of the letter is founded on the letter, in this case metaphor. That is, as Nietzsche pointed out, words are taken for concepts, and thereby removed to a supposedly higher ontological status, a position from which spirit (the concept) can regulate the letter (the material word). This transposition of metaphors with concepts is called "white mythology" by Derrida (1982, 207–71). In hyper-secular society, white mythology has the effect of practically suppressing irony altogether. The cost of empowerment through the privileging of "spirit" has in some ways been too high. Often the metaphor is deployed as a means of "breaking tradition's chains" (to use another Enlightenment metaphor that also resurfaces in the "Internationale").[12] This strategic move undoubtedly has its justifications, but it can also tend to break the chain of memory, and therefore the possibility of the reconfiguration of community. These goals are part and parcel of secularism, and I will

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even argue that they are necessary to some extent in the longer-term project of creating a postsecular community. But how do we square these strategies and goals with Marx, Lenin, and even Stalin, who were supposedly interested in creating a post-bourgeois world?

The practical scene of Lenin's deployment of the metaphor was set by the need to catch up with the practice of the Russian situation, which had outrun Marxist theory. (Lenin stressed, correctly I think, the international dimension of the Russian situation.) Marx always stressed the primacy of practice, such that if practice seems to outrun theory, then it is theory, not practice, that has to catch up. There is a tendency in this formulation, however, to "spiritualize" practice: the attributes traditionally ascribed to speech, such as immediacy, transparency, inner assurance, and autonomy, are inscribed in practice. This positivistic gesture (and programs founded upon it) is what severs people from the basis of community, namely history and memory. Indeed, "people" are formed in the image of this gesture and this severance.

The United States represents the furthest travels of this severance, this hyper-secularism. Memory and history mean close to nothing in this setting, where plans are made to sacrifice all humanity for a certain "spirit." From Lenin to the U.S. is perhaps a long way, but from the present-day Soviet Union to the U.S. is not so far. Perhaps the same "spirit," which Lenin did not entirely escape (though at least he was trying to, after a fashion—which is a very important distinction; and it is not clear whether anyone or anything can entirely escape this "spirit," for such "escape" would probably also condemn political activity to irrelevance), motivates the matrix which both present-day superpowers belong to.

Against the spirit that motivates the existing political matrix, this study will work toward understanding the power that is inscribed in the letter: *grammatology*, as it were, as a social program. By "grammatology," I take it that Derrida means the rigorous pursuit of the question of writing and the letter, through its disruptions of the concept-metaphors that are enframed (Heidegger's term) in the name of science. Keeping in mind the apocalyptic and concretely political concerns that have been discussed thus far, the more technical side of the problems and possibilities involved in this project can now be outlined.

Elements of a Derridean social theory

Derrida's work has been broadly influential in literary criticism and philosophy. This influence is just beginning to be felt, however, in social theory. My purpose in this study is to articulate a social theory

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that uses Derrida's work as its methodological basis, and to demonstrate why such a social theory is needed. Derrida is not a social theorist, at least in the common understanding of the term, but his work does have profound implications for social theory, in two ways. First, this work can be deployed as the basis of a critique of contemporary social theories, especially those that are largely secular and modern in orientation. Second, on the other side of this critique, Derrida's writing can form the basis for a social theory uniquely suited to the postmodern social situation.

In each of these two stages of critique and possibility, which are in fact inseparable, Derrida's philosophy is the key to working through three complexes of problems. These are: first and foremost, problems concerning the mediations of social interaction—in particular, the interplay of structures in which meaning is generated and the larger social field that is shaped and generated by the complex of mediation/interaction/signification; second, problems concerning the nature of subjectivity, and the relation of subjectivity to human agency and responsibility; and third, problems of social relations (their configurations and possible reconfigurations), intersubjectivity, and history.

These issues, of course, are central to a large and diverse group of social theories; that is why I take them to be the issues that "yet another" social theory has to deal with. Everything hinges, however, on what sort of matrix informs the elaboration of these issues, and what sort of line leads out of this arrangement to a new theory.

Although this discussion began with some apocalyptic statements, and although the possibilities that I hope to ground in this study are indeed radical, it has already been announced that the "line" leading to a new matrix cannot go in the direction of apocalypticism, of either a Heideggerian or a Marxist sort. The way out of the current set of social predicaments can be described as the movement from secular, positivistic society to a new, postsecular conception and instantiation of community. The means for achieving this community must be in keeping with the goal. The letter that has been written one way must now be written another way. Humanity, in order to survive, must break with "society" in many important respects, but it must mediate this break through a rewriting of the social matrix, and not through an attempted leap to the spirit. For such a "leap" would run counter to the project of the reinvention of memory. The seeming moderation and conservatism of these last few statements must itself be mediated through a deeper sense of "memory," as not simply "about the past" but rather just as much about what Derrida (1989a) calls the "advent and adventure" of the future.

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With Derrida's work serving as a philosophical "ground" a theory can be developed that addresses what I take to be the central problems of the contemporary social matrix. The term "ground" must be deployed with some suspicion, of course. Much of the work of this study will be taken up with the task of marking out the strategy by which the terms of social theory can be both placed "under erasure" and yet still deployed in rearticulated senses. I do believe, however, that this theory can be developed entirely out of elements taken from Derrida's text. This point is stressed in connection with two concerns.

First, my view is that Derrida's work is rigorous and argumentative and, even though it is a debatable proposition whether Derrida's work forms a "system," it is certainly "systematic" in many respects. Even though Derrida at the same time undermines systems and teases out the limits of reason (by pursuing reason to its limits, I hasten to add), it is not the wild relativism portrayed in some hasty caricatures.[13]

Second, a word or two should be said concerning Marxism. Although this study engages with Marxism especially (as opposed, that is, to liberalism or other broad categories in traditional political philosophy), this engagement is not meant as an across-the-board encounter between Derrida and Marxism.

I do not consider this study, however, to be pitched in a "post-Marxist" direction, at least not in the fashionable sense associated with a kind of euphoric or cynical postmodernism that I will criticize in Chapter 2. There is the basis in Derrida for a kind of historical materialism,[14] though one that takes as its first task the "materialization of the signifier." The notion of "marginal historical subjects" that I will outline has a more than coincidental resemblance to a certain reading of Marx's notion of the proletariat (elaborated in Chapter 4). Concerning the question of the "postmodern," a notion of historical disjuncture that owes something to Marx and Lenin is not entirely out of place. The Derridean strategy of reading against the grain might be seen as a form of immanent critique based on the materiality of the signifier. And, of course, both Marx and Derrida are well-known as readers of Hegel. Marx, then, will hardly be absent from the elements outlined here; but then, I do not think that Marx is absent from either Derrida's text or from the postmodern situation that a Derridean social theory must address.

Derrida did in fact spell out some elements of his own approach to Marxism in a well-known interview:

> . . . [W]e cannot consider Marx's, Engels's, or Lenin's texts as completely finished elaborations that are simply to be "applied" to the current situation. In saying this, I am not advocating

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> anything contrary to "Marxism," I am convinced of it. These texts are not to be read according to a hermeneutical or exegetical method which would seek out a finished signified beneath a textual surface. Reading is transformational. . . . But this transformation cannot be executed however one wishes. It requires protocols of reading. Why not say it bluntly: I have not yet found any that satisfy me.
>
> No more than I have dealt with Saussure's text, or Freud's, or any other, as homogeneous volumes (the motif of homogeneity, the theological motif *par excellence,* is decidedly the one to be destroyed), I do not find the texts of Marx, Engels, or Lenin homogenous critiques. In their relationship to Hegel, for example. And the manner in which they themselves reflected and formulated the differentiated or contradictory structure of their relationship to Hegel has not seemed to me, correctly or incorrectly, sufficient. Thus I will have to analyze what I consider a heterogeneity, conceptualizing both its necessity and the rules for deciphering it; and do so by taking into account the decisive progress simultaneously accomplished by Althusser and those following him. All this poses many questions, and today I could tell you nothing not already legible in the lacunae or notes to which you alluded, at least for anyone who wishes to pursue their consequences. Above all they refer to the general economy whose traits I attempted to outline based on a reading of Bataille. It follows that if, and in the extent to which, *matter* in this general economy designates, as you said, radical alterity (I will specify: in relation to philosophical oppositions), then what I write can be considered "materialist." (Derrida 1981b, 63–64)

In marking features of a relationship between his own project and Marxism's, Derrida has set out a program for a philosophy and a social theory that, while never entirely distant from Marxism, does not at every point need to concern itself with a Marx who stands over its shoulder, keeping guard.[15]

At the same time, then, something more needs to be said about what it means for this study to be "Derridean." Though the sense of this term is best articulated in terms of the elements of Derrida's work and their specific relations to central social theoretical questions, there is also a sense in which it is not "organic" enough simply to affirm some purported homologies between passages from Derrida's text and these questions. There has to be a broader sense in which the whole approach

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that Derrida brings to philosophy is brought now to social theory. I have aimed to capture that sense even when it takes the study away from a more exegetical approach. With these concerns and provisos in mind, we may turn to the particular matrix in which the aforementioned elements may be arranged.

A specifically Derridean social theory must necessarily take problems of language and signification as central to understanding first subjectivity, and then social relations in their historical setting. Derrida stresses that language functions on the basis of a "system of differences" that, in principle, can unfold indefinitely. This claim can be understood as in fact nothing more than the pursuit of the programs of Frege and (especially) Saussure to their logical conclusions. Each claimed that a word only has meaning within a linguistic context. For Saussure, a word means what it means by virtue of its distinguishability from other words—its difference. The main thing that Derrida has added to this understanding is the notion that this process of differentiation is potentially endless. (Derrida has, however, a far richer understanding of what it means for a word to "differ" from other words.[16]) But this is also to claim that there is no "final" context, which claim is a particular form of anti-foundationalism. This anti-foundationalism would have very significant practical consequences, if it turns out that there is a basic relation among language, subjectivity, and social relations.

There are many diverse arguments concerning the existence of a basic relation between language and subjectivity.[17] The position I take on this question will perhaps seem extreme, though it has had its proponents (again, a diverse group): subjectivity is an *effect* of language.[18] I am less interested in pursuing this argument at great length than I am in drawing the implications that must necessarily follow if the language from which subjectivity emerges is itself not fully a "ground" in the traditional sense. (I am relieved of the former responsibility by the fact that others have already engaged in this pursuit.) Language may be supporting subjectivity, but what is supporting language?

The further ramifications of this question for social relations are clear: if subjectivity is not moored to a secure ground, then social relations would tend to be, if anything, on even less secure ground. If such conclusions were indeed the limit of a "postmodern" approach (using the term now in the loose sense popularized by Richard Rorty, in which anti-foundationalism, of whatever sort, is equated with a postmodern approach to theory), then there would be no place for social theory (or even for morality), since there would be little more than a purely existential basis for fundamental notions such as responsibility and agency. As Thomas McCarthy (an advocate of the linguistic turn in social theory, but a critic of Derridean approaches) puts it,

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> . . . if the subject is desublimated, can we really expect much more from general social "theory" than a historicist contemplation of the variety of forms of life in the *musee imaginaire* of the past; or a hermeneutic dialogue with other cultures and epochs about the common concerns of human life; or perhaps, a genealogical unmasking of any pretense to universal validity? (McCarthy 1984, viii–ix)

In other words, social theory seems in deep trouble without a grounding notion of agency or subjectivity. McCarthy, following Habermas, argues that such a notion, which cannot be grounded in a way that is intellectually defensible, is actually what has gotten social theories (and their attendant social programs) into such hot water as modernity unravels. So far so good. The Habermasians, however, argue further that an approach to language that admits of no final context cannot serve to refound a linguistically-grounded subject. On this point I disagree, at least in the case of Derrida. Much more can be argued for than mere indeterminacy on the basis of Derrida's approach to language.[19] In particular, there are two ramifications of that approach that are of prime importance for a Derridean social theory.

First, even if language is considered as an always unfolding system of mediations, the social character of language ensures that subjectivity will also have a social character. Much more will be said on that social character, and its historical dimension, in the course of this study. On the basis of understanding that subjectivity in general is rooted in language, we may assert further that the social character of language grounds the view that intersubjectivity is prior to subjectivity in the order of explanation. Already, then, there is the basis for claiming that subjectivity exists in a social matrix, and that, regardless of whether this matrix is itself "ultimately" grounded (in a foundational sense), the expressions of individual agents have significance at least as far as this matrix is concerned. Though the effects of indeterminacy and underdetermination of meaning will have to be taken into account, there is the basis for a kind of social theory, though not a theory that claims to be foundational (quite the contrary). Derrida's arguments concerning the relation of language to subjectivity, which are especially developed in *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), are compelling. However, it may be safely admitted that, if the entire thrust of these arguments was geared only toward showing the necessity for practicing social theory in the pragmatic mode, then there would already be a sufficient basis in quite a few other philosophers for moving ahead with this project. Among these would be the American pragmatists (especially Mead and

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Dewey),[20] the later Wittgenstein, and the more naturalistic side of Marx. But there is another side to Derrida's approach to language that, while not necessarily detracting from this pragmatic mode (and in fact that mode will be very important in developing postmodern social theory), certainly augments that mode in a way not typical of (indeed, uncomfortable for) social theory in the pragmatic mode.

Second, then, let us turn to Derrida's problematic of "the other." Given that this problematic is found in several different forms throughout the European philosophical tradition from Hegel to Heidegger and beyond,[21] it is important that Derrida's particular contribution to the notion be attended to. Derrida's problematic is closely associated with the fact, mentioned earlier, that there is no "ultimate context." Our participation in the world through particular systems of signification is what makes subjects feel and think that there *is* such a context, but this is a kind of metaphysical illusion. Our "participation" is indeed formed in its very essence through the unfolding of language, of the material letter. In this unfolding process of the creation of participation (what Heidegger calls "disclosedness") the notion of language as a "medium" begins to break down, along with the dichotomy of subject and object that supports this notion.[22] When language is understood as the unfolding of differance,[23] we see that, in both theory and practice, the "ultimate context" is simply a horizon that recedes as we approach it. There is always the infinite "beyond" or "other." As Derrida argues in a number of studies, including *of Grammatology* and the essay, "*Differance*," this beyond is an "outside" that is also an "inside." (The inwardness of this alterity is evidenced in the movement of what Derrida calls the "trace," a point to which we will return at length.) The effect of this always-receding context is two-fold and even paradoxical: the "other" makes language *impossible,* and yet it is the "other" that "calls" us to language by continually confronting the emergent subject with possibilities. The "impossibility" of language, as a foundational enterprise in which meaning is generated in a stable process, is also, then, its possibility.[24] These categories, possibility and impossibility, are essential to this study.

The ramifications of this problematic for a Derridean social theory are encapsulated in the following set of claims, which can be set out on the basis of the framework now outlined. First, that subjectivity, in addition to having its ground in intersubjectivity, is capable of hearing and responding to the call of the "other." This I take to be the basis of responsibility, first of all social responsibility. Second, responding to this "call" is not, for Derrida, a quasi-mystical matter—as it seems to be for Heidegger. Rather, and third, it is a question of pursuing systems of

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signification into their "margins," to their limits, to the point where their systematicity begins to break down.[25] One way to describe this Derridean pursuit is the formulation, "reading against the grain," which would figure prominently in any discussion of history and social relations undertaken in consideration of the elements outlined here. Fourth, the problematics of (forms of) subjectivity, social relations, responsibility, and history, as reconceived in a specifically Derridean anti-foundational mode, can be distinguished from the notions that go by these names in other social theories. Fifth, these reconceived notions can be used to read against the grain of received history, to reveal a different history that will be seen to have a different trajectory than the mainstream (as opposed to the margins) of history. By "received history" I mean history that has been both created and reported from the perspective of foundational notions of subjectivity and responsibility. By a different trajectory, I mean a plurality of trajectories, *without* "outcomes." (On this latter question more will be said in the next section.) Finally, the possibility of reading against the grain will be seen as the beginning of a new practice of signification that could ground the practice of this "different history."

Wittgenstein argued for a similar possibility, namely that a new politics would require a new language—and that a new language would require a new, fundamentally different attitude toward language.[26] Where this possibility was only glimpsed by Wittgenstein (it was one of his many undeveloped insights), Derrida's work lays the foundation for the systematic justification and articulation of this possibility.[27] And, of course, it is a possibility that Derrida *practices* in his texts. While the framework just set out is in evidence in a number of Derrida's explicitly "political" writings (for instance, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," "Racism's Last Word," "The Ends of Man," etc.), it has not been fully elaborated in a social theoretical way. That is the task to which I hope this study will contribute.

Beyond the fleshing out of such an outline, a Derridean social theory must take up a number of specific problems, which I will now articulate. There is no need to claim that there is one and only one way of proceeding once we have a basic framework, but I would claim that these problems are indeed central to understanding and acting responsibly in postmodern society.

The first task in this regard is to contextualize the Derridean framework in terms of an account of the social world that it must confront. This contextualization arises from the conviction that any convincing theory of contemporary social relations must be grounded in an understanding of the nature of *contemporary* society. Despite the

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obviousness of this claim—which is virtually no more than a truism—it is not clear that most contemporary social theories are formulated in light of it. Ironic as it may seem, this major proviso is in many cases not even met in social commentaries that claim to be "postmodern." It is as though a style of theory that is called "postmodern" can be brought to bear on social questions that are conceived as essentially atemporal. My intuition, on the contrary, is that it is because society has entered a period, or phase, or *something* (perhaps something "out of phase," something that escapes the Hegelian sense of periodization) that is not simply "modern," but certainly *after* modernity, that a style of theorizing called "postmodern" is appropriate. In attempting to come to grips with this only half-named "something," this "postmodernity," we should both take Hegel at his word, and read against the grain of that word. That is, from Hegel we inherit both the notion of periodization that has led to the formulation of the idea of "postmodernity," and the notion of a "completion of history" that has seemingly not occurred. The understanding of postmodernity that will be developed in this study is of a "period" in which the conditions for the completion of history (in Hegel's sense) are present, but the end of history is forestalled, perhaps permanently. The sense of this impasse is captured in several of Derrida's essays, including "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without reserve," and in a more atmospheric form in *Glas*. It remains for social theory to demonstrate how this *impasse*, which contains among its chief characteristics the suspension of received notions of subjectivity, responsibility, and praxis, is concretely the situation of contemporary society. (I am taking over this notion of "impasse" from Fredric Jameson's influential essay on postmodernism; see 1984.) What is required, then, is a "postmodern cartography." (A significant distinction can be drawn between this type of social theory, which is "postmodern" because it aims at such a cartography, and the type that claims to be "postmodern" for other reasons—not that this would in all cases be a hard and fast distinction.) This task is taken up in Chapter 2: "History past its end: outline for a postmodern cartography, taking Hegel at his word."

Within this historical contextualization (which is indeed the context of an historical impasse), the thematics of language, intersubjectivity, and responsibility can be taken up anew, in order to argue that there is a way out of the impasse. As part of that argument, however, Derridean notions of language, subjectivity, and responsibility must confront the more typical notions that are found in "modern" social theories. As a key example here, I consider the work of Jürgen Habermas. His social theory is exemplary in its comprehensiveness.[28] Furthermore, Habermas

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also takes the problem of language as central to the development of a contemporary social theory—and he is very attentive to what has already been marked out as the "pragmatic mode." However, Derrida and Habermas end up in two very different places in pursuit of that mode. The comparison of the two thinkers has been undertaken thus far in piecemeal fashion, in part because Derrida is not, conventionally speaking, a social theorist. What needs to be shown is that a comprehensive social theory that takes a Derridean approach to language as its methodological basis would be a fit competitor to Habermas's theory. Please be aware, reader, that there is a great deal of respect for Habermas, whom I regard as the most important social theorist writing today, embodied in this last claim—I see Habermas's theory as the one that must necessarily be taken on (and I mean these last two words in a double-edged sense).

The whole question of postmodern social theory enters in again, in two respects. First, in that Habermas, despite his pragmatic concerns, is foundational in ways to which a Derridean analysis can be specifically sensitive (here Derrida's analysis of speech act theory, carried out in the essays "Signature Event Context" and "Limited Inc" [see Derrida 1988] is very important, as this kind of language philosophy motivates Habermas's own arguments concerning communication). Second, in that Habermas is concerned to press forward "the unfinished project of modernity." At the center of that program is the rationalist paradigm that Habermas takes over from Rousseau and Kant. Here again, Derrida is especially important because, unlike some "postmodernists," he does not simply throw the rationalist "baby" out with the bathwater (to borrow an expression from Habermas). Derrida is concerned to read both with and against the grain of this Enlightenment heritage: he does not simply want to turn Reason, History, the Subject, etc., on their heads (despite what Habermas seems to think), he wants to understand how their marginal aspects both problematize and interact with, even to the point of making possible, their "central" aspects.

In this regard a useful detour can be made through the work of Donald Davidson, which provides a bridge away from the philosophy of language found in Habermas, and toward Derrida's approach to language. There are several reasons why such an engagement is practical. First, Davidson provides, in a way that is not always so clear (or, at any rate, accessible) in Derrida's work, a sense of what it means for language to have a non-foundational structure. Like Derrida, Davidson has a "minimal" conception of the sign. That is, both Derrida and Davidson take it that there is nothing essential to the sign other than its

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repeatability.[29] Second, Habermas has admirably attempted to break out of the analytic/continental antinomy in philosophy by engaging with analytical philosophy of language. This engagement is important for both philosophical and political (even if of a merely "institutional" sort) reasons. Habermas would have been better served, however, by a truth-conditional theory of meaning, such as Davidson's, than by a speech act theory, which actually has as a consequence the very relativism that Habermas wants very much to avoid. Third, Davidson's theory, which also has a pragmatic dimension (and is anti-foundationalist) does not recognize, at least explicitly, the problematics of otherness that I discussed earlier.[30] So that (fourth) a critique of this pragmatic alternative to Habermas's philosophy of language serves as a further basis for showing why the problematic of otherness is essential to understanding language, subjectivity, and responsibility. Finally, this comparison will also demonstrate that there are indeed different forms of anti-foundationalism, and why it is a matter of practical importance to distinguish among them. Only an anti-foundationalism of the sort that Derrida offers can allow us to gain access to the margins of history. All of these questions are taken up at length in Chapter 3: "What is at the heart of language? Habermas Davidson, Derrida."

In the midst of the matrix of language, subjectivity, and social relations that will thereby be motivated, a line can be drawn toward more straightforward "political" questions, beginning with: supposing that we do have the basis for exploring the margins of history, what will we find in those margins? Not surprisingly, I will argue that we will find marginal subjects; that is, subjects who have been written out of history, but who are also deeply inscribed in history, and into the very possibility of history, both written and lived. These subjects will be diverse, and the question of letting these others speak will therefore also be a question of radical diversity—but also a question of radical *confluence*. I shall explain. Reading against the grain in Hegel, in what I propose to call a "postmodern cartography," we can consider the Jews as exemplary marginal subjects. Hegel needs and takes what Jewish civilization had already created, namely the very notion of narrative history itself, and the basis for the concept of "civic altruism," which is found in the Jewish understanding that the relation between the human person and God is only actual insomuch as it is enacted in relationships in the human community.[31] What Hegel leaves behind are the Jews themselves. He also leaves behind the Jewish problematic of otherness, in which the Absolute can never be seen or even named—and indeed, the Absolute is always receding (the incarnation of God is always that which *will* come). This problematic is very much in evidence in Derrida

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(e.g., his essays, "Shibboleth," "Des Tours de Babel," and "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas"). This simultaneous presence and absence of the Jews in Hegel can be taken as a model for reading other margins of history. On the basis of this reading, my further argument would be that these different margins, which include women, people of color, the poor, and other outcasts of history, are not reducible to one another, even if, in terms of a Derridean reading strategy, these outcasts conform to a certain model of marginality. The irreducibility of these marginalities has as a consequence the notion that a politics of the margins must depend on the possibility of confluence based on the model of marginality, rather than on a monolithic politics based on reducibility to a single, shared condition of life (as in some readings of Marx's notion of the proletariat). What unites these outcasts is, after all, their difference. The articulation of this radical diversity/radical confluence model will amount, in practical terms, to a philosophy of the new social movements. Chapter 4 articulates this philosophy, and is called, obviously enough, "Radical diversity/radical confluence."

Finally, then, we must ask what sorts of political engagements and solutions are made possible by this model. Uppermost among my concerns is the question of whether community is possible in postmodern society. This is the subject of the fifth and final chapter: "This unnameable community." The question of community can only be raised in the skeptical mode. That is, it cannot be assumed from the start that community is possible, nor can the analysis proceed on the basis of such an assumption.

Four possibilities can be raised concerning the question of community. I will outline these here, so that their attendant dangers and hopes can play a guiding role in the work of the first four chapters. Then the possibilities will be substantiated in the fifth chapter. First, there is the possibility that community is no longer possible at all, that all the social conditions that have made community possible in the past are now irreparably shattered. This is a possibility that has to be very seriously considered—no further possibilities can be considered apart from it. Second, perhaps some sort of community is possible in postmodernity itself. In setting out this possibility the responsibility of showing what sort of postmodern community is possible is incurred. Third, perhaps community will be possible again only after the impasse of postmodernity is broken. Here we incur the necessity of showing that the time after postmodernity[32] will in some sense be like the time before (and it will of course be an important question whether this would be a desirable thing). Fourth and finally, perhaps community will be possible only

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after the impasse of postmodernity is broken, *and* after the notion and the reality of community is recreated.

The outline that I have presented thus far points toward the fourth possibility; now it will be up to the rest of this book to clearly articulate a line toward this radical communitarian vision. The new community will be the community of radical diversity and radical confluence. This community will emerge by breaking the impasse of postmodernity and, in an interactive sense, the impasse of postmodernity will only be broken by the emergence of this community. I should clarify what I mean by the words "will" and "only" in this last sentence. I mean that either this community will emerge and the impasse of postmodernity will be broken, *or* there *will not* be a future for humanity. The outcome of this disjunctive pair—which consists in a possibility and the very negation of possibility—is far from certain. With the matrix offered here, and the contributions of others who are working in similar veins, however, I hope that we at least have the basis for some creative theoretical and practical contributions to the furtherance of human possibility.

The language of this possibility/the possibility of this language

Many present-day theories of language are careful to associate "language users" with "language communities." That broad category of theories that does not base itself in the notion of such a community can be defined as "language of thought" theories. These are especially associated with the transformational grammar of Noam Chomsky. Though there are many insights in Chomsky's system of ideas and its spinoffs in the philosophy of language (e.g., the work of Jerry Fodor, Stephen Schiffer, Fred Dretske, etc.[33]), and though I admire the political stance taken by Chomsky, this study will not be concerned very much with "language of thought" theories, for reasons that will become more clear in the third chapter. Instead, the focus will be on language theories that are based in "external relations," that is, theories that are based in the philosophy of language of Frege, Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Quine, and a fairly large and broad group of European thinkers (including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Bataille). Perhaps the essential difference between these two broad categories of theories, "internal" and "external," is that the Chomskian theories attempt to locate meanings "in the head" (as Hilary Putnam 1987, 1988, has influentially put it), while non-Chomskian theories take it that meaning is generated through networks that are not specifically grounded in individual interior monologue.[34]

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