**Emancipated Subjects or Linguistic Selves? Political Economy, Postmodernism, and
Communication Studies:**

The Making and Breaking of a Polemic

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Abstract

This thesis investigates a growing tension that has emerged in Communication Studies over the last few decades between those inclined to a political economy approach and those, broadly speaking, more sympathetic to developments in postmodern theory. Presenting the epistemological and theoretical premises of each approach, this thesis defends postmodernism against recent criticisms from political economy. In the process it examines how each discourse differs fundamentally over the categories of emancipation and/or social transformation, as well as on the relationship between knowledge, language and the self. The overall argument of this analysis is that the current rift between political economy and postmodernism not be viewed as a polemic, but rather as an example of a “differend,” or an instance of two incommensurable language games. So conceived, a productive theoretical space is cleared for an understanding of postmodernism that is not subordinate to the realist/materialist discursive assumptions that ground the modern critical discourse of political economy.

Acknowledgments

This thesis marks the culmination of numerous deliberations that I have had over the relationship between political economy and postmodernism. Like the broader question of modernity and postmodernity, this topic opens up into some sinewy theoretical terrain. I am greatly indebted to Paul Attallah whose clear insight, thorough reading, and helpful commentary has been invaluable to the realization of this thesis, and continually provided me with the confidence to engage some of the more complex issues surrounding the topic. I would also like to thank Peter Hodgins and Sheryl Hamilton for their helpful and enthusiastic reading and discussion of this thesis, as well as Ross Eaman for his help and encouragement throughout this process and over the course of my MA. I would like to acknowledge my classmates whose company and support I have enjoyed and appreciated, and also to Carole Craswell for her answers to my numerous questions. Finally, a very big and special thank you to Melanie, and also, to my parents.

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Introduction

Political Economy, Defensive Discourses, and the Increasing Tension with Postmodern Theory

A number of attempts have been made over the last few decades to assert neo-Marxian political economy of communications as an integral and necessary pursuit for the study of media and communication.¹ In keeping with Marxian precedent, these prescriptive texts aim at formulating a discourse of emancipation for the discipline of Communication Studies. As Robert McChesney suggests, the “purpose of [political economy’s] critique is to assist the process of social change both in terms of specific media policies within the context of a capitalist political economy and in terms of assisting broader social change toward a postcapitalist and more democratic society.”² Nicholas Garnham is less humble about the fact that, “[a] social science which cuts its links with [the] rationalist project of human liberation either sinks to the trivial level where mere academic games are played...or it joins the ranks of those who, throughout history, have perfected and wielded the technologies of domination, whether physical or symbolic, in the service of ruling elites.”³

It is no surprise that the template of the political economy of communications, given its Marxian base, should be aimed at an emancipatory narrative. Emancipation is

¹ Of these, the principal texts in mind are Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, “Introduction: Communication and Capitalism,” in *The Political Economy of the Media, Volume I*, eds. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1997): xiiiv-xviii; Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, “Culture, Communication and Political Economy,” in *Mass Media and Society*, eds. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Edward Arnold, 1991): 15-32; Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal* (London: Sage, 1996).

² Robert W. McChesney, “The Political Economy of Global Communication,” *Capitalism and the Information Age*, eds., Robert McChesney, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review P, 1998), 8.

³ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication* (London: Sage, 1990), 3.

one of the key goals of Marxism as it is of most—perhaps all—Enlightenment discourse. What is curious, however, is the context within which this emancipatory message is presented, or set against, in many of the recent theoretical works by authors of political economy.⁴ There is a *defensive*, even combative tone that runs through much of the literature, exemplified in the quotation from Garnham above. For his part McChesney alludes to the fact that the critique of political economy is meant for those “who have not lost their historical sensibility.”⁵ Again it is perhaps no surprise that Marxian discourses like the political economy of communication should be defensive; after all it sees itself as the auspicious guardian of a critique aimed at the heart of a very vibrant, popular, and growing capitalist economy. However, it is not against the maelstrom of capitalist protagonists that those like Garnham appear defensive but against a smaller, more specified, neighbor within the academy itself: postmodernism, and its closely related cousin poststructuralism. Garnham is quite pointed on the issue, confronted in the very first paragraphs of his 1990 *Capitalism and Communication*:

The disciplinary approach developed in these essays is that of the political economy of communications and culture. In developing that approach I am concerned to oppose three specific tendencies within cultural and media studies. First, *and above all* because it was and still is dominant in the field, that tendency which privileged the text and laid its analytical focus on questions of representation and ideology. This tendency developed out of literary and film studies and carried its textuality into versions of structuralist Marxism and on into postmodernism. It took with it the bacillus of romanticism and its longing to escape from the determining material and social constraints of human life, from what is seen as the alienation of human essence, into a world of unanchored, non-referential signification and the free play of desire.⁶

⁴ Hereafter when I refer simply to political economy I am referring to the neo-Marxian approach to the political economy of communication.

⁵ McChesney, 12.

⁶ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 1-2. Emphasis added.

As Garnham continues he suggests that postmodern studies into the “symbolic” offer nothing more than “cheap research opportunities.” The forcefulness of Garnham’s presentation is apparent, suggesting that these “cheap research opportunities” must in some way threaten the exercise of political economy. Whatever the reasons for his concerns, what is significant is that Garnham is not alone in pursuing the case, or at least sounding the alarm against postmodern developments in communication thought and social theory more broadly. This is also the case with Vincent Mosco who devotes an entire chapter of his 1996 work *The Political Economy of Communication* to “Challenges on the Borders” of political economy, namely cultural studies and policy studies. His concern with cultural studies however is immediately conflated with “post-structuralist...social constructionism [which] turns into a relativism that admits of little, if any, analytical or empirical certainty.”⁷ In other words, Mosco is concerned formally with cultural studies but more deeply with the branches of it that have flirted with poststructuralism and postmodernism.

Ted Magder, writing in a seminal text to establish the foundations of *The New Canadian Political Economy*, is, like Mosco, concerned with such challenges in a more implicit way. Magder’s review of political economy precedents in Canada, beginning with Harold Innis, opens with the notion that culture has not been taken as “seriously” as political economy would allow because of an “unstated assumption that the best approach to contemporary cultural practices lies within semiotics and content analysis, which concentrate on the ideological dimensions of cultural practice and try to uncover its

⁷ Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal* (London: Sage, 1996), 250.

various systems of meaning and representation.”⁸ Magder says nothing explicitly about postmodernism or poststructuralism (unless semiotics can be seen as a postmodern pursuit; it is not by definition *post*structural), but fears over the linguistic turn are implied by his mention that while “text” is an important object of cultural study, political economy gets at the “‘context’ of culture—its economic, political, and social determinants—[that] must also be probed.”⁹

What Magder does not overtly say in his guarded insinuation that analysis of context is more important than text, Naomi Klein does in her recent best seller *No Logo*. Using the analogy of “In-Fighting While the Global House Burned Down” as the title for a small subsection of her work, Klein condemns what she sees as the emphasis on language and representation that made up the “political models in vogue” in the 70s and 80s, namely identity politics, that “trained a generation of activists in the politics of image, not action.”¹⁰ In other words, one can examine media texts, but the real issue that needs to be confronted is how these media texts are a product of economic determinants that are wholly unfair and repressive. In another telling analogy for the divide between text and context with which political economy is concerned, Klein writes: “We were too busy analyzing the pictures being projected on the wall to notice that the wall itself had

⁸ Ted Magder, “Taking Culture Seriously: A Political Economy of Communications,” in *The New Canadian Political Economy*, eds., Wallace Clement and Glen Williams (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1989), 278.

⁹ Magder, 278.

¹⁰ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Toronto: Vintage, 2000), 124. While Naomi Klein is admittedly not a communications theorist nor an academic per se I feel comfortable including her in the general theme of the political economy of communications because *No Logo* is on the one hand, however populist it may be, a political economy text, and on the other has been included as required reading for MA level coursework on political economy offered by Vincent Mosco at Carleton University.

been sold.”¹¹ For both Klein and Magder, therefore, the pertinent issue for communication studies should not be in the study of media messages (a “trivial” task no doubt) but of the material aspects of their production, and this is something that political economy, by definition, takes as its *raison d’être* to trace and examine.

For political economists to suggest that the context is more important to examine than the text is again not surprising and follows from the base/superstructure premise that is an *a priori* for many, if not all, Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches to critical study of communications. Why then is it the case that numerous accounts of the political economy of communications published in recent years have felt the need to address so guardedly the topic of postmodernism and poststructuralism, or more derivatively the issue of text to context, as an integral problematic before proceeding to outline their otherwise straightforward approach to the study of communications? It is this basic question—which may perhaps be stated simply as “why is political economy so defensive about its mission and analytical pursuits with respect to postmodernism?”—that will guide the contours of the present thesis. More broadly, the overall goal of this thesis is to highlight a growing tension that has emerged in Communication Studies over the last few decades between those inclined to a political economy approach and those, broadly speaking, more sympathetic to recent developments in postmodern theory. A major goal of this thesis is to chart the pertinent issues in this polemic as these have been articulated within and without the literature of political economy. Having said that, this thesis will make no claims to being able to solve or reconcile the problems that generally divide political economy and postmodernism, but it will seek to place the issues within a context of understanding that might illuminate them more broadly toward this end. Throughout

¹¹ Klein, 124.

the analysis, however, an attempt will be made to work through many of these issues so as to counter and dismantle the surface treatment of postmodernism often given by political economists and neo-Marxian critics. But this already skips to a major goal of the research below before having introduced the antagonist that has and seems to be causing so much aggravation for political economy, namely, postmodernism. What is it about a postmodern approach to social theory that seems so threatening to many, not the least for the political economy of communications? What does postmodernism say? It is with this very broad question that this investigation into a growing tension between these two discourses of Communications Studies will begin.

Answering the question, “What does postmodernism say?” Chapter One aims to develop a historical discourse for postmodernism that positions it as both a sociohistorical paradigm as well as a series of theoretical concerns. The latter will be presented through an assessment of precedents to postmodern thinking as they appear in the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard. This chapter will look beyond these thinkers, however, and assess early precedents to the postmodern in the work of Arnold Toynbee and C. Wright Mills who saw the “post-Modern Age” as a fundamental sociological shift with potentially apocalyptic consequences. The main characterization of postmodernism will be that of a loss of faith, but a loss of faith with a rather theoretically and sociologically solid foundation (ironically enough) that is often overlooked or discounted in political economic accounts of the paradigm.

In effect, Chapter One can be read as both an introduction to postmodern ideas that will be recounted throughout the analysis, or as a stand-alone chapter. As concerns the latter, there are many facets and ideas contained in the first chapter that will not be

returned to. The work of Foucault and Derrida are exemplary in this regard. But running predominantly through the course of Chapter One is a figure who will be returned to throughout the thesis and especially in Chapter Five, Jean-Francois Lyotard. In fact, a subtext to this entire thesis is to conduct a thorough reading and engagement with Lyotard's seminal 1979 text *The Postmodern Condition* and the model of language games contained within it. Chapter One more than covers the grounds through which to make a solid and contextual introduction to Lyotard, who will be the guiding postmodern protagonist throughout the thesis.

Chapters Two, Three and Four will assess the political economy of communication and what it has to say about the study of communication and culture and the positing of a discourse aimed at emancipation. Emphasis will be placed on the idea that political economy is characterized by its reassertion of faith in modern thought practices against the non-believers of postmodernism. To this end each of these chapters will take on a different facet of "What political economy says?" Chapter Two will focus on the epistemological premises that guide political economy as outlined by its principal practitioners. Chapter Three will examine a particular premise for political economy in which it defines itself against other analytical templates for which it is not. The argument will be made that through this premise political economy pertains to encompass postmodern and "revisionist" challenges by pertaining to incorporate such challenges into its "dynamic" epistemological premise of the "social totality," outlined in Chapter Two. Chapter Four will examine specifically what political economy has to say about postmodernism. Using a comparative approach between Mosco's criticism of postmodernism and Lyotard's promotion of it, it will be argued that political economy is

not a more encompassing alternative to postmodern approaches, rather, each template has very different aims, premises and goals. As such, it is understandable that political economy should see postmodernism as a threat, but it is not viable to present this threat as an unmitigated and irrational nihilism—the way in which many political economists do vilify the program as witnessed in Chapter Four.

From this examination and critique of political economy the stage will be set for an encounter between political economy and postmodernism that is the project of Chapter Five. It argues that if postmodernism is ‘accepted on its own terms’ (a criterion elaborated in the first chapter below) it is indeed difficult to reconcile it with a Marxian political economic approach. As such, what will be identified between political economy and postmodernism is an example of a ‘differend’: an instance in which two language games are seen to be incommensurable, and as such, differential paradigms in which no consensus is possible and the rules for the game are irrevocably different. If this is a viable observation, then this fact does much to substantiate what postmodernism says; that is, it validates the idea of incredulity toward metanarratives, as well as the theoretical model of language games that falls on the heels of the dissolution of the metanarrative. A large part of the research in Chapter Five is aimed at presenting a mature and productive understanding of Lyotard’s concept of language games.

Of course, part of this problem with this argument is fundamentally accepting what postmodernism says as being credible. That political economy emphatically rejects this might say more about political economy’s modernist epistemology than it does about postmodernism. The overall sentiment of this thesis is to make the point that it might be time for political economy to change its defensive discharge of postmodernism into a

more thorough engagement with the paradigm. Of course, no argument can be made to logically suggest this alternative to political economy. The best that can be done is postmodernism is given a fair assessment against its current attackers within political economy. Making such an assessment is the goal of the present thesis and its reading of the developing polemic between political economy and postmodernism within the context of Communication Studies.

Chapter One

Incredulity as Loss of Faith: Theoretical Problems of the Postmodern and their Sociological and Historical Justification

I

Introduction

The political economy of communication has the tendency to present the broad terrain of “postmodernism” in a rather disparaging light. The introduction has already outlined that Nicholas Garnham feels postmodernism is another name for a variety of “cheap research opportunities” that have no integral value within communications scholarship, and Chapter Four will be aimed at exemplifying more broadly how political economy represents postmodern thought. Obvious from the fact that the political economy of communication has sought to address the issue of postmodernism in a disparaging light is proof that postmodern theory offers an analytical standpoint at variance with that of political economy. But what is it exactly that postmodernism says which garners hostility from templates like political economy? An answer to the question of what postmodernism says will be the goal of this chapter.

Given that political economy proceeds on the basis of modern categories for thought and the general acceptance of Enlightenment principles it is not surprising that it should have issues with postmodernism.¹ For this very reason it is important to examine postmodernism from terms other than those critically presented by political economy. Setting these terms will be the first goal of this chapter. From this a genesis for postmodernism comes into range that is varied, broad and at times contradictory; less a

¹ Nicholas Garnham lists the terms for these Enlightenment principles in *Capitalism and Communication* (London: Sage, 1990), 3.

specific identifiable movement in social, political and cultural theory, i.e. modernism, and more a general set of skeptical questions with respect to modern thought and its goals; a complex paradigm that is not strictly *against* modernism or the Enlightenment, but is rather implicated intricately with these programs, ostensibly as the “other” to Enlightenment rationality, and has been from as early as the 17th-century according to at least one argument.² In identifying the Janus-face of postmodernism as referring on the one hand to a series of theoretical developments, and on the other to a sociohistorical category—postmodernity—that emerged in the 1950s, the parameters of postmodernism come into view. Postmodernism can best be characterized as a multifaceted set of reactions to the general advance of Western modernity (its accepted philosophies, technologies, social and political arrangements) that has taken place over the past five hundred years. This chapter will illustrate the development of some of the reactions to modernity and postmodernity that have lead to the production of a complex paradigm loosely dubbed postmodernism—a constellation of thought that has emerged as a point of consternation for many in the political economy of communication.

The task of this chapter and the question that it poses obviously enters into some very broad terrain. This is heightened by the consideration that postmodernism applies, as just mentioned, to both a sociohistorical period (sharing with the notion of the post-industrial world) as well as to a set of theoretical concerns reacting to modern thought and the conditions of modernity and postmodernity. In the case of the latter, postmodern ideas like the death of the subject, hybrid and/or fragmented identities and subjectivity,

² For example in the work of John Deely, *New Beginnings: Early Modern Philosophy and Postmodern Thought* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994). Deely’s work will be discussed in a little more detail below.

its emphasis on language, on knowledge and/as power, on destabilizing binary concepts and thinking, on emphasizing the local and particular over the global and the total, on questioning universal reason as the tool for enlightenment and a better world, on emphasizing difference over similarity, have done much to challenge traditional values and emancipatory goals of education and higher learning.³

One of the foremost values destabilized by postmodern theory is the idea that language is a transparent medium for intentional thought processes through which to reach a consensus over issues that can lead the secular modern world toward emancipation. This idea posits that despite differences of opinion, culture and language, there are essential universals that transcend language use and speak to a common humanity. A critique of this general notion of consensus as the goal of communication has been outlined with great consequence by Lyotard in his seminal 1984 (1979 in the French original) text *The Postmodern Condition*. Arguing that philosophy has historically developed as a meta-discipline that “produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status,” Lyotard continues:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace.⁴

³ For a good analysis of how postmodernism presents both a challenge and a number of possibilities for pedagogy see, Harland G. Bloland, “Postmodernism and Higher Education,” *Journal of Higher Education* 66, no. 5 (1995): 521-559.

⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984 [1979]), xxiii-xxiv.

It is following this passage, the last part of which justifies the idea that the postmodern calls into question the Enlightenment narrative of consensual progress, that Lyotard offers what is by now the most famous, guiding principle of postmodernism: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁵ The following reading of the postmodern will argue that one of the foremost principles of postmodernism is *not* that there is no longer any attempt at making metanarratives, or that there are not still legitimizing metanarratives being used or sought after in the world. Rather, the critical idea is simply that in posing alternatives to, or examining problems postmodernism is reluctant to look for sweeping totalizing knowledge or emancipatory solutions; the latter representing conceptual tools that have not owned up to their original Enlightenment promises and were never meant to achieve a very radical sense of democracy in which difference is formidably confronted.⁶

As will be argued over the course of this chapter, therefore, the postmodern, or postmodernism can best be chronicled as a *loss of faith* in the Enlightenment metanarrative of universal reason and consensus as that which will lead to a better world for all. On this a self-proclaimed “non-expert” on the subject, educational theorist Nicholas Burbules, offers an insight of which the current illustration of “what postmodernism says” will build:

⁵ Lyotard, xxiv. Emphasis in original.

⁶ As Charles Lemert suggests, “The modern world promised economic progress, social equality, freedom from want, and peace. In the lack of which, people today rightly wonder why [sic] they face so much poverty, inequality, hunger and disease, civil strife.

Modernism—that is, roughly: the culture of the modern world—had always extended the ethical promise that if people worked hard at legitimate enterprises things would get better, for their children, if not themselves. But now people ask: Is the modern world still a place in which children can find work as a means to worth—or even, if not by work, is it a place that assures them some other means to a decent life?” See, Charles Lemert, *Postmodernism is Not What You Think* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 4.

Nearly everyone...focuses on the idea of metanarratives, our attempts to offer general and encompassing accounts of truth, value, and reality. Postmodernism seems to be about denying the possibility of these, and rejecting as monolithic and hegemonic the ones that the Western traditions have embraced. But the key term in this phrase (in translation at least) is “incredulity”—a fascinating and unsuspecting word. Incredulity is not a denial or rejection or refutation; it is an inability to believe. In this difference I think we see what is most distinctive and penetrating in the postmodern insight.⁷

Developing on the insight of Burbules above, the following chapter will address the question “what the postmodern says” by stipulating that, as a general assumption, it expresses “an inability to believe” in the values usually attributed to modern thought: certainty, consensus, truth-value, totalizing contexts, universal emancipation etc. The complexity of the postmodern paradigm itself, alluded to in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, begins at this general point of non-belief in modern thought and its analytical practices. On this much it is perhaps possible to agree.⁸ But in accepting the

⁷ Nicholas Burbules, “Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophy of Education* [online edition], <<http://faculty.ed.uiuc.edu/burbules/ncb/papers/doubt.html>> (1995): 2.

⁸ This might be a hasty judgement given that for some analysts there are clearly both positive and negative strains of postmodernism. Kellner and Best suggest that the work of Jean Baudrillard represents a negative and pessimistic postmodernism stemming from the failed results of the 1968 student movements in France. On the other hand they identify with more “positive versions of postmodern theory” in the work of Hal Foster and Teresa Ebert. The authors also argue that Marxism is compatible with postmodernism and are critical of those postmodernists who deny the possibility of Marxism after a denial of metanarratives is postulated. It is interesting that Kellner and Best identify Foster as a postmodernist given the latter’s 1985 essay “Against Pluralism” that is seething with anger over theorists who have embraced the linguistic turn and questioned traditional canons of knowledge and emancipation. This example might say something about the type of postmodernism Kellner and Best are after, i.e. one that is still after Marxist goals and could for all intent and purposes be seen as more modernist, or in sympathy with modern thought and modernism, in overall orientation. See, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Guilford, 1997), 3-37; Hal Foster, “Against Pluralism,” in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Boston: Bay P, 1985).

Another version of “positive” postmodernism that accepts Lyotard’s version of it is offered by Steven Seidman who suggests that “A postmodern reconfiguring of

turn to postmodernism there is consequently a problem: defining the terms for a paradigm that takes as its point of departure an inability to believe in the value or the ability to undertake such a venture in analytic certainty.

II

Addressing the "Terms" set by Postmodernism

The goal of this chapter will be to respond to the rather broad question "what does postmodernism say?" In light of what has been stated above there is immediately a factor to consider. A simple answer to this broad question is that postmodernism says many things that cannot necessarily be characterized neatly and categorically. But moreover, from a postmodern perspective it can be seen as counter-productive or untenable to

knowledge is crucial to understand the contemporary west and to preserve a connection between the human studies and its emancipatory aims." Seidman is in sympathy with a general project of emancipation but only one that accepts and attempts to work through postmodern premises such as "the decentering of the subject and the social world." As such, despite its reference to emancipation, Seidman is more representative of the different types of genuinely postmodern discourses that begin only at that point of skepticism over modern thought and its universalist goals. See, Steven Seidman, "Introduction," in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven Seidman (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994), 1-26.

One other point: the shared title of these two texts is revealing. Each plays on different variations of the *turn* toward postmodernism. For Best and Kellner the 'turn' is a subtle one which "signif[ies] novel developments, yet also retain continuities with modernity and modern theory, pointed to shared assumptions, presuppositions, modes of thought and discourse..." (p. 25). On the other hand, Seidman's 'turn' is characterized by "a plurality of approaches and conceptual strategies. All share a certain affinity or kinship with respect to abandoning certain key Enlightenment assumptions. They advocate broadly postfoundational, pragmatic premises and points of departure" (p. 21). Ironically, Best and Kellner enlist Seidman as a "less extreme" form of postmodernism, "a position with which we identify" (p. 25). This would seem to be contradicted somewhat, however, in the sentiment of the quotations above. Nonetheless, accepting that there are many degrees of postmodernism that range from the more or less radical in their reaction to Enlightenment principles, this chapter is assuming that postmodernism is that which in general finds many aspects of modern thought problematic. Beyond this, however, there are many different theoretical developments and goals for postmodern theory.

attempt such a categorization. That is, to neatly qualify and discern the parameters for “postmodernism” is invariably to embark on a “modern” task of understanding; an epistemological pursuit that postmodern theory itself has sought to question on the grounds that it reduces the broader realm of reality and experience to a frustratingly narrow realm of sanctified knowledge. For many, the postmodern *turn* hinges on the maxim of trying to think outside or beyond the frame of modern conceptual analysis; something that is exemplified by poststructuralism’s attempts, for example, to navigate beyond binary thinking.⁹ With these concerns in mind, Krishan Kumar has stipulated that while “It is reasonable to begin with some reasonably clear definition of the post-modern”:

This admittedly is contrary to most post-modernist practice. Post-modernists are loath to define, partly for the reason that ‘it is difficult to avoid giving a modern definition of the postmodern; in fact, virtually any definition of postmodernism will turn out to be modernist’.... Definitions

⁹ This is encapsulated in Jacques Derrida’s concept of “différance” which plays with the idea that the essential meanings for words are located in words themselves. Not only is the meaning for a word to be found in its relationship with the other words in a chain of signification, but this meaning is therefore constantly deferred to the next in an endless play of signification that is never final or fully present. Jean-Luc Nancy describes the concept as “nothing other than the infinite repetition of meaning, which does not consist in its duplication or in a way of always distancing itself to infinity, but which is rather the grounding of meaning, which is to say the absence of a ground, which destines it to be that which it *is*: its own difference.” See, “Elliptical Sense,” in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 39. From Nancy’s description it would seem that extending beyond binary thinking is quite a convoluted and complex task! Lemert offers a simpler definition: “ironic term...used by social theorists affiliated with deconstruction to critique the modernist (and essential) ideal of primary and universal cultural meaning.” Lemert, 65. Ben Agger offers a broader suggestion that Derrida “does not elaborate a single deconstructive method, refusing programmatism in favor of his own exemplary literary, cultural and philosophical readings, it is easy to see that literary deconstruction challenges traditional assumptions about how we read and write.” See Ben Agger, “Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1991): 112.

engage with those qualities of rationality and objectivity that post-modernists are at pains to deny.¹⁰

Ben Agger, in a reading of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard aimed at extending the breadth and scope of critical social theory furthers Kumar's assessment with the stipulation that "The lack of clear definition reflects the purposeful elusiveness of work that can be variously classified as poststructural and/or postmodern: Perhaps the most important hallmark of all this is its aversion to clean positivist definitions and categories."¹¹

John Deely, in a very innovative reading of postmodern thought as finding its historical roots in a continuation of Latin philosophies (namely in the work of John Poinset (1589-1644)) of the 17th-century that rivaled the contemporary 'modern' outlook of Rene Descartes, lends credence to the denial of modernist "objectivity" described by Kumar and Agger. For Deely the basis and goals for "postmodernism" question this effort:

The emphasis on method in modern thought was a natural outgrowth of the focus on the mind's own workings. Postmodern thought has made its own claims to methods, but these are distinctively not "modern" methods concerned with rationality and sensibilia so much as they are methods of exploring what stands in opposition to rationality and the idea of a given at the foundations of experience in sense. *Postmodernism seeks to make a place for yet further aspects of reality* that modernity left in the background, much as modern thought began by seeking to make a place for the aspect of the mind's rational working left in the background by the Latin period. These are the realities of feeling, deception, and illusion, which are every bit as much a piece with our experience as are the "realities" of rational communication and order and sensible intrusions from the environment upon our experience, such as the rising and setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, and the patterns of the stars.¹²

¹⁰ Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 104. The quote within a quote is given by Kumar as being a paraphrase from both J. Nederveen Pieterse's *Emancipations, Modern and Post-Modern* (London: Sage, 1992) and J. Alexander's "Modern, Anti, Post and Neo: How Social Theories Have Tried to Understand the 'New World' of 'Our Time'," *Zeitschrift fur Soziologie* 23, no. 3 (1994): 165-97.

¹¹ Agger, 112.

¹² Deely, *New Beginnings: Early Modern Philosophy and Postmodern Thought*, 16-17. Emphasis in original.

Deely's rather inspirational and poetic (from a postmodern point of view at least) analysis of postmodernism as a counter to the narrowly reductive process of categorical knowledge creation that has held sway in Western thought since the Enlightenment goes some distance in making the case that postmodernism, when not treated trivially, represents a long tradition of thought that sets itself not wholly *against*, but somewhere outside the systematic accomplishments of Enlightenment rationality and its processes. That is, postmodernism, like the Latin philosophies that rivaled Descartes' procedures in his own day, is ostensibly an attempt to think differently about how the relationship between reality, experience and knowledge has come to be defined, and for what purposes, within modern rational thought.¹³ In this much, Deely's (radical?) reading of postmodernism shares with Michael Roberts' recent postulation that "Both critics and supporters of postmodernism miss the most important aspect of the postmodern perspective: the attempt to break out of epistemology and the Kantian conceptual framework."¹⁴

In his recent article "Rethinking the Postmodern Perspective" Roberts analyses postmodern thought from within the context of the ongoing "science wars" in which sociologists of science like Bruno Latour argue that science is itself a value-laden pursuit. Defenders of science argue that it is of course not, and that the sciences secure objective

¹³ Extending this idea, Deely writes: "Hence the central importance for the nascent postmodernism of ideas illusion, irrationality, and deconstruction, even though these fashionable preoccupations are far from the whole story and, in the nature of the case, incapable of adequately defining the contours of what postmodern philosophy must inevitably move toward realizing, namely, an adequate appreciation of the richness of human experience as the ground of all art and science, and the only means we have for testing what is true." Deely, 19-20.

¹⁴ Michael Roberts, "Rethinking the Postmodern Perspective," *Sociological Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2000): 681.

knowledge about the world that is True in and of itself. Roberts sees a significant defect in the arguments of either side of the “science wars” within the context of the United States due to the misnomer that postmodern thought is improperly qualified as a product(ion) of the humanities. Instead, Roberts “rethinks” the postmodern paradigm from the standpoint of French thinkers like Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem and his student Michel Foucault. Each of these thinkers, Roberts argues, has taken fundamentally and primarily to task the Kantian conceptual split between subject and object, “that is, as a problem of the relation between the external, experienced thing and the knowing subject, endowed with categories of thought that exist in a realm separate from the experienced object.”¹⁵ It is not imperative to get into the details of Roberts’ rather complex illustration of the ways in which the “new sciences” in France developed by Bachelard and Canguilhem postulated a new post-epistemological framework that inverted the Cartesian rule to “begin with the simple and end with the complex.”¹⁶ Neither Roberts’ concern with the debate over the “science wars,” nor the thought of Bachelard or Canguilhem will be returned to below (Foucault will, however, reappear). Safe to say that what is important to extract from Roberts’ text is what he envisions as the goal for a post-epistemological postmodern perspective:

Sociologists are in a prime position to take the lead in developing the cutting edge of a new social theory based upon the postmodern framework the [*sic*] recasts the relations between subjects and objects or between what Latour (1999) calls “humans and non-humans.” The postmodern move corrects the modernist mistake of splitting up the world into the human realm of subjects that make meaning and the non-human realm of inanimate objects...Shouldn’t we take the opportunity to develop a richer

¹⁵ Roberts, 687.

¹⁶ Ibid., 688.

understanding of reality, to reconstitute society and nature as the theatre of living beings?¹⁷

The context for Roberts' postmodernism aimed at developing a "richer understanding of reality" is akin to that of Deely's, as well as with the postmodern aversion to definitions and clear-cut objective lines of demarcation for knowledge claims described by Kumar. Each analysis positions postmodernism within a frame of reference suited to what Dennis K. Mumby has labeled a "*discourse of vulnerability*," in which "the postmodern intellectual has given up the 'authority game' as a uniquely positioned arbiter of knowledge claims."¹⁸ A similar sentiment for "Postmodernity" is offered up by Steven Seidman who sees it as "characterized by a loss of certainty and a 'God's eye point of view' in the sphere of knowledge, a loss of a central, organizing principle governing society and a unitary standard of cultural excellence or morality, and a decline in a unitary, coherent self."¹⁹ Mumby, and it is undoubtedly safe to say Seidman, positions this postmodern discourse in relation to a "Modernist project," the terms for which should be now familiar:

The first stream of modernist thought—at least as it has been put into practice in the twentieth century—can be roughly characterized in terms of the positivist appropriation of Cartesian dualism...The foundation of this method is the radical (Cartesian) separation of subject (researcher) and object (of knowledge) and the development of research tools that allow this bifurcation to remain as inviolable as possible (p. 4).

Mumby suggests that in the modernist paradigm of communication studies language is nothing more than a conduit for fully formed concepts, and that this is by and large the

¹⁷ Ibid., 693. The reference is to Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999).

¹⁸ Dennis K. Mumby, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Communication Studies," *Communication Theory* 7, no. 1 (1997): 14.

¹⁹ Seidman, 6.

model for the bulk of “research that has taken place in the social sciences, as well as in communication studies” (p. 4).

In summary therefore, each of these presentations of postmodernism has suggested that it is a paradigm by and large skeptical of classification and the rationalization of the experiential field through which modern thought proceeds in order to gain conceptual understanding and the positing of objective knowledge. Given this, what then are the options for answering the question of what postmodernism says—a question that begs the demand of certainty—if one is also to do justice to an acceptance of postmodernism “on its own terms”?²⁰ This paradox is one that has been described by educational theorist Roger Mourad, Jr. in his 1997 work *Postmodern Philosophical Critique and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Higher Education*. In his analysis of the possible benefits of postmodern and poststructural theory in educational practices²¹ Mourad is careful to distinguish what postmodern thought is not, i.e. simply against all absolutes, or simply nihilistic. One problem in considering postmodernism however, according to Mourad, is created through “the common tendency...to carry modern categories and criteria into the reading of postmodern work and to apply these categories in order to understand it.”²² As such, any credible account of postmodernism aimed at understanding its history and theoretical implications must confront not only the fact that

²⁰ Roger P. Mourad, Jr., *Postmodern Philosophical Critique and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Higher Education* (London: Bergin & Garvey, 1997), 4.

²¹ It is interesting to note that the field of education has been quite active in pursuing many of the problems brought forward by postmodern theory. It might also help to ground the issue of modern thought and the creation of knowledge that has been discussed so far within a practical context: i.e. the relativity of knowledge and differences in cultural understanding that are often encountered in a class room or pedagogical setting.

²² Mourad, 4.

it is a “slippery term that has had a complicated conceptual development,”²³ but also the seemingly unreasonable suggestion that this slipperiness is a place in which postmodernism is happy (or at least has no choice but) to reside. In fact, the version of postmodernism that will be returned to at the end of this thesis—that of Lyotard’s “language games”—will come across as much less slippery than this reading makes out. But it is important to highlight this reading of the terms for postmodernism in order to stress the extent to which these do indeed differ from a modern, especially political economic, epistemological framework.

But a question remains, having introduced the postmodern as an inability to believe in metanarratives, how is one to propose a metanarrative, or at least a concise explanatory frame for “what postmodernism says,” without doing violence to the realm of open-ended signification and non-essential, non-reductive, analysis that, as illustrated above, much postmodernism sets out to achieve? In light of this problem—but acknowledging that this paper will say something concrete and intelligible about postmodern thought—perhaps the better or safer question to ask immediately of postmodernism is not “what does it say?” but “why does it say it?” For in asking *why* before getting at the more ambiguous *what* the full breadth of *The Postmodern Condition* will become audible and credible, and “what it says” can then be positioned as an integral problem for social theory, especially political economy.

²³ Roberts, 682.

Following the remarks of Steven Best and Douglas Kellner in their tellingly titled *The Postmodern Turn*,²⁴ the question of why is one that has not been breached nearly as much as the steady stream of postmodern literature would lead to suggest.

Yet no one has yet explained satisfactorily *why* all these discourses of the “post” have been proliferating and attracting attention and even devotion in recent years. We maintain that there is no single and simple explanation for the emergence of postmodern discourse and the belief that we are living in the “time of the posts.” Rather, clarification of the postmodern turn requires discussion of the sociohistorical environment in which the discourse of the “post” first emerged.²⁵

For Best and Kellner this sociohistorical period centers on the 1960s and the radical upheavals that were taking place in both France and the United States at this time. Strewn into the turmoil of these times was also the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger to be found in thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard who were reworking the former’s seminal critiques of Western knowledge through nihilism and phenomenology respectively. This context will be revisited in the continuation of my own analysis below, only instead of the 1960s, the question of *why* will begin in the 1950s and the work of Arnold Toynbee. But first, a final word on considering postmodernism “on its own terms” that will help to set the stage for the reading of the paradigm that follows, and also differentiate it from appropriations that have taken place on the part of Marxian theorists that read postmodernism through a modern conceptual lens, something that necessarily

²⁴ There at least three books that carry this title, referencing a “turn” in social theory that the postmodern brings. However, to demonstrate the lack of unanimity over what is characterized by this turn each of the books treats it differently. As will be demonstrated, for Best and Kellner the postmodern marks a continuity with modernism, Seidman’s compilation accept the implications of postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” but is still working toward emancipatory goals, whereas Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Ohio: Ohio State UP, 1987), which preceded the other two texts, accepts the more anarchic and indeterminate features of postmodernism and denotes a sharper break with the concerns of modernism and modern thought.

²⁵ Best and Kellner, 4.

reduces the theoretical implications of postmodernism viewed consequentially as an “incredulity toward metanarratives.”

III

An Abbreviated Confrontation Between Marxism and Postmodernism (A sign of things to come)

In their analysis of why there has been an advent of “posts” over the past few decades, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner are not interested in postulating that postmodernism represents any *fundamental* break with modernism or modernity, rather they acknowledge a continuity with the past in which postmodernism is “a mutation of the modern, as a shift within modernity.”²⁶ The reasons for this position, as will become evident, are as much logical as they are strategic. They also seem to disagree fundamentally with the problematic and ideas raised in the analysis of the “terms” for postmodernism above. “Terms” that would undoubtedly be seen by these authors as signifying a radical and irresponsible “rupture” with modern thought, an observation that I will argue presently is misguided.

For Best and Kellner the logical reasoning behind *not* positioning postmodernism as a radical break with modern thought is that this position would seem to signify that modern thought is itself a completed project or entity that has been replaced or rendered obsolete:

This tendency usually attacks modern discourse or politics as being obsolete and calls for new beginnings and a break with the past. Modern theory is rejected in toto as a set of foundationalist, universalist, essentialist, and totalizing practices that must be renounced for a wholly new mode of postmodern theory, ethics, and politics. Strong postmodernists who take this position tend to be true believers and often

²⁶ Best and Kellner, 25. See also note 8 above.

ideologues who totally reject the theories, discourses, and politics of the past modern era.²⁷

What is curious, however, in Best and Kellner's assurance that continuity is more appropriate than the radical disjunction "found among the younger generation of pomos" is what this position allows the authors to smuggle unscathed into the backdoor of postmodernism. Again a quote at length is in order:

[F]or us the notions of "shift" and "turn" signify novel developments, yet also retain continuities with modernity and modern theory, pointing to shared assumptions, presuppositions, modes of thought and discourse, practices and strategies, and vision. Seeing the postmodern as continuous with the modern eschews postulating a radical rupture in theory and history. Such moderate versions describe postmodern phenomena more modestly and make less dramatic claims for the radicality of their theoretical positions while appreciating the novel qualities of the contemporary era. Thus, from the moderate perspective, postmodernism in the arts would be another mode of modernism, another avant-garde avatar of the new, another search for a contemporary goal of the modern.²⁸

In their strategically subtle shift in terminology, Best and Kellner place their "moderate" reading of postmodernism—that stresses continuity while recognizing a number of "novel" sociohistorical and theoretical changes—against the "radical" postmodernists who would wage war on modern thought. Ironically, however, it is Best and Kellner's "moderate" postmodernism that retains, or aims to retain, a vision of the "avant-garde avatar of the new." This sounds very much like a radical impulse; in fact its etymology is intimately associated with revolution.²⁹ It is possible to scent that there is something more at work within

²⁷ Ibid., 24.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Donald D. Egbert traces the etymology of the term "avant-garde" to Russia and Lenin's usage of "*avangard*" to describe the Communist party as "vanguard of the revolutionary forces in our times." Egbert further traces the term back to Marx and Engels, and to Henri Saint-Simon before them. The key to the term is that it "denote[s] radically progressive leaders of both art and society." See, Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea

this so-called “moderate” postmodernism. And indeed it arrives, much later in Best and Kellner’s text.

Discussing identity politics and the tendency of much postmodern theory to isolate the local as a critical vantagepoint, the authors declare that “While today we need the expansion of localized cultural practices, they attain their real significance only within *the struggle for the transformation of society as a whole*.”³⁰ A number of pages earlier Best and Kellner also thank postmodern politics for bringing to the fore “a politicization of all spheres of social and personal existence, which were previously ignored or rejected as proper political spaces by modern and Marxist approaches.”³¹ And there we have it, the realization that the “moderate” postmodernism espoused by Best and Kellner is simply a reworking of Marxism and its modernist, totalizing metanarrative aimed at universal social transformation and the emancipation of society. With this in mind, what then can be said of those that Best and Kellner dub radical?

In fact, a revisiting of this paradigm would suggest that these thinkers are radical only in so far as they genuinely accept the implications of what “incredulity towards metanarratives” means for social theory, namely, a serious reconsideration of some of the basic tenets of modern thought and their guiding, Enlightenment principle (whether in Marxism or Liberalism) that reason and rationality will lead to human emancipation. But keep in mind Burbules’ insight above into Lyotard’s term “incredulity.” It was suggested that this “is not a denial or rejection or refutation; it is an inability to believe.” If the

of ‘Avant-garde’ in Art and Politics,” *The American Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (1967): 339-366.

³⁰ Ibid., 278. Emphasis added.

“terms” for postmodernism commence upon an inability to believe in the metanarrative of progress or emancipation of the Enlightenment this is a much different thing than suggesting such thinkers represent, “true believers and...ideologues who totally reject the theories, discourses, and politics of the past modern era,” as Best and Kellner suggest. Such a declaration by Best and Kellner only serves to mask the fact that it is their “moderate” postmodernism that truly must believe in order to reach its goal of social transformation.³²

Having taken Best and Kellner to task on this point it is possible now to identify with the “terms” of postmodernism outlined above on a level that is much less “radical” and tumultuous than the authors of *The Postmodern Turn* would suggest. Rather, the “terms” for postmodernism sketched in the work of Deely and Roberts, for example, do not deny the admissibility of modern thought and its foundational premises, they merely question or doubt the viability that these should be the best or only means through which to analyze society, culture or reality. Instead of reducing the social field to a conceptual equation and epistemological criteria aimed at its transformation, much postmodernism aims to open up epistemological categories in order to broaden formulations for concepts like subjectivity, gender, identity, culture, language and communication, democracy, politics, art and architecture, as well as sexuality, without necessarily worrying about how this broadening might all be transcended toward some common humanity. But this

³¹ Ibid., 276.

³² Indeed, it becomes apparent through a critical reading of Best and Kellner that in their suggestion that radical postmodernism makes a break with modern thought what this does is say less about these radical postmodernists and rather leaves the moderate position, and its faith in continuity with modernism and modern thought, completely intact. In doing this Best and Kellner transfer the ideologue status onto radical postmodernists leaving their ideological faith in modernism appear like a normative state of affairs.

has jumped too far ahead into the *what* of postmodernism before asking the *why*. The latter question can be turned to now, safe in the assurance that the sociocultural concept of postmodernity that has contributed significantly to the “time of the posts” has not ushered in a host of radical thinkers who would arbitrarily or necessarily posit the end of modernity or modern thought.

The “radicalism” of postmodernism in its various outposts is only in its ability or desire to question and think differently and seriously about the position of the self in a late modern or indeed postmodern world. Undoubtedly this is a task that is bound to raise a hostile eyebrow from “moderate” postmodern positions that have not really questioned or let go of the guiding impulses of modernism and its aim of social transformation. In the light of the latter, knowledge takes on a narrowly prescriptive mission and, as Vincent Mosco suggests, “intellectual activity is organized to transform [reality] for the wider benefit of all.”³³ A worthy task to be sure, but one whose validity and straightforwardness has been severely stirred by the sociohistorical context of postmodernity.³⁴ This chapter will now finally turn to this context before examining what postmodernism says.

IV

Why this “Time of the Posts”? Postmodernity as Sociohistorical Concept

There is no unanimous agreement that a period known as “postmodernity” exists—that the present state of affairs in many most developed countries has witnessed a sociocultural, technological and political shift beyond the world of modernity and into the

³³ Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal* (London: Sage, 1996), 272.

world of post-modernity. For example, Best and Kellner suggest that the latter is not plausible, that the postmodern “is a cultural and theoretical construct, not a thing or state of affairs. That is, there are no phenomena that are intrinsically ‘postmodern’.”³⁵ On the other hand, David Lyon holds stock in its sociological relevance, referring to the postmodern as signaling “the exhaustion of modernity.”³⁶ For Kumar postmodernity is more than casually related to the cultural and theoretical developments of postmodernism and marks a strong distinction from modernity. The latter can be characterized, according to Kumar, as that period which emerged from the 17th century onwards and reflected a faith in secular scientific and rational methods as a means to achieve “unending human progress on earth.”³⁷ Modernity is associated with modern industrial societies and the aims of its efforts were to realize “History and Progress; Truth and Freedom; Reason and Revolution; Science and Industrialism.” All these represent, in Kumar’s estimation, “the main terms of the ‘grand narratives’ of modernity that the post-modernists wish to consign to the dustbin of history.”³⁸ Steven Seidman, however, does not see such a grand demarcation between postmodernity and modernity, arguing that while it might be in “crisis,” “Modernity is not abruptly coming to an end.” Seidman continues:

The chief signs of modernity have not disappeared: for example, an industrial-based economy; a politics organized around unions, political parties, and interest groups; ideological debates centered on the relative merits of the market and state regulation to ensure economic growth, and

³⁴ Recognizing that the skepticism presently being accorded to the idea of social transformation might appear misguided the next chapter will look at this issue more closely in the form of a ‘disclaimer’.

³⁵ Best and Kellner, 24.

³⁶ Though it remains uncertain exactly what this means: “does this invite obituaries or merely a call to make room for a fresh appraisal of modernity?” David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994), 18.

³⁷ Kumar, 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

the good society; institutional differentiation and role specialization and professionalism within institutions; knowledges divided into disciplines and organized around an ideology of scientific enlightenment and progress; the public celebration of a culture of self redemption and emancipatory hope. Modernity has not exhausted itself; it may be in crisis but it continues to shape the contours of our lives.³⁹

All this flies in the face of Kumar's estimation—obviously taking its lead from Lyotard—that postmodernity represents a host of sociocultural, industrial and technological changes leading to a lack of faith in the metanarratives of modernity and modern thought. For Kumar, like Lyotard as well as Lyon, postmodernity is linked to the advent of a number of theses such as Daniel Bell's "postindustrial society" and the idea of post-Fordism that have developed in the latter half of the 20th century to make sense of the global rise of information based economies, Internet technologies, and flexible workplaces.⁴⁰

Undoubtedly Seidman's sense of "crisis" alludes to the notion that there is something amiss with modernity as it confronts conditions generally attributable to postmodernity, or at least to those theories such as postindustrialism and post-Fordism that it invariably takes under its wing. Usually outlined within these realms is a shift from industrial to information based economies; a conflation of the realms between the

³⁹ Seidman, 1.

⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson recognizes the debt Lyotard owes to Bell for the underlying sociological and empirical basis of *The Postmodern Condition*. See, Fredric Jameson, "Foreword," in Lyotard, vii-xxi. Daniel Bell's post-industrial thesis first emerged in 1973 with the publication of *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, but a good, concise version of Bell's ongoing sociological account of changes in the technological organization of the workplace and capitalist economic structures occurring in "the postindustrial society" can be found in his "The Third Technological Revolution," *Dissent* Spring (1989): 164-176. For a good analysis of how Post-Fordism—a number of sociological observations generally associated with the so-called New Times project in England that emerged in the early 1990s under the guidance of Stuart Hall—characterizes the shift in labour processes and their sociological implications, see Robin Murray,

cultural and the social; an increasing media presence in daily life; the advent of new technologies such as the Internet; cybernetics and virtual reality that are altering relations of the self and “Reality.”⁴¹

In the work of Jean Baudrillard these changes are seen to usher in postmodernity as a new epoch in which the relationship between the self and reality had drastically altered, namely by the fact that Reality itself had given way to an endless play of signification and signs that no longer carried any basis in reality.⁴² He referred to this highly mediated situation as that of the “simulation” in which reality has been replaced by the “hyperreal,” or, “a real without origin.”⁴³ In numerous famous examples including his argument that the 1990 Gulf War did not take place and analysis of Celebration USA, the Disney-owned city in Florida, Baudrillard characterizes the postmodern as a

“Fordism and Post-Fordism”, in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 38-53.

⁴¹ In discussing the features of postmodernity it is usually safe to begin with the premise of computer-mediated technologies and the knowledge-based economy, not to mention the expanse of consumerism and the conflation of the cultural and the popular in everyday life. Two brief conceptions of the postmodern are as follows: Charles Jencks’, used by Kumar: “The Post-Modern Age is a time of incessant choosing. It’s an era when no orthodoxy can be developed without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity. This is partly a consequence of what is called the information explosion, the advent of organised knowledge, world communication and cybernetics,” (p. 104), and how Lyon characterizes the advent of “postmodernity”: “‘postmodernity’, on the one hand, while still concentrating on the exhaustion of modernity, has to do with putative social changes. Either a new kind of society is coming into being, whose contours can already be dimly perceived, or a new stage of capitalism is being inaugurated. In both cases, previous modes of social analysis and political practice are called in question. And in both cases, two issues are crucial: the prominence of new information and communication technologies, facilitating further extensions such as globalization; and consumerism, perhaps eclipsing the conventional centrality of production” (p. 7).

⁴² Hans Bertens refers to Baudrillard as well as Fredric Jameson as theorizing postmodernity as a new epoch “distinctively different from an earlier modernity.” See, Hans Bertens, *The Idea of The Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), 95.

⁴³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000 [1981]).

foundationless era in which the world is socially constructed through and through. Ironically, this situation of postmodernity is for Baudrillard very real indeed.⁴⁴ However, despite Baudrillard's ongoing efforts to theorize the lived social conditions of an age increasingly characterized and impacted by new technologies and infinite representations, no unanimity resides over whether or not the current age can be describes as that of "postmodernity," with a corresponding set of theoretical and cultural features known as postmodernism.⁴⁵

For the present purposes, the question of whether or not the world is postmodern, or if there is adequate examples of postmodernity to warrant justification of postmodernism, will not be breached. It is impossible to deny that certain features Seidman attributes to modernity and modern thought still play a fundamental role in the daily life of citizens in many—still existent—Nation-states. However, it is equally impossible to deny that a host of socioeconomic changes, as well as new technological developments, have occurred over the last half of the 20th century and are having considerable impact in the social, political and cultural realm. Whether these mark an epochal shift to a post-industrial society, as Bell suggests in his essay "The Third Technological Revolution,"⁴⁶ or a discernable change in the criteria of knowledge

⁴⁴ Baudrillard lamented the onset of the postmodern era he characterized. As Mark Poster suggests his faith in humanism could not accept the sociological implications of his observations: "the great weakness of Baudrillard's effort to theorize [virtual reality] is his inability to recognize practices that involve assemblages of humans and machines and account for their differential relations." Mark Poster, *What's the Matter with the Internet?* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001), 136.

⁴⁵ The latter connection is easier to make, i.e. that there is generally a conflation and convergence between postmodernity, as social condition, and postmodernism as theoretical and cultural phenomena. See, Kumar, 100-101; Lyon, 6; as well as, Richard E. Palmer, "Postmodernity and Hermeneutics," *Boundary 2* 5, no. 2 (1977): 363-366.

⁴⁶ See note 34 above.

creation as Lyotard suggests in *The Postmodern Condition*, is arguable. What is less indisputable is that something called postmodernity and postmodernism has entered into academia, not to mention popular culture, and has disrupted the ability to accept clearly and unrepentantly modern thought and the hallmarks of modernity.

The “crisis” referred to in Seidman’s analysis need not spell the end of modernity and those sociopolitical or even industrial features of it that still find purchase in the developed and developing world,⁴⁷ rather, the crisis is one of acceptance. Again, it is incredulity as lack of faith that is important here, postmodernism being characterized by an inability to believe in the goals and concepts of modernity as well as modern thought. And undoubtedly it is the sociocultural phenomenon of postmodernity that has contributed to this lack of faith, and has set the terms for postmodernism as something other than the foundational bias that characterizes modern thought. So, while not seeking to establish postmodernity as a substitute for modernity—a nauseatingly tedious task that would require analyzing each new technological, cultural or politic development and its sociological implications as attributable to “modernity” or “postmodernity”—this section aims merely to trace how an idea of postmodernity, or of a “Post Modern Age,” has been proposed over the last few decades and contributed to the basic tenet of “incredulity” that is at the basis of any postmodern theory that accepts postmodernism not on modern terms, but on its own terms.⁴⁸ As such, this section will highlight a possible context for the term “postmodern” into which Lyotard placed his now canonical 1979 work.

⁴⁷ One of Seidman’s points is that it is illogical to discuss postmodernity in those parts of the world that are still aiming to become modern. It should be reminded also that Lyotard’s examination of the postmodern is solely based on “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies.” Lyotard, xxiii.

⁴⁸ Daniel Bell has offered a descriptive way of positing the relationship between postindustrial developments and modernity, or residual elements of the industrial

The question then becomes where to begin an analysis of why the “time of the posts” has emerged? Undoubtedly there are many avenues toward this end that could begin in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and his 19th century skepticism and lack of faith in the foundations of modern thought and Enlightenment principles. David Lyon begins his take on postmodernity with Nietzsche, whom he describes as “postmodern *avant la lettre*.”⁴⁹ Political economy, as will be seen in Chapter Four, harps on Nietzsche’s influence on postmodernism to the extent that proponents of the latter are said to disseminate little more than nihilism. No doubt Nietzsche’s allegorical predicament of the ‘overman’—“the hero of an aesthetic and morally destitute world; he presents the paradox of the avid pursuit of greatness when no transcendental standards exist. He must embody his own justification”—is, as will become clear below, closer in kind to a more postmodern than modern world view and conception of ethics.⁵⁰ The influence of Nietzsche is most avidly felt in postmodernism through the work of Michel Foucault whose examinations of power and knowledge make explicit use of a Nietzschean genealogical critique that abandons the search for origins and positive power relations, focussing instead on how truths are produced through discourse.⁵¹ For Lyotard,

economy. He refers to the notion of “palimpsest,” i.e. that which has been inscribed more than once and in which the previous inscriptions have not been completely effaced, in which: “Postindustrial developments do not replace previous social forms as ‘stages’ of social development. They often coexist, as a palimpsest, on top of the others, thickening the complexity of society and the nature of social structure.” The sentiment behind the postindustrial as “palimpsest” works equally well for my analysis which would see postmodernity not replace modernity but act as a palimpsest to it. See Bell, 167.

⁴⁹ Lyon, 7.

⁵⁰ As quoted in, Leslie Paul Thiele, “The Agony of Politics: The Nietzschean Roots of Foucault’s Thought,” *The American Political Science Review* 84 (1990): 910.

⁵¹ For an outline of Foucault working through Nietzsche’s thought see, Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977), 139-164.

as will be elaborated again briefly in Chapter Five, Nietzsche figures as influential for pointing to an inherent characteristic of modern speculative thought: that its proof requires an infinite regression of further proofs. But this is an observation that for Lyotard postmodernism no longer revisits, nor laments.⁵²

Martin Heidegger and his phenomenological inquiries into “being” that influenced to a great extent the project of existentialism that developed after World War Two is another possible avenue toward the postmodern. Best and Kellner cite William Barrett’s 1958 *Irrational Man* as a marking point in later postmodern theory, a book that presented a “modernity in crisis” at the hands of existential philosophy “linked to a paradigm shift that [Barrett] sees as unfolding in philosophy, art, literature, and science.”⁵³ But neither Heidegger, nor Nietzsche arrives at the sociocultural phenomenon of postmodernity. These thinkers were reacting to the conditions of modernity, as well as asking questions about modern thought, but they remain within a mostly theoretical context. Their legacy will surface briefly again in the next section that posits what postmodernism says through those such as Derrida and Foucault. In terms of arriving at postmodernity as a sentiment that something dramatic has changed at the social level, acting as a “palimpsest” (see note 39) to modernity, it is possible to chart a course not from continental philosophy, but to begin with an historian named Arnold Toynbee.

Although the word *postmodernismo* had been used in a derogatory sense by the Spanish poet Federico de Onis in the 1930s to describe a reactive strain within Hispanic

⁵² Lyotard writes on the matter that “This is exactly what Nietzsche is doing, though with a different terminology, when he shows that ‘European nihilism’ resulted from the truth requirement of science being turned back against itself.” Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 39.

⁵³ Best and Kellner, 7.

modernist poetry that was both conservative and ironic, the term post-modern only entered into more popular usage a few decades later.⁵⁴ According to Matei Calinescu the British “prophet historian” Arnold Toynbee was the first to coin the phrase “post-Modern” in the 1950s.⁵⁵ Ihab Hassan dates the latter’s first usage of the term to 1947.⁵⁶ Toynbee’s *A Study of History* is the voluminous set of writings in which the term first appeared to designate an apocalyptic sense that something dramatic had happened to western society following the end of World War Two, but that had “opened in the seventh and eighth decades of the nineteenth century.”⁵⁷ Toynbee’s sentiment of the post-Modern is dire and pessimistic in theoretical orientation but it nonetheless opens a space for postmodernity for which its eventual theoretical counter part would become postmodernism. The key is not the valuation of postmodernity asserted by Toynbee, but its primacy in putting a name on an age that, to his estimation, was markedly different than the one preceding it.

Toynbee characterizes the West in terms of epochal stages for which the “modern” began in the 15th and 16th centuries and lasted until the turn of the 19th and 20th. For Toynbee, the development and “ascendancy” of a burgeoning middle class is the pinnacle of modern western civilization. This version of modernity seems equivocal to a liberal pluralist state of affairs in which, Toynbee contends, “any alien recipients of this

⁵⁴ For *Postmodernismo* see Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 3, and Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977), 132-3. Ihab Hassan has noted also that the term postmodern was used in Europe in the 1870s to describe what is now taken to be post-Impressionism. See, Ihab Hassan, “From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: the Local/Global Context,” <http://www.ihabhassan.com/postmodernism_to_postmodernity.htm>.

⁵⁵ Calinescu, 133.

⁵⁶ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 85.

⁵⁷ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. IX (London: Oxford UP, 1961), 234-

Modern Western culture would be likely to be successful in making it their own.”⁵⁸

Indeed, one of the features of the oncoming “post-Modern Age” is the “rise of an industrial working class,” but also, as Calinescu writes, “the advent of a ‘mass society’ with a corresponding system of ‘mass education’ and ‘mass culture’.”⁵⁹ Of these, it was in the realm of education that the “post-Modern Age” was making itself felt most as the secular “new sciences” of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, etc. were seen to be leading knowledge down a path toward relativity and the “*intellectually anarchic* Late Modern and post-Modern Age.”⁶⁰ Adding to this anarchic development in the field of education were two other factors that round out Toynbee’s concept of a post-Modern Age as charting an epochal change: the threat of nuclear war, as well as a teleological view of history that held to the notion that since the late 19th century, and through the two World Wars in the 20th, a 120 year “war-and-peace cycle” had been broken with unknown, but considered detrimental, effects.⁶¹ Of these it is the threat of nuclear war that perhaps has more credence as justifying an apocalyptic vision for a post-Modern Age.⁶² All in all, Toynbee introduced sketchily over the course of *A Study of History* an outlook for a post-Modern Age in which destructive forces were at work that had taken aim at rationality and suggested anarchy. In a moment of undoubted self-reflexivity Toynbee speaks in volume nine of his study of “an increasingly anxious post-Modern Western Man.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. VIII (London: Oxford UP, 1961), 338.

⁵⁹ First quote is from Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. VIII, 338, the second from Calinescu, 135.

⁶⁰ Toynbee, as quoted in, Calinescu, 135. Italics in Calinescu.

⁶¹ Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. IX, 234-5.

⁶² Toynbee’s comments about nuclear war appear in vol. IX, 409.

⁶³ Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. IX, 341.

Although Toynbee's apocalyptic prophecies have proven largely flat and his teleological reading of history belongs to a methodology of another time, his characterization of a new era dawning that no longer seems to hold a rational and Enlightened modern outlook took hold in many circles. In the prelude to his 1960 essay "What was Modernism?" literary critic Harry Levin rebuked Toynbee's pessimism with the concession that "Insofar as we are still moderns, I would argue, we are the children of Humanism and Enlightenment." In the next breath, however, Levin shares in Toynbee's characterization of the postmodern, "To identify and isolate the forces of unreason, in a certain sense, has been a triumph of the intellect. In another sense it has reinforced that anti-intellectual undercurrent which, as it comes to the surface, I would prefer to call post-modern."⁶⁴ Throughout the 1960s the age of the post-modern that had been associated with mass culture and mass society by Toynbee was seen to have infiltrated the realm of high art and modernism, creating a strain of literature and thought that Levin identified with "anti-intellectualism." Irving Howe took this up in his 1970 essay "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction" that, as Best and Kellner conclude, "lamented the end of the modern."⁶⁵ "For Both Howe and Levin," Best and Kellner write, "postmodernism was a symptom of decline; it represented the appearance of a new nihilism...that threatened the values of the Enlightenment."⁶⁶ Thus, from the original characterization by Toynbee of a sociohistorical post-Modern Age that was witnessing anarchic fissures

⁶⁴ Harry Levin, *Refractions* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966), 271.

⁶⁵ Best and Kellner, 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

along the threads of modernity and modern thought, literary critics like Howe and Levin placed a derogatory valuation on the term itself.⁶⁷

Notably, and not without major consequence, this derogatory sentiment towards the postmodern would begin to shift in the early 1970s with the publication of Ihab Hassan's creative and inventive essay "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography." Hassan accepted Toynbee's sociohistorical conception of the postmodernity as beginning in the later 19th century, writing in a later essay entitled "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism:" "For Toynbee, Post-Modernism designated a new historical cycle in Western civilization, starting around 1875, *which we now scarcely begin to discern.*"⁶⁸ Hassan's outlook on this period of anxiety did not share the dire sentiment of Toynbee, Howe or Levin. Rather, Hassan was prepared to relish in the freedom offered to literary theory and cultural production through the "*dehumanization*" that was at the root of postmodernity in its more pessimistic formulations. Instead, Hussein saw this turn away from humanism and established canons of knowledge as diffusing "Antielitism, antiauthoritarianism. Diffusion of the ego. Participation. Art becomes communal, optional, anarchic. Acceptance."⁶⁹ In another statement on this theme Hassan compares Leonardo da Vinci (representative of rational measurement and principles in art) to Picasso's "beings splintered on many planes." For Hassan the latter was not "less human, just another idea of man."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Calinescu, 138.

⁶⁸ Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of the Postmodern," in *The Postmodern Turn*, 85. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Ihab Hassan, "POSTmoderNISM: A Paracritical Bibliography," in *The Postmodern Turn*, 41.

⁷⁰ Hassan, 35.

To reinforce his *jouissance* in rebuking a modern conceptual analysis, in “POSTmodernISM” Hassan has formally abandoned the rules of logic, narrative and reasonable inquiry. The work itself is comprised of what is more or less a collage of thoughts, ideas, quotes, pictograms, even a bibliography of a “curious chronology of some Postmodern criticism” embedded within the text itself. All this flies with convention and runs with an idea of postmodernism as linked to the conditions of “Urbanism,” “Technologism,” “Primitivism,” “Eroticism,” as well as “Experimentalism”—“New languages, new concepts of order”—that Hassan saw as being brought forth within a postmodern world. And although his interests are mainly literary and cultural, Hassan makes it clear in a later work that there is more to the postmodern than just an aesthetic movement:

Postmodernism can expand into a still larger problem: is it only an artistic tendency or also a social problem, perhaps even a mutation in Western humanism? If so, how are the various aspects of this phenomenon—psychological, philosophical, economic, political—joined or disjoined? In short, can we understand postmodernism in literature without some attempt to perceive the lineaments of a postmodern society, a Toynbeeian postmodernity...⁷¹

Thus, for Hassan there is a connection between the onset of a “post-Modern Age,” as outlined by a Toynbeeian “postmodernity,” and a new type of thinking and conceptualization choosing to play in the freedom offered to “an increasingly anxious post-Modern Western Man.”⁷²

To this end, on the next page of his “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism” where the quotation above was taken, Hassan makes a list of features distinguishing

⁷¹ Ihab Hassan, “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” 90.

⁷² The turn from a pessimistic to an optimistic use of the term “postmodern” has been commented on by Calinescu who writes that “The death of modernism was joyous

postmodernism from modernism that have by now become familiar to a postmodern lexicon. For example, “Hierarchy” in the modern becomes “Anarchy” in the post. “Creation/Totalization,” becomes “Decreation/Deconstruction,” “Root/Depth” gives way to “Rhizome/Surface,” “Determinacy” to “Indeterminacy,” and, among many other comparisons, “Metaphysics,” becomes “Irony” within postmodernism.⁷³ Hassan’s inventive 1971 essay was aimed at setting the terms for a new theory, even perhaps a new epistemology, which reveled along the fissures of modern rationalism and Enlightenment humanism. Discussing the penchant of the postmodern to stress pluralism, indeterminacy, heterodoxy, randomness, discontinuity, Hassan declares: “Through all these signs moves a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche—the entire realm of discourse in the West.”⁷⁴

On first glance it might seem that Hassan’s acceptance of Toynbee’s post-Modern Age and subsequent revolt against modern canons of thought share with modernist movements like Dada or German Expressionism, perhaps even elements of cubism, that were by and large reacting to modern thought and Enlightenment rationality.⁷⁵ Indeed Hassan stresses in “POSTmodernISM” that “Modernism does not suddenly cease so that Postmodernism may begin.” However, in Hassan’s estimation this does not so much mean that postmodernism is a reconceptualization of modernism, *qua* Best and Kellner,

news for other critics who employ ‘postmodern’ and ‘postmodernist’ in an emphatically positive sense.” Calinescu, 139.

⁷³ The full list is available in Hassan, “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” 91-92.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁵ Kumar suggests that with Hassan, “it is difficult to see in what way there has been any real departure from modernism.” Kumar, 109.

rather “they now *coexist*.”⁷⁶ There is a sense in Hassan that what is being introduced as postmodernism is an opening up to new lines of inquiry that rework elements of previous tradition while these self-consciously and continually recreate themselves anew and without any sense of finality or transcendence; “Metaphysics” had, as Hassan declared, given way to “Irony.” As such, building on a sociohistorical context outlined by Toynbee in the 1950s, Hassan was one of the first⁷⁷ to actively take up the idea of a discontinuity between the modern and the post; that is, to actively come to theoretical terms with a sociohistorical period that had begun to show signs of doubt or confidence in the grandiose efforts of the Enlightenment and modern thought, as well as the modernist tactics that had up until that time been called to critique it. It is not superfluous that Lyotard was well familiar with and acknowledged Hassan’s creative efforts by the time he had come to declare the postmodern as “an incredulity to metanarratives” a few years later.⁷⁸ Hassan’s ideas build on the sociohistorical paradigm of postmodernity as outlined in Toynbee and serve to give malleable form to an emerging ideational fabric owed to the sociohistorical context of postmodernity. In terms of answering the question of why the terms for postmodernism have come to pass, Toynbee’s quasi-prophetic scholarship opened up a space for thinking about the ‘end’ of modernity, an ‘end’ that signaled for Hassan a free space without the reductive and authoritative burden of modern rationalism. The kind of postmodern theory to follow in the work of Lyotard and Derrida, not to mention Deely and Roberts above, share in the possibilities of indeterminate thought and open-ended inquiry. The final chapter of this thesis will

⁷⁶ Hassan, “POSTmoderNISM: A Paracritical Bibliography,” 33.

⁷⁷ Leslie Fielder’s essay “The New Mutants” is also credited in many accounts as introducing the period after Toynbee as a time of the “posts.” See, Bertens, 60; Best and Kellner, 131-132; Calinescu, 136-137; Kumar 108.

highlight the work of Lyotard, above these others, as exemplary of a productive method for this type of inquiry.

To conclude this section that has sought to investigate the question of why the “time of the posts” has arrived it is important to stress that neither Toynbee nor Hassan can account for the full breadth of scholarship and ideas that has emerged under the rubric of postmodernism. It is undoubtedly not straightforwardly possible to make a connection between Baudrillard and Toynbee, for example. Also, Best and Kellner make no mention of Toynbee in their characterization of the postmodern that begins with existentialism. It is also the case that Toynbee makes little effort over the course of *A Study of History* to concretize the term post-modern, leaving it rather as “a hazy, quasi-apocalyptic notion referring to obscure demonic forces...and threatening indeterminacy.”⁷⁹

But in this definitive murkiness an idea had surfaced which suggested *sociological* rather than merely theoretical credence for the exhaustion of an era that could be called modern.⁸⁰ Although Toynbee’s analytical methods are questionable, the underlying sentiment of a post-Modern Era was enough to signal the arrival of a new age. An age corresponding to technological advancements in physics that had witnessed the splitting of the atom and the threat of annihilation, a burgeoning mass society and growth

⁷⁸ Bertens, 112.

⁷⁹ Calinescu, 135.

⁸⁰ In a critical review of Toynbee’s views on education in *A Study of History* that rejected the idea that History and Sociology could be separated into isolated disciplines, Robert Bierstedt argues that despite Toynbee’s own admission to the contrary his voluminous study is sociology rather than history. Bierstedt goes on to suggest that it is “bad sociology,” but that is a point that the presentation here will overlook. Robert Bierstedt, “Toynbee and Sociology,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 2 (1959): 95-104.

in consumption, the media, as well as changes in the education system. Having made the provision that the goal of this section was not to weigh postmodernity against modernity to assess the proper characterization of an age, it is enough to suggest that an idea of the post-modern, or postmodernity, emerged after Toynbee and was picked up by others. In sociology C. Wright Mills declared in 1959 that “The Modern Age is being succeeded by a post-modern period.”⁸¹ Leslie Fielder used the term “post-Modernist” in 1965 along with a number of other “posts” including “post-humanist.” In 1977, Richard E. Palmer differentiated between postmodernism and postmodernity in which the former “is something like a movement or current of thought, whereas the term postmodernity points to a diverse range of activities—indeed to a coming era of time.”⁸² All these proclamations happened before the appearance of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* emerged in 1979. As such, by the time Lyotard’s text appeared the sociohistorical framework for postmodernity had been adequately postulated. Whether or not the world has or had become postmodern is not of concern. What is of concern is that the question of “why the time of the posts?” can be answered with the affirmation that a step toward postmodern theory became a logical one. The “terms” for modernism and modernity, while not discountable, had begun to seem increasingly untenable.

V

Meanwhile in Europe: What Postmodernism says: Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault

In 1979 the president of the Conseil des Universités for the Quebec government in Canada called upon the emergent post-industrial context—“of the most highly developed

⁸¹ C. Wright Mills, “Culture and Politics,” in *Power, Politics, People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford UP, 1963), 236.

⁸² Palmer, 364.

societies”—to be investigated and characterized. This project, invariably placing the term “post-modern” into *popular* usage, was undertaken by the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard. The English account, published in 1984, was entitled *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In it the philosopher describes, in no uncertain terms, how a new era of computer-mediated technologies and rise in immaterial commodities (information) marks a significant shift from Enlightenment epistemology over the “legitimation” of knowledge. Lyotard’s 1984 text set the stage for many salient themes of postmodernism—especially relating to the philosophy of communication. For it is the fundamental question: ‘Can knowledge be grounded in Truth and exchanged between subjectivities within a paradigm—social or linguistic—legitimized through some ontological basis outside of itself?’ that postmodernism sets out not so much to answer as to deride as *a priori* impossible. Lyotard’s proposed paradoxical ‘postmodern’ communicative ‘condition’ is allegorical to the predicament of Nietzsche’s ‘overman’ encountered above, and contrasts eloquently with Lyotard’s description of the rational hero of the Enlightenment, the terms for which have already been encountered:

The rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace.

In his report Lyotard dubs the fundamental process that has served to legitimize the above model as the “grand narrative,” or, the “metanarrative.” Lyotard contends that the project of modernity in its various forms and methodologies—the dialectical Spirit (Hegel), “the emancipation of the working subject” (Marx), “the hermeneutics of meaning” (here we could go back to the biblical/Judeo-Christian basis of the Western

world)—assume, or serve as, discourses that “universalize” and “legitimate” their ends. Created therefore is the possibility for knowledge, and subsequently, emancipation. Bluntly stated, a metanarrative for Lyotard legitimates truth-consensus for the action and knowledge criteria of “progress” and “civility/civilization” in the post-Enlightenment Western world.

These ‘metadiscourses’ have reached a “crisis” however, Lyotard concludes as his premise for the Quebec government. The diffuse splintering of the colonial project throughout the beginning of the 20th-century delegitimated, or fragmented, a “universal” ‘benchmark’ for Truth. Universities and ‘scientific’ institutions that traditionally entrenched Western epistemology have become no longer able to serve this ontological function. “Legitimation” of knowledge within post-industrial societies, Lyotard argues, is overridingly made possible through technology. But the promise of technology is not an ontological one: knowledge ceases to be “an end in itself” (p. 5) as it is transformed to serve the needs of computer-driven economies. Lyotard infuses the *Postmodern Condition* as one in which no *universal* claims to truth can be made, nor Truth claims in the name of positivistic science in general—science becomes one narrative among many. Sociologist Ben Agger sums up Lyotard’s general thesis poignantly: “One cannot tell large stories about the world but only small stories from the heterogeneous ‘subject positions’ of individuals and plural social groups.”⁸³ As we shall see in Chapter Four below, this is one of the major premises from Lyotard that causes consternation for political economy.

⁸³ Agger, 116.

In his speculations over the possibility of successful communication Lyotard offers a sharp confrontation to the ideas of Jurgen Habermas, questioning the latter's emphasis on consensus as a communicative ideal. Instead, Lyotard articulates what he calls "dissensus" as a way of avoiding the 'violent' possibility wherein one 'rule', or voice, delegitimizes alternative voices. The process of "dissensus," Lyotard posits, is one in which two or more "differends," i.e. parties located within incommensurable linguistic paradigms, attempt to accommodate the other without retort to governing rules that are, in accordance with what has been stated so far, always unachievable. Lyotard attempts to deal with the question of truth, knowledge, and communication within a world that, to his estimation, is ruled not by ontological certainty, but rather, overwhelming and undeniable plurality.

Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and subsequent works such as his apt-titled (for reasons discussed presently) *Just Gaming* (1985), or his previous *The Differend* (1983), have aided in concretizing the postmodern as a paradigm of thought reacting to the conditions of postmodernity and continuing the intervention to modernism started by Hassan. Intellectual influences looming in Lyotard's thought run deeper than his admiration for the latter however. From a European and largely theoretical and philosophical context these influences also foreshadowed the academic impulses of postmodernism more broadly, instigating views on language that broke canonically with previous linguistic tradition. Among these, the Austrian-born British philosopher and member of the Vienna Circle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Swiss linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure were instrumental in creating the *theoretical* space needed for a "linguistic turn." A "turn" that would help to academically precipitate postmodernism through its

closely related cousin: poststructuralism. Wittgenstein's peculiar-yet-influential form of logic, presenting the idea of 'language games', is referenced in the title of Lyotard's 1985 publication, and informed the concept of the *differend*—a concept that will resurface prominently in Chapter Four below.

Though Wittgenstein has been credited with influencing Lyotard, it was Saussure's semiological regard for language as a "sign-system" that significantly altered previous theory concerning language and meaning. Stated briefly, in Saussurian semiotics words (signifiers) signify concepts (a signified) in the *arbitrary*—a crucial distinction—relationship signifier/signified, where the sign refers not to an actual material thing in the world, a dog, but rather a mental concept of what a "dog" is. This sign-system is situated within a framework where *langue* refers to the structure of the linguistic system through which individual utterances, *parole*, become possible. This became the base model for structuralism whereby anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss set out to study cultural groups through analysis of the base structure within which linguistic utterances and ideas become possible. Note already that this model begins to question notions of *universality* within communication (and indeed it is this tenet that has led to charges of cultural relativity and linguistic determinism within much structural anthropology and linguistics⁸⁴).

Linguistic meanings for Saussure, derived through the arbitrary relationship of the sign to its referent, are not pre-existent givens that become formulated *through* language. Rather, and this is the fundamental premise underpinning the so-called "linguistic turn": meanings are produced *in* language itself. The way languages do this is not through

reference to some outside ‘Reality’, as has just been stated, but through the play of *difference* between signs *within* the linguistic system: a cat is a cat because it is not a bat, and so on....⁸⁵ The communicative model for the structuralist system is accordingly one of binary opposition—self/other— where one side usually exerts power over the other, serving as a standard for truth. Jacques Derrida’s subsequent *poststructuralism* pushes this binary model further (his first major publication *Of Grammatology* examined Saussure’s linguistics), questioning the stability of binary difference through the invocation of his concept “*différance*.” This postmodern concept will be formally defined below.

Continuing with an elaboration of influences in Lyotard, Wittgenstein’s antagonistic logic combined with Saussure’s arbitrary linguistic signification created a theoretical frame through which a poststructural paradigm has emerged for a succinctly, but by no means uniformly accepted, “postmodern” study of communication. The “linguistic turn” conceptually reverses not merely the way meanings come to be constituted in language, but, by consequence, affects how reality and the self are enmeshed within this system. The parameters for the subject, as well as reality—as has already been viewed in Baudrillard—become much less ‘bounded’, so the postmodern argument goes, than rational inquiry and its postulation of a fully-embodied subject through which to measure and quantify the world would like to allow.

⁸⁴ For a biting criticism of linguistic determinism as it affected structural anthropology see, Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 59-73.

⁸⁵ For an excellent analysis of Saussure that covers these issues in relation to postmodernism see, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “Agency in the Discursive Condition,” *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 40-44.

Turning to the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, his poststructural concept of *differance* pushes Wittgenstein's 'language games' to their logical conclusion. For Derrida there is no possible way that meaning can be secured within a word, not simply because words rely on their "other" (in the binary frame) to achieve meaning, but because this process of grasping differences within a chain of signification constantly defers itself to the next signifier. The difference/deferral process, or the notion that the meaning of an utterance will never fully-embody itself within a specific *present* to be grasped by the receiver without any "remainder" (i.e. lapses or distortions in meaning), is what Derrida coined *differance*. The problematic of *differance*, Derrida adds, is not partial to any particular communicative form. All media become "texts," including conversation.

Derrida's most recognized contribution to postmodernism, the analytical strategy of "deconstruction," seeks to break down the categorical distinction assumed in Western civilization from Plato onward between dialogue (an *immediate* exchange between two people/subjects) and dissemination (a mediated exchange of the type that the invention of writing and print allow for, and that Plato's Socrates was weary of). This distinction held that the former, dialogue, was able to ensure an 'ideal' exchange of meaning from one subjectivity to another in a way that writing, dissemination, could not given the absence of the author (hence Socrates' skepticism). Derrida's specific postmodernism labels the above assumptions "logocentric," reliant upon what Heidegger referred to as the "metaphysics of presence" (see below), and insists that intended meanings, whether immediate or not, are never communicated or understood *as they are intended*. Language

is simply too ‘slippery’ a category to serve this function, forever plagued with the characteristic, to use another of Derrida’s terms, of “undecidability.”

Derrida’s voluminous academic output, though criticized as being overly dense and inaccessible,⁸⁶ has done much to inform and antagonize the postmodern paradigm as it serves communication and other disciplines in the late 20th-, into the 21st-century.

Derrida has spent a career attempting to display how the Western metaphysical tradition—more broadly even than just that element of it that stems from the Enlightenment—has fallaciously assumed an embodiment of subjectivity and presence as means for unproblematically and unrepentantly staking a claim in the world. George Lipsitz has summed up Derrida’s reading of Western thought eloquently:

Derrida finds Western thinkers to be uncritical about their ‘standpoint’, about their insistence on unifocal and univocal investigations outward from a privileged center that deny opportunities for reciprocal perspectives and multivocal dialogues. Uncritical acceptance of language as an unmediated vehicle for understanding experience underlies much of the arrogance of Western thought for Derrida—its privileging of written texts over other forms of discourse, its dangerous instrumentality, its crude dismissal of competing systems of thought as ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric’.⁸⁷

To arrive at this declaration and desire for “multivocal dialogues,” and his criticism over “a privileged center,” the French philosopher continues in the phenomenological vein of Heidegger who insisted—returning to the notion of the *metaphysics of presence*—that in their quest to understand the world, the “founders”⁸⁸ of metaphysics in the West (Ancient Greece) assumed that understanding was a process that starts with Being *a priori* established. Rather, as Heidegger attempted to explain,

⁸⁶ A critic of this position is Agger, 106.

⁸⁷ George Lipsitz, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory and American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1990): 618.

understanding is a fundamental quality (an *existentiale*) of *Dasein* that clears a space for “Being-in-the-world.” The German philosopher held that there was no such thing as “being” as a category as such. Human beings inhabit the world only through what they have done, along with the choices that will establish what they will ever-continually come-to-be (*Dasein* is this particular quality of Being-in-the-world), but never through what they *are*. To believe the latter, for Heidegger as for Derrida, is to fall into the fallacy of presence. Derrida’s postmodern project aims to illustrate how this fallacy has played out in textual offerings from a variety of interpretive disciplines from philosophy to the Fine Arts. This has been his contentious offering to postmodernism, one that quite obviously can only be considered on “terms” other than that which mark modern categories of thought and its privileging of the subject/object divide characterized by Mumby at the top of this chapter.

A criticism railed against Derrida and his contribution to the paradigm of postmodernism is that “deconstruction,” and poststructuralism more broadly, offers nothing in terms of a substantial politics, and hence no emancipatory possibility.⁸⁹ This undoubtedly helps to account for the type of remarks made against poststructuralism that this thesis will encounter in Chapter Four. Derrida would undoubtedly agree that “deconstruction” has *not* aimed to solidify or provide alternative models for social relations as these would risk re-establishing the problems of power relations established and witnessed within the rational project of modernity. Nonetheless, given the density

⁸⁸ Heidegger problematically believed history is capable of returning to a point where truth, as “unconcealedness of being,” is realizable.

⁸⁹ Dyer-Witheford illustrates how Derrida begins to come close in his 1994 publication *Specters of Marx*, but ultimately stops short. See, Nick Dyer-Witheford, *CyberMarx* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), 170. Also Poster has written about this issue in a similar, if not more biting, tone. See, Poster, 146.

and overall inaccessibility of much of Derrida's writings, my final analysis of postmodernism in Chapter Five will not return to Derrida. It is, however, important to reflect on his "postmodern" position so that the theorist does not become an Achilles heel for the validation of Lyotard's postmodernism that this thesis is supporting. Derrida might be complex in his delivery, but it is important that this complexity is not dismissed out of hand as 'nonsense' or irrelevant nihilism—there is a method to deconstruction, though it is obviously one that can be seen to challenge the Western metaphysical tradition which is the subject of its ongoing critique.

Another thinker that should also be examined here for many of the same reasons as Derrida, given his prominent though contested⁹⁰ affiliation with postmodern thought, is the French historian of ideas Michel Foucault. Foucault's work is relevant in the purview of Lyotard in that the former's legacy resides in the observation that power and knowledge—long held in normative thought to be mutually exclusive and contradictory terms—are not opposing fields in which the latter can overcome the former, but are rather two sides of the same coin. This idea informs the basis of Lyotard's view of scientific knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition*: "knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?"⁹¹ For Foucault, however, the power/knowledge equation is important to recognize for how it implicates the subject of Enlightenment humanism. Again in the interest of strengthening postmodern positions from their detractors it is important to

⁹⁰ Alex Callinicos quotes Foucault as responding "sardonically" about the idea of a postmodern age with the quip "What are we calling postmodernity? I'm not up to date?" Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-structuralism," as quoted in, Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity P, 1989), 5.

⁹¹ Lyotard, 8-9.

analyse Foucault's thought briefly, but in the final analysis it is Lyotard's postmodernism that will be stressed—not the least because it presents a more optimistic and productive analytical template than that which will be seen to emerge in Foucault.

Foucault's historical revisionism and contribution to the paradigm of postmodernism posits the subject as a vacuous site of struggle over the workings of power and knowledge within the "discursive" space of modernity. Foucault dispensed with the ideal that a rational fully embodied subject could ever be an emancipatory possibility. This possibility would require that the individual be capable of overturning the "dominant" workings of power (exerted on the body or otherwise), and subsequently attain freedom of agency. In Foucault's view power, other than directly applied physical aggression, is not outwardly oppressive, but has rather in modernity been dispersed into the social fabric where language itself becomes a dimension of it. That is, power functions through collection of knowledge of and by individuals at numerous levels, and through a myriad of institutions: schools, science, medicine, media, etc. Foucault's radical notion, first seriously developed in his 1979 publication *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (but prefaced in earlier works including his 1965 assessment of the categorical emergence of insanity, *Madness and Civilization* and his 1973 *The Order of Things*) was to reverse the concept of subjectivity as not, for example, a self who exerts power over the Other (a process that can be reversed), but rather selfhood itself as being *constituted and dominated* by power through and through.

Foucault argues the above position metaphorically in *Discipline and Punish* using the British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) design of the "panopticon,"—a model prison in which surveillance could be exerted unknowingly on

prisoners thus promoting self-regulation of conduct, and it was hoped, reform. Disciplinary power that was once exerted outwards onto the body of the “condemned” through public displays of torture became internalized in the post-Enlightenment era through surveillance and control, namely in the form of knowledge. Within this regime of power/knowledge “man” as a subject and object became thinkable in the late 18th-, early 19th century; undoubtedly in the positivistic space of “Reality” for humanist rationalism’s ideals, but as an ever-unrealized fragmentation of discourse within Foucault’s anti-historicism/humanism critique. Owing a strong debt to the tenets of poststructuralism, as well as Heidegger’s anti-Enlightenment conception of being, Foucault posits the discursive spaces the modern subject inhabits as contingent upon the formation of “normalizing” epistemologies such as the “human sciences” that *objectify* individuals while also making them the *subject* of power. Foucault’s intellectual work attempts to pursue a “genealogy” of this power/knowledge regime—revisiting history not as a straightforward narrative of human teleological achievements towards freedom, but conversely as a series of historically contingent and continually inescapable “dominations” that enmesh the (postmodern) figure of the fragmented subject. On this last point Foucault’s work has been criticized as failing to offer a substantial politics to escape this system of domination,⁹² as well as challenged as incongruous for those times when he has suggested the possibility of transgression.⁹³

⁹² Nancy Fraser delivers a productive criticism of Foucault’s thought from the perspective of three different possibilities for the latter’s rejection of humanism: on “strictly conceptual and philosophical grounds,” “strategic grounds,” or on “normative grounds.” Nancy Fraser, “Michel Foucault: A ‘Young Conservative’?” *Ethics* 96 (1985): 165-184.

⁹³ Stephen K. White has commented on the fact that “To single out and endorse such movements means that Foucault must move out of the detached perspective assumed in the archaeological-genealogical analysis of fields of behavior and into the

Leaving this brief analysis of Foucault, this section will conclude with the observation that in their own distinct fashion each of the three “postmodern” theorists encountered above call for a reconsideration of how the subject has been positioned within social relations in modernity, and into postmodernity (if one can accept the term). A task that requires a reworking of normative concepts such as power, knowledge, and most importantly language and communication, in the face of the realization that the *grand narratives* supporting Enlightenment epistemology and supposed emancipation have provided also for modernity’s greatest exclusions, omissions, violence, and oppression. It is on this point, again the question of the legitimation of knowledge, upon which the postmodern *turns*. Poststructuralist and postmodern thought as delineated through Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault has severely questioned, or at least brought to the fore, what had up until that point not been a major issue within modern Western academia and institutions of higher knowledge, yet alone within the ‘general’ public: that of the postulation of knowledge itself. And it is on this point that this chapter may conclude by examining again Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, a text the weight of which is owed to its bringing together of the sociohistorical paradigm of postmodernity and postmodern theory to argue that what has shifted in the condition of postmodernity is mainly the criteria upon which to legitimate knowledge. For this reason, over and above Derrida and Foucault whose influence on postmodernism has been significant, it is Lyotard’s reading of the postmodern that will be defended throughout this thesis, and

analysis of situations of action. But to adopt an action-theoretical perspective requires one to speak of subjects of action in a way that cannot be grasped in archaeological-geneological categories.” Stephen K. White, “Foucault’s Challenge to Critical Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 2 (1986): 423.

against attacks from political economy, to be eventually returned to in the final chapter below.

VI

Conclusion: What Postmodernism Says, Incredulity as Loss of Faith

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, setting out to ask what postmodernism says would mean entering into some very broad terrain. In fact, the terrain could have been much broader than that which has been presented here. Postmodernism is by no means a singular category, nor can there ever hope to be an illustration of it encompassing the full range of thought and analysis within its parameters. This study has not touched on one of the primary areas where postmodernism first emerged, namely architecture.⁹⁴ Nor has it aimed to assess the different forms that characterize postmodern cultural products: pastiche, pop, recycling and quotation, etc. There has also only been scattered mention of the main premises accepted by that branch of theory known as “postmodern.” Some of these were raised in the discussion of Hassan as well as Baudrillard, and others can be gleaned from Foucault and Derrida: the death of the subject, fragmentation of reality, the primacy of language to thought and identity. Norman K. Denzin offers what can only be seen as a very comprehensive list of premises associated with “postmodern social theory.” In lieu of attempting a paraphrase of these ideas that are available in any number of analyses of postmodern thought, I will take the liberty to quote from Denzin’s poignant summary:

A departure from theorizing in terms of grand systems which conceptualize the social as a totality; an intense preoccupation with the

⁹⁴ Two of the more famous analyses being, Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977); Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izendour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2000 [1972]).

crises of legitimation and experience that characterize the modern computerized, media dominated world cultural system; a radical conceptualization of language, linguistic philosophy and pragmatism; a critique of scientific knowledge and realism in the late-capitalism era; a critique of the subject in social theory; a concern for the collapse of metanarratives (science, religion, art) in everyday life; a call for new images of the social, society, language and the human subject; a profound distrust of reason and science as forces which will produce a utopian society based on consensus, rational communicative action, and human freedom.⁹⁵

The reason this chapter has not chosen to stress or outline each one of these premises is deliberate. While agreeing that each one of these premises outlines a “postmodern” outlook for social theory, and notably each one owes a large debt to Lyotard, if not Derrida and Foucault, there is a problem if premises are listed as the simple and sole means to establish the parameters of “what postmodernism says?” Certainly much postmodernism says these things, but the problem is a bit like putting the cart before the horse: without establishing terms for postmodernism on a level other than that established by modern thought and its conceptual parameters, these premises, while descriptive, mean little. The reason being that modern thought is more than prepared to look out to the social body and find evidence of, for example, metanarratives and, evidence in hand, list these as refuting the so-called “collapse of metanarratives.” Naomi Klein’s 2000 best seller *No Logo* can be read as exactly just such an attempt at trying to stress a metanarrative of power and globalization through which major corporations are creating a capitalist global order. Her pointed and convincing analysis is deliberately set against the model of 1980s “identity politics” which tended to focus on semiotics and representation at the expense of the metanarrative (evinced in the popular slogan ‘the

⁹⁵ Norman K. Denzin, “Postmodern Social Theory,” *Sociological Theory* 4, no. 2 (1986): 194-195.

personal is political’).⁹⁶ By the same token the postmodern preoccupation with the “experience that characterize the modern computerized, media dominated world cultural system” rings hollow or deterministic to modern thought if it is ever seen to extend beyond a strict dichotomy between machine and human. Undoubtedly it is for this reason that Marshall McLuhan has been so often downplayed as a technological determinist because he actively attempted to blur the boundaries between humans and their relationship with technology.⁹⁷ It is for this reason that in lieu of setting up a number of premises for postmodernism that could, rightly or wrongly, be knocked down given their absurdity from within a modern conceptual analysis, this chapter has instead sought to outline differential terms for postmodernism aimed at circumventing this problem. At this point a recap of the goals and arguments of this chapter is in order.

Section II aimed to set these terms while section III argued that so-called “moderate” postmodernists sometimes characterize postmodernism’s goals as being “radical” only to mask the fact that they would see a continuation of modernism’s more avant-garde and totalizing goals. The latter is something that is rendered incompatible with postmodern understood as an inability to believe in metanarratives. Section IV attempted to examine the idea of postmodernity as a sociohistorical paradigm and argued that whether or not adequate criteria can be established for calling the present age postmodern, it is the case that a number of thinkers have chosen to characterize it as such, hence opening a space for the ideational consideration of postmodernism. Section V

⁹⁶ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Toronto: Vintage, 2000), 124.

⁹⁷ Thus James Carey’s sober analysis that “The first task is to demythologize the rhetoric of the electronic sublime. Electronics is neither the arrival of apocalypse nor the dispensation of grace. Technology is technology; it is a means for communication and transportation over space, and nothing more.” James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on media and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 139.

examined how a number of theoretical influences have become enmeshed with the conditions of postmodernity, creating a body of thought aimed at extending, speculating or indeed rethinking the seminal categories of modern thought and its uncritical reflection of the position of the subject within the realm of knowledge creation. As such, within the parameters of Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard certain concepts are jettisoned that have otherwise been a basis for legitimate social scientific inquiry. That the ideas of these thinkers can be considered without delegitimation is only by virtue of an understanding of postmodernism that does not base its legitimation for knowledge on terms set by modern analysis. This is certainly not to say that postmodern thought is outside the bounds of criticism, but it is to offer up some protection and justification for its platform lest this thesis, and its positioning of postmodernism against political economy, becomes another effort at academic futility and simple polemics. Having said that, at the heart of what postmodernism says is something that modern thought has never been very good, or interested, in characterizing, namely, incredulity.

As mentioned at the onset to this chapter, the idea of an “incredulity toward metanarratives” is what characterizes the “postmodern condition” for Lyotard. The last section presented a context for this incredulity, but this must be broadened by the idea that Lyotard embraced not only the theoretical context of poststructuralism and Wittgensteinian language games, but also poured over contemporary writings aimed at characterizing the technological development of Western countries from the period of the 1950s. It is under these conditions that Lyotard devises the idea that knowledge had undergone a transformation within which its legitimacy had shifted: “In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the

legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses.”⁹⁸ At the base of Lyotard’s analysis of the delegitimation of knowledge is, “The decline of narrative [that] can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means....”⁹⁹ In so much this is territory familiar to the sociohistorical context for postmodernity outlined by Toynbee above. But despite this sociohistorical context, and despite all efforts at presenting shifts in technology, in higher education, in scientific inquiry (all of which Lyotard does over the pages of his text), Lyotard presents the caveat that “Anytime we go searching for causes in this way we are bound to be disappointed, we would still have to detail the correlation between the tendencies mentioned and the decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives of speculation and emancipation.”¹⁰⁰

As such, what Lyotard offers in *The Postmodern Condition* is sociological observation and philosophical speculation. Well documented and thoroughly intriguing, it characterizes a context in which knowledge has lost (or indeed never had) the ability to legitimate itself outside the system, or language game, within which it is operating. Knowledge itself becomes wholly pragmatic and its aims no longer ideal, consensual, or emancipatory. An acceptance of this scenario would indeed signify a move toward declaring “incredulity” towards a modern narrative of progress, consensus, and emancipation. “Incredulity,” that is, clearly understood as an inability to believe in the goals of modernity. This does not mean that postmodernism denies elements of the latter,

⁹⁸ Lyotard, 37.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 38.

or modern thought *in toto*. Rather, what postmodernism more rightly says is that perhaps it is time to look again at grand theorizing aimed at universal goals such as emancipation, or that would claim to speak on behalf of a social totality that does not fundamentally reconcile difference. These are two principal areas in which political economy and postmodernism will be seen to brush heads below, and for which Lyotard will be summoned again in a number of instances against the context of political economy. In the interest of that equation this chapter has not aimed to prove the undisputed validity of postmodernism. Rather, in describing a number of facets of postmodernity and postmodern thought, it has more modestly suggested that the incredulity upon which postmodernism's terms are set, and upon which the postmodern *turns*, is neither arbitrarily reckless nor radical, and certainly not without theoretical and historical justification.

Keeping this assessment of postmodernism in mind, the next three chapters for this thesis will be devoted to an analysis of a template that does not accord postmodernism very much in the way of theoretical or historical prowess: political economy. The latter does not go very far at all in accepting postmodernism 'on its own terms', let alone accepting it at all. In examining the terms for political economy, its epistemological premises, its discord with postmodernism will become apparent. It is to these differential terms for political economy that the next chapter turns.

Chapter Two

What Political Economy Says I: Epistemological Premises

“It is true that critical political economy mostly works at a structural level, detailing the ways in which the dynamics of capitalism create particular kinds of arenas for action which encourage certain forms of meaning-making and discourage or rule out others.”¹

I

Introduction

The last chapter presented postmodernism as both a sociohistorical paradigm and a set of theoretical assumptions premised upon the idea of “incredulity” toward metanarratives. It concluded that postmodernism as an area of inquiry is certainly not without theoretical and historical justification. This last point is important because, as will become apparent in Chapter Four, political economy has the tendency to denounce postmodernism without accepting or readily engaging the circumstances through which its lack of faith in metanarratives has come about. Instead, as will be argued over the course of the next three chapters, political economy adheres to a modern critical epistemology that is at pains to reject any argument advanced by postmodernism. The outline for the next three chapters will be as follows. In this chapter, the goals and premises for political economy as advanced by some of its major proponents will be presented. This chapter will focus on political economy’s interest in explaining the “social totality,” an explanatory context for communication and culture suited to the purpose of social transformation. The next chapter will examine a rhetorical strategy that surfaces in much political economic writing. It is a strategy that follows clearly from political economy’s tendency to define itself ‘negatively’, against other templates which it finds inadequate and which it also

¹ Graham Murdock, “Across the Great Divide: Cultural Analysis and the Condition of Democracy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 12 (1995): 92.

claims to subsume within itself. These ‘alternative’ paradigms include structuralism, instrumentalism, even more extreme versions of political economy itself, and, most importantly, cultural studies. The third chapter will argue that in response to criticisms that it is reductive, political economy responds with the claim that it is a dynamic and flexible paradigm, a claim that often falls short in practice. Finally, in Chapter Four I examine what political economy has to say about postmodernism. Here a hostile and arguably defensive tone emerges as political economy berates those who have accepted the terms of “incredulity” proposed by postmodernism. In its hostility, it becomes evident that political economy has done little to reconcile its modernist epistemology with postmodernism, preferring instead to attack the latter from the foundational premises of modernity. It is these premises that come to the surface in the present chapter that examines specifically what political economy says.

The political economy of communication is a discipline whose emancipatory goal stands on the ability to present a clear and determinate explanatory field for the realm of communication and culture. To this end, many of its practitioners emphasize the importance of a narrative context aimed at explaining the larger “social totality.” Political economy also affirms moral judgments and criteria for determining what a better media system should look like, as well as what could be considered more “positive” media content. Overall, political economy is an analytical template aimed not only at explaining events within the broad realm of communication and culture, but at changing this realm as well. In contrast to postmodernism, political economy emerges as a pre-eminently modern social scientific program. Nonetheless, leaving postmodernism aside

for the moment, this chapter will focus on answering the question “what does political economy claim?”

II

A Disclaimer: The Problem of Emancipation

Before beginning this chapter a word of clarification and caution is in order. Throughout what follows I will be using the words ‘emancipation’, ‘human emancipation’ and ‘social transformation’ in what might be perceived as a somewhat disparaging manner. I do not of course disparage the idea of human emancipation. The goal of social transformation and/or human emancipation is self-evidently a desirable one that I wholeheartedly support. However, raising the idea of human emancipation and social transformation as a practical possibility, no matter how desirable, also presents a number of problems that might not be apparent at first glance, and are often overlooked by Marxian theorists.

In order to hold to an idea of human emancipation as the ultimate end for analysis there must be a state of affairs, or forces to be analyzed that are said to impede conditions for emancipation. The idea of *critique* stipulates that criticism is made of a current condition in the interest of presenting a superior condition. It remains to be stated if this criticism of the conditions are to be dubbed faulty or not. But, moreover and more importantly emancipation holds to the possibility for a future state in which the conditions for liberation will be realized. This in itself perhaps does not seem problematic, but in order to realize such a condition a number of steps must be followed, and a consensus must be reached in order to ensure that the prescriptions toward emancipation can be practically realized. As such, emancipation is a highly prescriptive and normative endeavour. Without consensus, indeed universal agreement over the terms

for emancipation, there can be little hope of achieving an ideal future state. As such, the problem is raised of what to do with those who do not agree with the terms for emancipation? There are a few things that can be said about people realizing, or not, conditions for emancipation.

First, because emancipatory narratives are by definition universal (how could they be otherwise?), there is the immediate problem of what to do if people fail to share the same criticisms of the system as those who have prescribed the goal of emancipation? In other words, what if one person or group of people seems to not share the same interests of another? Many Marxian analyses have dealt with this issue and the problem of why workers—as a group with supposedly similar interests—do not seem to all agree with the conditions of emancipation from alienation. The prescription to this problem is raised by the idea of “false consciousness” in which people are said to not be aware of the possibility for emancipation. As will be seen below in the work of Nicholas Garnham, the idea of false consciousness is alive and well in the discourse of political economy.

Given the premise of false consciousness, emancipation is often prescribed as an enviable condition to be achieved for all, even in spite of people’s own ignorance of such a goal. As such, given that emancipation implies that *all* should be emancipated (even if, under conditions of false consciousness, they do not know it) it is an idea that, in its universality, can conflict with the question of subjectivity and plurality of human interests. This sentiment is reflected by Robert J. Antonio in an essay devoted to Marx and Habermas and critical of the “emancipatory theory tradition”: “Marx failed to consider adequately the patterns of communication necessary for the rise of an emancipatory proletariat...and this problem would long plague the emancipatory theory

tradition.”² Angela McRobbie quotes Stuart Hall in a similar vein slightly more directed at political economy: “the left has never understood the capacity of the market to become identified in the minds of the mass of ordinary people, not as fair and decent and socially responsible (it never was), but as an expansive popular system.”³ I am less interested in the moralization of the market (as in Hall) than in the problems which it raises for emancipatory theory. In other words, what if it is really not the case that people are duped into acceptance of the capitalist media and are simply interested in living their own lives and making their own decisions?

While no doubt a noble and valid idea, in practice prescribing an emancipatory model for a morally better, more authentic, more fully or purely human realm of life and action forces a conflict between an individual’s right to choose his or her tastes, preferences, goals for life, etc., and the prescribed set of goals, tastes, and preferences that are deemed by one group or class of people as being morally superior to all others. If history is any record, and efforts at establishing communism are especially eloquent in this regard, moral prescriptions in the interest of social transformation have often resulted in violence and repression. And while I am certain that many political economists and neo-Marxists feel today that the global capitalist media are enacting exactly this sort of repression, even violence, the prescription of a model for total social transformation can only be dangerous for the very things that the critics themselves value. This deeper desire is for human freedom *tout court*, what George Steiner has called “a deep-seated nostalgia for the absolute,” a desire which, in Marxism re-emerges as a total frame of

² Robert J. Antonio, “The Normative Foundations of Emancipatory Theory: Evolutionary versus Pragmatic Perspectives,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 4 (1989): 725.

inquiry aimed at restoring purity, wholeness or human-ness to a distorted and inhumane world.⁴ This is an understandable (even primordial?) goal, but one that in practice can only replace one totalizing system for another.

Ironically, what starts out as a prescription for a state of affairs in which people can realize human freedom can only be realized through a process in which some human interests are dubbed to be superior than all others. This factor comes about by the practical realization that emancipation can only be arrived at through social consensus confirming ultimate goals for social transformation and the value of emancipation itself (which again would have to be defined). Antonio's brief quote above is perceptive, therefore, in that communication itself would seem to run contrary to the emancipatory tradition. Communication implies difference, implies a possibility of heterogeneous language games and expressions of human desires and interests and possibilities for social organization. Consensus implies an end to this heterogeneity and a prescription for unanimity over the heterogeneity of language games. Because emancipation is a prescriptive state of affairs to be realized as a goal in the future it also signals an end in which heterogeneity has been subsumed under universality. Discourses aimed at universal agreement are often hostile to those who dissent, or disagree. As such, the idea of emancipation, as desirable as it may at first appear, carries with it the potential of doing violence to the heterogeneity of language games.

But here my skepticism toward theories of human emancipation is starting to sound less like my own, and much more like that which Lyotard brought against

³ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, as quoted in, Angela McRobbie, *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion and Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 1999), 64.

⁴ George Steiner, *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1974).

Marxism and modernity in his “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” It is a passage that summarizes what happens when one attempts to deny the heterogeneity of language games in the interest of arriving at a transformed reality for authentic human action:

Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games...and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience.⁵

For Lyotard, modernity’s promise, as it were, whether in the form of Marxism or Hegelianism, was to establish a metanarrative of totality within which a universal consensus would be reached through which humanity would reach the ends of “universal peace.” Lyotard questions this equation and finds in the postmodern a heterogeneity of language games; that is, a number of different paradigms for social action, which are not all reducible to the same metanarrative, nor even necessarily commensurable with one other. It is on such grounds that a metanarrative of emancipation begins to look shaky—even dangerous—because it establishes, whether intentionally or not, conditions under which the diversity of language games is eclipsed by a prescriptive discourse for human thought and action. Thus, even if the goals are entirely noble—which I have no doubt they are for political economy—a discourse of emancipation must always confront a discourse of plurality, call it the heterogeneity of language games, no matter what the

⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984 [1979]), 81-82.

intention of the ultimately desired social transformation. A more productive reading of language games will take place in Chapter Five that also places the concept against the communicative model of political economy.

In the meantime, the disclaimer here suggests merely that on these grounds a cautious flag be raised concerning theories aimed at a model for human emancipation or social transformation. This is not to say any effort at working through problems or attempting to impose justice or identify less than ideal social conditions is moot. It is to say that extending these efforts to the level of overall social and/or structural transformation can and often does have serious implications. My disclaimer against emancipation, therefore, can be summarized simply by saying that I am wary of the violence (literally or figuratively speaking) to diversity inherent within the language game of totality. This is the language game of human emancipation, and it is a metanarrative that can be seen to surface in the language of political economy, the premises for which will be viewed presently.

III

What Political Economy Says: Foundational Premises

i) Praxis

Returning to an examination of what political economy says with these disclaimers against emancipation in mind, one of the first premises outlined as intrinsic to political economy is its blend of rationally directed research and action aimed at social transformation. This combination of research and social action is a pursuit known as “praxis.” Vincent Mosco defines praxis as “the recognition that research and social intervention are intimately connected so that research is not simply the task of describing

the world but of pointing the way to changing it.”⁶ As Graham Murdock and Peter Golding explain in their introduction to a rather massive volume of political economic writings about communication, “The concern” for political economy has always been “not only for what is, but for what ought to be.”⁷ Mosco is more explicit in a 1989 essay which refers to C. Wright Mills:

Mills recognized that the sociological imagination could not stop at describing social life. It must make good on ‘its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time’ More concretely, Flacks and Turkel have called on sociology to ‘take as its goal human emancipation...a condition in which each person has the chance to participate consciously in the formulation and direction of the social organization affecting him or her.’⁸

Political economy takes for granted not only that emancipation is an achievable goal (theoretically and realistically), but also something much more basic: that the world can be reasonably and rationally placed into terms of conceptual understanding that can then be acted upon or accorded to the purpose of social transformation.⁹ In short, political

⁶ Vincent Mosco, Foreword, *Reconvergence*, by Dwayne Winseck (Cresskill, NJ.: Hampton P, 1998), xx.

⁷ Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, “Introduction: Communication and Capitalism,” in *The Political Economy of the Media*, Vol. 1, eds. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1997), xvi.

⁸ Vincent Mosco, “Labor in Communication Industries,” in *Rethinking Communication. Vol. 2. Paradigm Exemplars*, eds. Brenda Dervin, *et al.* (London: Sage, 1989), 222.

⁹ There is another element to consider when thinking about political economy’s notion of praxis and social transformation. Undoubtedly the crucial idea is to live in a world where everybody has autonomous access to citizenship and participatory democracy—everybody can live and think freely and have equal opportunity and access to the means of communication. This emancipatory goal opens up larger philosophical issues that enter the realm of utilitarianism and individual versus collective rights. There is not the room here to get into such a discussion. Suffice it to say instead that in the class-basis of political economic analysis, it is difficult to see how the interests of *one* class could be extended to mean freedom for *all*. By definition it would seem to follow that within such a totalizing frame for social transformation another division of labour and power would rise to the surface. This is the real dilemma that faces much

economy rests upon the assumption that the world is always self-identical (this is, in fact, the pre-condition of consensus); that it is available to investigation (i.e., we know the world itself and not only our means of investigating it); that the means of investigation are adequate and devoid of perversity (i.e., they do not introduce distortions or can be controlled so as to eliminate distortion); and that all researchers see the same thing when the appropriate methods are used (i.e., everybody plays only one language game and its appropriate outcome is consensus). This can be called the realist epistemology at the basis of political economy.

ii) Realism

In the interest of locating political economy's epistemological realism, Graham Murdock opens his essay "Critical Inquiry and Audience Activity" with the heading, "The Researcher as Realist." This essay occurs in the context of a critique of trends in "ethnographic" studies of media reception that, according to Murdock, fail to explain fully structural (i.e. political economic) factors that can account both for audience tastes and for media messages produced. For Murdock, the value of realism lies in that it blends both the factual "findings" of empirical studies (primarily "sample surveys") with "theory," though the latter is somewhat undefined. Nonetheless, this is a realist epistemology placed in the service of critical inquiry, which:¹⁰

emancipatory theory: how to gain complete autonomy and freedom for all without simply replacing what is held to be one repressive system for another?

¹⁰ While Murdock's essay is sociological in orientation since it involves an explanation and critique of audience research studies through the work of Pierre Bordieu, it also expresses Murdock's broader political economic goals. In the section "Income and Unequal Access," which investigates access to the increasingly privatized media system in many Western countries, Murdock writes "This new economic dispensation has far-reaching social implications given that people's capacity to participate in the political system as fully enfranchised citizens depends, in part at least, on their access to the full range of information...." Graham Murdock, "Critical Inquiry and Audience Activity," in

cannot be confined to audience activity as it appears to external observation and measurement (as in empiricist approaches) or as it is understood and described by participants (as in interpretive approaches). It must move beyond immediate acts of consumption and response to analyze underlying structures that provide the contexts and resources for audience activity and go on to demonstrate how they organize the making and taking of meaning in everyday life.¹¹

Realism is called forth to aid in determining the political economic context in which audience activity is implicated. Realism is further defined in a later work by Golding (with Murdock) in which critical political economy “assumes a realist conception of the phenomenon it studies in the simple sense that the theoretical constructs it works with exist in the real world, they are not merely phenomenal.”¹² Bypassing the type of “abstract theorizing” that Murdock associates with Baudrillard in his “Critical Inquiry” essay,¹³ realism helps to ground “critical analysis” in its principal concern “with the question of action and structure, in an attempt to discern the real constraints which shape the lives and opportunities of real actors in the real world.”¹⁴ Thus, the political economy of communication is *not* interested in theory (i.e. an anti-realist epistemology) that questions the basic acceptance of Reality and/as the material structures through which media messages are created and communication and culture develops. “As such,” Golding and Murdock continue, “critical theory is also materialist, in its focus on the interaction of people with their material environment and its further preoccupation with unequal command over material resources and the consequences of

Rethinking Communication. Vol. 2. Paradigm Exemplars, eds. Brenda Dervin, *et al.* (London: Sage, 1989), 230.

¹¹ Murdock, 227.

¹² Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, “Culture, Communications and Political Economy,” in *Mass Media and Society*, eds. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Arnold, 1996), 13.

¹³ Murdock, 227.

¹⁴ Golding and Murdock, “Culture, Communications and Political Economy,” 13.

such inequality for the nature of the symbolic environment.”¹⁵ Hence, political economy privileges a realist epistemology simple because it begins its critique at the level of material reality. Kept at this level, a realist epistemology is called forth to provide an underlying context for what is otherwise considered as “fact” in normative empirical studies, or merely “ideological” within cultural studies.¹⁶ Realism may, therefore, be defined as the claim that statements made about the world are not merely, simply or primarily projections of the mind *onto* the world but rather and most importantly full, adequate and truthful *renderings* or *capturings* of the reality of the world. It is the claim to be connected directly to the world, unmediatedly, without the intervening distortions of language or communication; it is direct, full and adequate perception. In this sense, then, language is not a veil between us and the world but a neutral medium for the full, fair, accurate and adequate representation of my thoughts to your mind, of your thoughts to my mind, and of the nature of the world to both our minds. Therefore, truth is structured into the very nature of knowledge and into the very being of reality. To argue over it is merely to give evidence of one’s inadequate perception.

Political economy is less interested, therefore, in media messages themselves, than in the resources through which messages are produced. By contrast, focussing simply on “texts,” or media messages, is held by political economy to be secondary to its more fundamental explanatory approach. It is the former—the study of “texts”—that is usually associated with cultural studies. Ted Magder explains the difference between the

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Robert McChesney describes cultural studies as often “concerned with the relationship of media ‘texts’ to audiences and both of them to existing class and social relations,” but that falls short of examining the underlying context for this relationship. “The Political Economy of Global Communication,” in *Capitalism and the Information*

two fields from the perspective of political economy. With reference to a context for political economy in Canada that has in Magder's view been overly economic to date, Magder declares:

No doubt the relative neglect of the cultural sphere stems...from an unstated assumption that the best approach to contemporary cultural practice lies within semiotics and content analysis, which concentrate on the ideological dimensions of cultural practice and try to uncover its various systems of meaning and representation. Analysis of the "text" is indeed vital to the study of culture, but the "context" of culture—its economic, political, and social determinants—must also be probed. This is the task for a political economy of culture.¹⁷

Following with the political economist for a moment, Magder elaborates on this task for political economy aimed at explaining the "context" of culture:

[R]elating what is produced to how production takes place, how it is organized institutionally and economically, and, increasingly, how it is regulated by the state. Indeed the method of political economy is well suited to the analysis of contemporary cultural practices, which now firmly and increasingly depend on the process of capitalist commodity production. The production of culture has become a big business. Moreover, there is an undeniable affinity between the commercialization of production and the form and content of contemporary cultural products. Increasing concentration and monopolization within the cultural industries have helped standardize and homogenize cultural production. That "Hollywood" refers both to the most dominant film production and distribution companies in the world and to the dominant form of filmmaking itself is proof of these trends. And while there is still considerable space for resistance to these trends, the constraints on creative and democratic cultural production must be recognized and analysed.¹⁸

Age, eds. Robert McChesney, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review P, 1998), 4. See also Magder's comments in the next paragraph.

¹⁷ Ted Magder, "Taking Culture Seriously: A Political Economy of Communications," in *The New Political Economy*, eds. Wallace Clement and Glen Williams (Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989), 278.

¹⁸ Magder, 279.

In the final analysis, Magder stipulates the sort of commitment required by political economy. It is a commitment that again links political economy to emancipation through a context of understanding aimed at praxis:

This cannot be a detached academic exercise. If the new political economy is to remain committed to social change, to the development of a more progressive, democratic, and egalitarian social system, we need to establish a cultural sphere radically different from the current commercialized, centralized, and undemocratic structures. A political economy of culture will help us not only to understand the current structure but also to develop a more democratic alternative. Otherwise we have not yet learned to take culture seriously enough.¹⁹

Magder has been quoted at length here because his account of the project of political economy outlines quite straightforwardly the larger goals of the approach. These quotations also illustrate very well the faith that political economy places in its ability to provide a context to “understand” and address the realm of communication and culture in such a way that leads to alternative media frameworks. As such, Magder’s descriptions of political economy and its goals bring to the fore—albeit by example and not by name—a number of premises coinciding with realism that are usually part and parcel of a political economic analysis.

For example, the second quotation above (“relating what is produced to how production takes place...”) illustrates well Magder’s use of narrative to account for the social totality, in this case the commercial communication system in North America. It is a good example because it is simple: the social totality in this case is “proven” by Hollywood and its indisputable output—“The production of culture has become a big business.”

¹⁹ Magder, 279-280.

The narrative for the “social totality” is a narrative told at the level of structure and the production of media messages: something that a realist and materialist epistemology can readily identify. This basis for contextualization is, as will be demonstrated, continually reinforced for political economy. This realist point of view is interesting because it works on the empirical basis of indisputable fact (who owns what and how much), but unlike empiricism it also links fact to value through a process of moralization that it holds to follow from a materialist view, but which is not “abstract theory.” On that note, Magder’s entire analysis exemplifies the sort of moral conviction that characterizes another basic premise for political economic analysis. In this case the cultural fare that is distributed by Hollywood and other monopoly and concentrated media sources is contrasted to the possibility of democracy and egalitarianism. To the affirmed degeneracy of the existing system is counter-posed a morally superior alternative.

iii) Moral Absolutism

Another requisite for attaining the goals of political economy is therefore taking a moral stand with respect to the analytical field that is not relative but absolute. Robert McChesney exemplifies the moral stance of political economy: “The global corporate media produce some excellent fare, and much that is good, especially in the production of entertainment material in commercially lucrative genres. But in view of the extraordinary resources the corporate media command, the overall quality is woeful. In the final analysis, this is a thoroughly commercial system with severe limitations for our politics and culture.”²⁰ Indeed, McChesney (above) even follows his commentary with a quotation from George Gerbner who states that the “media giants,” “have nothing to tell,

but plenty to sell.” Gerbner has himself spent a good part of his career measuring the detrimental effects of media productions on the social body.²¹

McChesney had made his moral convictions clear in the introduction to his 1997 book, *The Global Media*, co-written with Edward S. Herman. The latter has himself published, in collaboration with Noam Chomsky, the extremely popular and influential *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) that advances a “propaganda model” for the media in which advertisers infect the American public with wants and desires which are precisely the criteria of big business. Herman and McChesney write, “the market finds that violence and sex draw larger audiences, so that commercial entertainment offerings tend to be infused with these. But the exploitation of violence and sex can be socially detrimental, making the audience more fearful, insecure, and prone to violence. Put otherwise, the market can make money by programming that yields *negative* externalities, just as it improves its bottom line by ignoring the positive externalities of the public sphere.”²² All said, it is undoubtedly possible to suggest that Herman and McChesney’s moral reading of media content and the “context” of communication and culture is a more pointed extension of what Magder presented above. And while Edward Herman has been accused of “instrumentalism” by fellow political economists,²³ this only

²⁰ McChesney, 15.

²¹ For example, George Gerbner, Hamid Mowlana, Herbert I. Schiller, and eds., *Invisible Crises : What Conglomerate Control of Media Means for America and the World* (Boulder: Westview P, 1996).

²² Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, *The Global Media* (London: Cassell, 1997), 7.

²³ Golding and Murdock lay the charge in conjunction with Herman and Chomsky’s aforementioned *Manufacturing Consent*, explaining that “Instrumentalists focus on the ways that capitalists use their economic power in a commercial market system to ensure that the flow of public information is consonant with their interests.” The authors suggest that Herman and Chomsky are “partly right” in insisting that governments and big business have more power when it comes to setting the agenda for

serves to get at another premise through which political economy organizes its research agenda: defining itself through what it is not. This is the premise (negative definition) that will be examined in the next chapter.

In the meantime, it should be noted that the premises of realism, postulating the social totality, the invariant nature of reality, the existence of non-distorting tools for the capture of reality, and the potential for consensus, as well as taking a moral stance, not to mention its avowed commitment to praxis and social transformation, are clearly illustrated in the literature of political economy. Indeed, Mosco states plainly in his 1996 “rethinking” of *The Political Economy of Communication* that from its earliest beginnings under Adam Smith, and in a more critical vein in Karl Marx, right up “to the work of contemporary political economists of communication, we can observe a strong commitment to historical analysis, to understanding the broad social totality, to moral philosophy or the study of social value and of a good social order, and, finally, to social intervention and praxis.”²⁴ Golding and Murdock also list “three insistent characteristics” of political economy: it is holistic, historical, and posits a realist/materialist epistemology. “For critical political economy,” Golding and Murdock write, another element is necessary: that the “moral and philosophical foundations essential to classical political economy were retained.”²⁵ All these areas flesh out the answer to the question of what political economy says which is the goal of this chapter. In the final summary, it will be

news, but that instrumentalist positions “overlook the contradictions in the system. Owners, advertisers and key political personnel...operate within structures which constrain as well as facilitate.” As such, in derailing instrumentalism the door is left open for critical political economy to postulate social transformation out of the fissures within capitalist structures. Golding and Murdock, “Culture, Communications and Political Economy,” 15.

²⁴ Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 17.

²⁵ Golding and Murdock, “Introduction: Communication and Capitalism,” xvi.

concluded that political economy aims, above all else, to posit a narrative for understanding the “social totality” of communication and culture. Without such a narrative (for which there must be consensual agreement) social transformation is not possible. To re-quote Magder from above, this time with emphasis, “A political economy of culture will help us not only to *understand* the current structure but also to develop a more democratic alternative.”

Creating such a discourse of understanding aimed at social transformation is *prima facie* perhaps not really a problem, nor a surprising goal for sociological inquiry. The matter of concern lies in the attempt to maintain a rigid realist/materialist narrative as though it were a complete and totalizing metanarrative in an age of pluralism in which heterogeneous language games abound and in which many people are quite simply incredulous towards metanarrative.²⁶ As I will argue over the next three chapters, political economy is not very interested in incredulity, except as it is seen to trouble on its realist project. The goals of political economy are clear: uphold a narrative for the social totality through which to reach a consensus for the path toward social transformation.

IV

Foundational Premises Continued: Consensus, False-Consciousness and Emancipation

i) Political Economy and Modernity, the Ideal of Consensus

All of the major attempts to define the political economy of communication in recent years by Murdock, Golding, Garnham, and Mosco, exhibit a number of shared starting

²⁶ The point here, which will become clearer as this chapter continues, is that the realist-based narrative for the “social totality” is not held to be a merely discursive one, but one that actively defines, beyond repute, real and immutable properties of the “real” world.

points.²⁷ Janet Wasko also presents a curtailed version of these premises aimed at “the study of capitalism as a structured totality.”²⁸ This makes it possible to present critical political economy clearly as a paradigm and list its main features and premises.²⁹ These features and premises exhibit an obvious *credulity* toward the critical and emancipatory tradition in which Lyotard and others have lost faith.

There are four main premises that define political economy as a paradigm and point toward how to conduct critical analysis of communication and culture. These premises are listed in Golding and Murdock’s 1996 article “Culture, Communications, and Political Economy”: “First, it is holistic. Secondly, it is historical. Thirdly, it is centrally concerned with the balance between capitalist enterprise and public

²⁷ The works being referred to here are Graham Murdock, “Across the Great Divide: Cultural Analysis and the Condition of Democracy,” 89-95; Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, “Introduction: Communications and Capitalism;” Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, “Culture, Communication and Political Economy;” Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*; Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*.

²⁸ Janet Wasko, “What’s So ‘New’ About the ‘New’ Technologies in Hollywood? An Example of the Study of the Political Economy of Communications,” in *Rethinking Communication: Volume 2. Paradigm Exemplars*, eds. Brenda Dervin, et al. (London: Sage, 1989), 495.

²⁹ Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. describes a “Radical Political Economy of Communications,” that stems from the work of Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller and lists Murdock, Golding, Garnham, Mosco, Wasko, as well as Armand Matellart as its main contemporary proponents. Oscar J. Gandy, Jr., “The Political Economy Approach: A Critical Challenge,” in *The Political Economy of the Media*, Vol. 1, eds. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1997), 32-33.

On the other hand, one of these proponents, Graham Murdock, is not so certain that this tradition is so easily summarized: “The attempt to interrogate these realities, to trace their histories, dynamics, and consequences, has been central to the critical political economy that Garnham, myself, and many others have sought to practice. This effort does not constitute a “school” a “paradigm” or a “position.” It is too diverse for any of these static terms to be much help as a description. Nevertheless, there are shared starting points.” Murdock, “Across the Great Divide,” 91. I will be drawing on Gandy’s reading of this field and holding to an idea that there are quite clear premises which demarcate a locatable paradigm of critical communication studies for which, as Murdock suggests, “there are shared starting points.”

intervention. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it goes beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good.”³⁰

Golding and Murdock reiterate these premises in their introduction to a volume on political economy published the following year. Emphasizing again that political economy is both holistic and historical, the third premise now falls under a “realist/materialist epistemology.” Again, also, for “*critical*” political economy “the moral and philosophical foundations so essential to classical political economy were retained as the starting point of analysis.”³¹

These premises are echoed by Mosco in his 1996 “rethinking” of the paradigm:

Moving beyond debates about how to define political economy, we address those major characteristics that have preoccupied political economists from the time of the discipline’s modern foundation in the work of the eighteenth-century Scottish and English moral philosophers. From that time forward, through to the work of contemporary political economists of communication, we can observe a strong commitment to historical analysis, to understanding the broad social totality, to moral philosophy or the study of social value and of the good social order, and, finally, to social intervention and praxis.³²

Sharing with Golding and Murdock an emphasis on holism, understood here as “the social totality,” Mosco also stresses a moral stance for the beginning of analysis, as well as a historical approach. Mosco also postulates a realist epistemology, as will be demonstrated below when this premise is again taken up in greater detail.

Finally, Garnham’s 1990 *Capitalism and Communication* takes a realist approach to analysis, and outlines premises similar to those above. In Garnham these premises turn into a method for establishing the conditions for what Mosco describes as “social intervention and praxis.” Garnham begins, like Mosco, by making reference to “the

³⁰ Golding and Murdock, “Culture, Communications and Political Economy,” 14.

³¹ Golding and Murdock, “Introduction: Capitalism and Communication,” xvi.

Enlightenment project,” which, “In breaking with religious explanations...placed the responsibility for human action and human salvation in human hands and sought the answer to the questions it posed in the concept and practice of human reason. It was reason which linked the project of understanding the world to the project of changing it.” For Garnham, political economy understood as “progressive politics” is tied to a series of “rational” premises.³³ For attaining the emancipatory goals of political economy, a number of rules are important:

What I mean by [rationality] is a system of inter-subjective communication based: first, on a shared and realist epistemology—that is, an assumption that there is a material world external to our cognitive processes which possesses specific properties ultimately accessible to our understanding; second, on shared rules of discourse such that there are propositions on which we can all agree, on the basis of the presented evidence and the observance of common rules of argumentation, to be either true or false; third, on the assumption that humans share enough common characteristics to make it possible for them to agree on the accuracy of external descriptions of their interests and the reasons for their actions, as well as being potentially capable of arriving at a common set of judgements as to the rightness or wrongness of any given action in the light of an agreed set of common interests.³⁴

It should be mentioned that this list of rational premises is not particular to political economy, but is more reflective of the Enlightenment goals of consensual communication that was and is a hallmark of modern thought, as Garnham himself readily recognizes. As such, Garnham’s presentation of these terms exemplify the metanarrative of progress and emancipation that Lyotard brings up in his *Postmodern Condition*. There is no question that Garnham’s list of premises is perfectly reasonable and follows directly from the precepts of the Enlightenment, as well as the ideals of a

³² Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 17.

³³ It is Garnham himself, who had already in the opening paragraphs of his 1990 text expressed concern over “Nietzschean post-modernists” that brings attention to the word “rational,” “a term that one now uses, I realize, at one’s peril.” Garnham, 2-3.

universal pragmatics in the work of Jurgen Habermas.³⁵ The presentation of these terms does illustrate, however, how important a language-model paradigm based on the (Enlightenment) values of undistorted communication and the ability to reach universal

³⁴ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 3.

³⁵ Garnham makes reference to this aspect of Habermas' thought in a number of instances in *Capitalism and Communication*. In a section devoted to a consideration of the goals of a democratic politics for which, Garnham argues, "universal ends are always at issue," Garnham considers Habermas' theory of the public sphere and the possibility of attaining its ideals in which "in the Enlightenment tradition, it obeyed the rules of rational discourse, political views and decisions being open not to the play of power, but to the argument based upon evidence." While capitalist interests, as well as State power have placed increasing pressure upon the realization of this sphere Garnham agrees with Habermas that its "principles are the indispensable basis of a free society...general accessibility, especially to information, the elimination of privilege, and the search for general norms and their rational legitimation." In taking up these principles of Habermas in greater detail, a good illustration of Habermas' communicative ideals is presented, ideals of consensual communication that are also those which have been touched by the postmodern 'loss of faith'. It is worth quoting the passage by Garnham, if only to delineate quite clearly the terms of a modern epistemological stance which his political economy uses in order to establish the conditions of human emancipation and social transformation. Many of the terms for this elaboration, especially that of ever reaching an 'ideal speech situation', have been heavily scrutinized by postmodernism (see the 'differend', or the incommensurability of language games):

"The centrality of these principles for Habermas derives from his more general concern with 'undistorted communication'...Habermas has sought concrete grounds for the validation of critical social judgement and for the claims to human emancipation. He has attempted to ground truth claims in the social sciences upon what he has called the Ideal Speech Situation. He argues that human interaction, the field of meanings and values, presupposes language and exists in language. He goes on to argue that we can therefore discover within the structure of speech itself the essential grounding presuppositions of all human interaction and thus all social organization. He argues that every time we speak we are making four validity claims, to comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness and sincerity, which in their turn imply the possibility of justifying those claims. Thus the claim to truth implies a social context within which factual claims about external nature can be validated by evidence and logical argument, while claims to...the social right to make the statement, imply a social context in which social norms can be rationally debated and consensual agreement arrived at. In actual societies characterized by differential power relations and resource distribution such conditions do not hold, and we are thus in the presence of 'distorted communication'." Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 107-108. These ideas, especially the final comments on the difference between 'undistorted and distorted' communication, will re-surface below in a discussion of Garnham's assessment of 'false-consciousness'.

consensus (see note 35 for an elaboration of these terms) are for political economy's overall goal of human emancipation and social transformation. That is to say, not only must an inter-subjective consensual agreement be reached about the truth value for certain immutable properties of the world, but, this inter-subjective agreement must also cut across *all* language paradigms and epistemological contexts, i.e. all language games, in order to attain the goal of universal consensus and social transformation. As Lyotard argues, the philosophical leap of modernity, as for political economy, is in its attempt to extend this realist paradigm for attaining inter-subjective communication to the realm of a metanarrative (the attempt to universalize the rules of one particular language game – in this case, science).

On the heels of this broader modern/postmodern debate, Garnham's establishment of a realist "inter-subjective" communication model for political economy attempts to isolate the basic premises needed for establishing conditions for social transformation and human emancipation. Among these are "shared rules of discourse," providing for, "the assumption that humans share enough common characteristics," to arrive at "a common set of judgements as to the rightness or wrongness of any given action in the light of an agreed set of common interests." Following from these postulates Garnham goes on to discuss Kant who argued that "human beings shared the same set of common interests," and then turns to Marx as "the next and crucial step on the road to the political economy of communications." Marx is important as he "argued that the concept of human interest and of universal rationality had to be grounded materially and historically." Garnham, therefore, presents a model for political economy that is holistic (universal), historical, realist/materialist and morally grounded, but more importantly, is an attempt to hold true

to the much broader premises of Enlightenment rationality that have been placed under scrutiny by postmodernism. This is not to discount Garnham's premises or the larger goals of political economy, only to extrapolate the full extent to which these can be seen as credulous of the metanarrative of progress and emancipation towards which postmodernism has expressed incredulity. In its credulity to the conditions of rational communication aimed at consensus, it follows that political economy should be concerned with those elements which 'distort communication'. In this context emerges the capitalist media and the problem of false-consciousness.

ii) The Problem of False Consciousness: Impediments to Consensus

Following on the heels of Marx, Garnham's *Capitalism and Communication* moves from the possibility of establishing universal consensus and common interests to a discussion of those factors which impede the goal of inter-subjective communication: "the problem of ideology." As with Golding and Murdock's stress that political economy be "centrally concerned with the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention," what Garnham is concerned with in discussing ideology is the impediments to the "realization of the project of human liberation."³⁶ For Garnham, the project of human liberation is only realized when public intervention and common interests are autonomous from capitalist enterprise: "the truth...agreed to by free human beings as a result of an unconstrained process of rational debate...as the normative basis for both human science and political liberation."³⁷

As Garnham states, what Marx did was tie material and historical conditions to the realization of human liberation and the ability to conduct free, rational debate and

³⁶ Garnham, 5.

³⁷ Ibid., 4-5.

human action. These material and historical conditions are those of capitalism, and it is these that the political economy of communications picks up on and makes explicit.

Garnham lists three ways that “political economy of communications and culture links the analysis of capitalism, both as an overall social formation and as a specific mode of production, to the normative definition and realization of human liberation.” These are:

Firstly the relation between the mode of production of material life in general and the specific set of material practices by means of which symbolic forms are created, circulated and appropriated. Secondly the relation between capitalism as a social system and a set of ideas about the world possessed by human agents within that system. Thirdly, the relation under capitalism between human ideas and human actions.³⁸

Within this realist framework, Garnham brings the field of human experience down to an economically determined context of understanding. Within such a context it is readily possible to identify those factors which impede the rules of rational discourse outlined above. That is, for critical political economy what is impeding human freedom—or the ability to exercise or attain the ideals of “rational” inter-subjective communication and consensus —is a material network producing symbolic structures that either infringe directly upon public autonomy or at least keep the public unaware of the possibility of autonomy. The latter is the problem of “false consciousness.”

The concept of false consciousness applied by political economy is one that, by Garnham’s own admission, has received bad press over the last few decades.³⁹ Nevertheless, whether stated implicitly or explicitly, it is also a basic component of what political economy says; indeed, in the absence of hegemonic capitalist media infringing upon the ability to live a fully human life, political economy’s emancipatory mission has

³⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁹ Garnham, “Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?” 67-68.

considerably less purpose.⁴⁰ This section will follow Garnham to explain briefly the concept of false consciousness and emancipation, and then turn to the other premises for political economy previously outlined. As will be demonstrated, realism, morality and establishing the “social totality” provide an explanatory context for communication and culture aimed at emancipation from false consciousness.

Returning to the quotation from Garnham above, the link between structure and ideas necessary for a concept of false consciousness is apparent in the author’s suggestion that “material practices” are tied to the creation of “symbolic forms.” Moreover, human agents are said to derive all their ideas about the world from “capitalism as a social system.” The third postulate above, “the relation under capitalism between human ideas and human actions,” becomes strategic as it has to do with the notion that if we agree that capitalist relations govern all social relations as well as ideas about the world, then it follows that a change in these relations will cause a change in ideas and in the course of human action. What impedes such change, however, is the strength of postulate number one: “the relation between the mode of production of material life in general and the specific set of material practices by means of which symbolic forms are created, circulated and appropriated.” And herein lies the premise of false consciousness. It is a premise that Garnham makes no qualms about borrowing more or less directly from

⁴⁰ Garnham suggests that practitioners of cultural studies, though they do not admit it, do exercise a belief in false consciousness “otherwise their practice would be incomprehensible.” That is, what would be the point of their analyses of ideology, hegemony and the like? Garnham argues later that “The rejection of false consciousness within cultural studies goes along with the rejection of truth as a state of the world, as opposed to the temporary effect of discourse. But without some notion of grounded truth the ideas of emancipation, resistance, and progressiveness become meaningless. Resistance to what, emancipation from what and for what, progression toward what?” Garnham, 68-69.

Marx. To understand the full extent of this model it is necessary to quote Garnham at some length:

Marx held to a concept of human rationality and to a philosophical realism that maintains that a world exists exterior to human beings with defined properties which can in their turn be captured in those systems of representation through which we interpret that world, in such a way that human beings can come to a common and true understanding of that world through the evidence of their senses as communicated through the languages at their disposal. But it is central to this theory of ideology that this process of understanding is neither simple nor unproblematic. This is because the complexity of the world to be analysed and because of the mediated relationship between phenomena themselves, and between observing human agents and those phenomena. Thus the Marxist theory of ideology depends on a rationalist theory of truth against which ideology can be measured as false and at the same time acknowledges a possibility of false consciousness in the sense of systematic error in a world in which increasingly the knowledge of the world we require for action is not based upon evidence directly available to our senses. Hence the centrality of mediated forms of communication in the process of social life and its analysis.⁴¹

Garnham upholds a theory of false consciousness again in a 1995 debate with cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg⁴² that picks up on the notion of media and “systematic error” presented above: “once one accepts the idea that on the one hand, our relations to social reality are mediated via systems of symbolic representation and, on the other hand, that we live within structures of domination—the mechanisms and effects of which are not immediately available to experience—then a concept like false consciousness becomes necessary.”⁴³ So how to unpack Garnham’s lengthy passage in the interest of assessing what political economy says?

Simply stated, Garnham’s espousal of a model of false consciousness is an extreme form of economic determinism in which capitalist relations are equated with *all*

⁴¹ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 5.

⁴² This debate will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

sociocultural relations. This model of false consciousness is one based on the “complexity of the world to be analysed” that, in its efforts at offering a “rationalist” account of its systems and structures must also contend with “the centrality of mediated forms of communication in the process of social life.” It is the latter, the “problem of ideology,” that increasingly prevents human beings from coming “to a common and true understanding of that world through the evidence of their senses as communicated through the languages at their disposal.” Instead, there remains a consciousness that is false, or, at least, guided by “irrational and, to put it mildly, socially and personally suboptimal” actions.⁴⁴ This by virtue of those “structures of domination,” i.e., capitalist media, the “mechanisms and effects of which are not immediately available to experience.”

All in all, the model of false consciousness espoused by Garnham presents a realm of ‘distorted’ communication drastically impeding rational communication, consensus and, ultimately, social transformation. That is, false consciousness explains why Garnham’s realist and rationalist inter-subjective communication model outlined above cannot be realized. But there is hope. The problem of false consciousness, leading to a distortion of the public sphere and the subjugation of genuine human interests and free and rational discussion on the part of the general population, can be identified and diagnosed out by “intellectuals.” “First,” Garnham writes, “organic intellectuals, in a necessary and legitimate division of labor, create the consciousness of a class out of the

⁴³ Garnham, “Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 12, no. 1 (1995): 68.

⁴⁴ This line is from Garnham’s 1995 discussion on false consciousness. He is using a personal testimonial that “we are all aware of the ways in which the pressures of everyday life” lead people to act in the ways described above. Garnham laments that

fragments of that class's experience. Second, intellectuals provide a political strategy by providing a map of the structure of domination and the terrain of struggle."⁴⁵ What type of intellectual is suited for this task? Undoubtedly, "card-carrying political economists."⁴⁶ And how are they able to identify and rid the world of false consciousness and distorted capitalist relations under a burgeoning capitalist media system? The answer to this question has already been given: by establishing a dynamic model for mapping the "social totality" of communication and culture that points to the conditions, as well as the contradictions, of capitalist relations.

Of course, as mentioned above, there are a few imperatives to follow before establishing such a dynamic model. Political economists adhere to these imperatives in order to map the terrain of the "social totality" for communication, culture, and ultimately, reality. This dynamic model or contextual narrative, once adumbrated, identifies the determinate factors (false consciousness) impeding the possibility of consensus and free, rational inquiry based on (true) human interests. Indeed, the realist narrative associated with the dynamic model transcends the properties of language and points rather to the immutable properties of the "real world." At this point, the "social totality" can be seen to emerge as a narrative based on certain rules and criteria, ostensibly realism tied to moral absolutism, through which political economists come to a contextual understanding of reality in order to transform it. For this transformation to occur, however, political economy's view of reality, i.e., of the social totality, cannot be a

many academics "choose to forget this when they put on their scholarly hats." Garnham, 68.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁶ This term is used by Golding and Murdock, "Introduction: Capitalism and Communication," xvii.

“language game,” it must be *the* language game that transcends all others and is capable of establishing the grounds for human emancipation.

At this point I wish to remind the reader of my earlier observations upon the theme of human emancipation and social transformation. I do so because I realize that my presentation of political economy might be seen as pushing a very strange and pessimistic view of social relations and democratic possibilities. This should not be seen as the case. Indeed, postulates of inter-subjective communication based on consensus (even as expressed by Garnham) are a perfectly good goal. The difficulty emerges when the rules of this consensus-based model are transformed into ‘universals’, thereby requiring the enormous heterogeneity of language games to be reduced to a single game, and for all human interests—in the multifarious and incommensurable diversity—to pour themselves into the unique mold of Enlightenment objectives. When that happens, emancipation becomes prescriptive and normative and in that very process becomes the thing itself from which emancipation must be achieved. Such an order of universals is especially apparent in the notion of false consciousness, a concept that suggests that were it not for the integral problem of capitalist relations, human beings would be able to identify and consensually define the terms of their own emancipation. It is the capitalist media that are always getting in the way.

Garnham is only the most committed of political economists in recent years to espouse such a deterministic view of the power of false consciousness and, indeed, to espouse the rather vulgar concept of false consciousness itself. It incorporates a rather patronizing view of human agents *viz.* intellectuals. False consciousness necessarily implies the possibility of true consciousness which is, of course, the privilege of the

intellectual. None of Mosco, Golding and Murdock, nor Wasko make reference to false consciousness as such in their definitions of the field of political economy and its goals. However, this is not to say that they reject Garnham's efforts. Indeed, each of them specifically supports Garnham's emancipatory formulations and economically reductive explanations as appropriate for the field. Mosco bases his political economic analysis on the definition of realism found in Garnham. Murdock's chapter in the 1995 *CSMC* PE/CS debates agrees wholeheartedly with "Nick Garnham" and the notion that "the most pervasive and central conditions of contemporary cultural practice stem from the dynamics of capitalism as they operate within the sphere of cultural production to organize the making of public meaning, and more generally to form the conditions under which these meanings are encountered and worked out in everyday life."⁴⁷ Wasko, in an article short on explanation for what political economy is and does in favour of numerous case studies about Hollywood and "new" technologies (that in her estimation are not really so new or revolutionary) nonetheless holds up Garnham as a model for his description of "the study of political economy of mass communications as focusing on the significance of the industrialization of culture for the process of social cohesion or change, or the modes of cultural production and consumption developed within capitalist countries."⁴⁸ As such, while quiet on the specific concept of false consciousness, the overall goal for political economy involves the creation of, "a political strategy by providing a map of the structure of domination and the terrain of struggle." On the premises for the creation of this map there remains consensus, while Garnham specifically points to false consciousness when discussing the map's necessity.

⁴⁷ Murdock, "Across the Great Divide," 90.

⁴⁸ Wasko, 475.

V

Conclusion: Mapping the Terrain of Struggle

The basic premises listed over the course of this chapter can be brought together at this point as each contributes to a map with which political economists establish a framework of understanding for communication and culture aimed at pointing the way from reification to social transformation. The first thing required is a narrative structure: that of the “social totality” or a holistic approach to analysis poised to “examine...in full the interrelation of social and cultural dynamics.” Such a narrative was shown above to be not simply one possible narrative among others—the model for the “social totality” is held by political economy as comprising the sum total of all other narratives. As a model of the “social totality,” the narrative is aimed at demonstrating the dynamic and complex realm of communication and culture. In order to get a handle on such a wide and multifarious realm of inquiry, however, there must be a basis through which political economy’s narrative can ensure it is more valid than other observations and interpretations of the social realm.

Enter premise number two. The analysis of the social totality is conducted within an epistemological framework of realism and/or materialism. For Garnham this framework means “assum[ing] that there is a material world external to our cognitive processes which possesses specific properties ultimately accessible to our understanding.”⁴⁹ Or, as outlined by Golding and Murdock:

The critical perspective assumes a realist conception of the phenomenon it studies in the simple sense that the theoretical constructs it works with exist in the real world, they are not merely phenomenal. For this reason critical analysis is centrally concerned with questions of action and

⁴⁹ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 3.

structure, in an attempt to discern the real constraints which shape the lives and opportunities of real actors in the real world.⁵⁰

It is certainly difficult to argue with material reality and the observable world of the senses. But when dealing with the broad terrain of communication and culture there is obviously more at stake than just material factors. The media are producers of material objects, certainly, but of a uniquely immaterial kind; indeed, the media also produce experiences and memories, states of excitement and emotion, states of desire and longing, intensities, diversions, simple pastimes, impulses, etc. Hence, while it is relatively straightforward to identify empirical “facts” about the media—media concentration and ownership, who produces what, who has resources, etc.—it is considerably more difficult to capture “facts” about the full range of media ‘effects’. The temptation, then, is great to analyze texts and their reception. How, therefore, to ensure that the story of the social totality does not veer from the type of conclusions that can be reached by a realist/materialist epistemology (i.e. media concentration equals negative media messages), and start to drift into the more sinewy frame of the ideational, symbolic and more abstract realm of cultural productions, their meanings, and the specifics of their reception? At this (superstructural) level, there can often be a graying between right and wrong, correct interpretations, fact and fiction. In certain cases there may appear to be no necessary or determinate relation back to the economic and materialist base.

Enter premise number three, the moral imperative of political economy. Against the threat of abstraction and obscurity, Mosco has suggested that any analysis of communication not based at the level of class power and struggle and real working conditions risks becoming absorbed in the “insularity” of the “text.” Such absorption

⁵⁰ Golding and Murdock, “Culture, Communications and Political Economy,” 13.

represents an analytical abandonment of responsibilities “requiring little or no reference to economic, political, social, or, in the extreme, cultural practices.”⁵¹ Against the danger of inertia and apoliticism, even pleasure,⁵² therefore, a morally absolute guideline is presented by political economists that condemns the dangers of flirting with more relativistic or contemplative approaches. So Garnham declares that a “social science which cuts its links with this rationalist project of human liberation either sinks to the level where mere intellectual games are played...or it joins the ranks of those who, throughout history, have perfected and wielded the technologies of domination.”⁵³ There would seem to be little room for agnosticism with respect to political economy’s own judgmental frame, the alternative of indecision and ambiguity being coterminous with apologies for the system itself.

And so it is that the major attempts to delineate a critical political economy referred to above have each posited an analysis of the “social totality” based on these realist and rational premises. This model for the “social totality” serves as a map toward a final defining premise for the field, praxis: a need to understand the world in the interest of changing it. In opposition to numerous other approaches to the study of communication and culture, praxis is another important premise that political economy

⁵¹ Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 271.

⁵² This point must be added as it becomes apparent that much political economy sees a growing hedonism in analytical work that examines communication without any special or specific interest in judgement. So Murdock writes, defensively, “It is not, as some critics claim, that critical political economy is a ‘dismal science’. It has a strong interest in pleasure, or more correctly, in the preconditions of pleasure and self-expression. This follows logically from its ethical basis.” Murdock, “Against the Great Divide,” 93. It is only that moral judgement must come before pleasure, which, within this context means specifically that pleasure should not take place if it is an abandonment into “desire” provided for by an investment with capitalist cultural forms (or any cultural forms that presumably do not measure up to the morally sufficient status of integrity that political economy suggests).

reserves as its own. In this, the political economy of communication holds itself up as the worthy guardian of a practical method and context of understanding through which to create the materially and historically based conditions of social transformation and human liberation. Its premises of realism, materialism, moral absolutes and the positing of the social totality paint an accurate portrait of what political economy says. Through the acceptance of this model, political economy is poised to lead the masses out of the slumber of false consciousness and into the recognition that a more fully human and authentic system of social relations is on the horizon.

Overall, this chapter has aimed to answer the question of what political economy says. In doing so, it has surveyed a number of the more unanimous premises through which critical political economy analyzes communication and culture. This chapter has not sought to conclude that the more specific methodologies applied by political economists are all the same—Mosco, for example, uses the categories of “Structuration,” “Spatialization,” and “Commodification” as “entry points” while Golding and Murdock invariably juxtapose the symbolic realm of media products against their material production—only that, as more fundamental prerequisites, a critical approach contains these key ingredients.

In presenting these premises of praxis, realism, moral absolutism and a metaphysical language paradigm poised to adumbrate the “social totality,” political economy emerges as a “modern” template for sociological understanding for which a subsequent conflict with postmodernism would seem inevitable. Within its modern epistemological categories, political economy is more specifically a paradigm that contextualizes communication and culture on strictly economic and materialist terms.

⁵³ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 3.

This is something that has led to the charge of reductionism in which political economy makes economic criteria determinate of the entire realm of culture. This is a charge that the analysis of political economy above has done little to discount in its presentation of the field as more or less a tracing of economic determinants above all else. These determinants are epitomized in the language of false consciousness and the idea that the capitalist media are nothing more (but this is a lot) than a hegemonic screen masking the potential of fully human relations. The charge of reductionism and economic determinism is, however, one that political economy itself has done much to try to counter. It is to these rhetorical strategies through which political economy has attempted to face the charges of reductionism, determinism and economism that the next chapter will turn. Arguing that, despite its rhetoric, political economy is neither able nor interested in presenting a narrative for the “social totality” that is truly dynamic and pluralistic, the thesis will then examine what happens when political economy is faced with an epistemological context that *is* aimed at such indeterminate ends. This context is postmodernism, an epistemological paradigm for which political economy and critical will be seen to exude little more than scorn.

Chapter Three

What Political Economy Says II: Rhetorical Smokescreens

I

Introduction: Political Economy and the Inclusive Language of Totality

Perhaps the crucial premise for political economy identified in the last chapter is its confidence in the ability to postulate a narrative of the “social totality.” If one were to invert the well-known phrase of Lyotard, one might say that political economy is characterized by its *credulity* towards meta-narratives, or at least toward one meta-narrative in particular, the narrative of the enduring reality and efficacy of the social totality. Vincent Mosco has been one of the most ardent defenders of the notion of social totality in political economy although he does recognize that the attempt to establish a consensual and legitimate model of the social totality has been heavily challenged by “postmodernist and post-structuralist thinking.” Indeed, he characterizes the postmodern attack upon totality in these terms:

Across the range of differences within these views, one finds agreement that the term *society* is an attempt to apply a unity in discourse to something fundamentally divided, disconnected, and hence undefinable...The general tendency is to argue that there is no social totality, no individual totality, and no discursive totality.¹

Referencing Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* specifically, Mosco continues, “According to this view, the implosions of twentieth-century life, set off in part by the power of new communication and information technologies, have broken apart totalities, taking with them measures of time and space that ultimately used to provide some degree of unity.”²

Obviously, political economy and postmodernism are at loggerheads over the

¹ Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 32.

² Mosco, 32-33.

usefulness and plausibility of the language of totality. Mosco is not in agreement with what he sees as the fall into fragmentation and specificity, and away from macro-theorizing, that he believes accompanies postmodern and post-structuralist thinking. From a postmodern perspective, however, it is difficult to express confidence in any narrative of social totality because of postmodernism's very incredulity towards all meta-narratives, its belief that no language is capable of speaking from all subject positions, all points of view, or of producing a single, authoritative, or exhaustive account of 'society'. As Steven Seidman said earlier in this thesis, postmodernism is "characterized by a loss of certainty and a 'God's eye point of view' in the sphere of knowledge, a loss of a central, organizing principle governing society and a unitary standard of cultural excellence or morality, and a decline in a unitary, coherent self."³

As the last chapter pointed out, however, political economy is confident in or credulous of the very elements which inspire postmodernism's lack of confidence or incredulity. For example, political economy's knowledge paradigm is secure: it is firmly based in a realist/materialist epistemology that gives access to the world 'as it really is'.⁴ Its criteria for providing a moral evaluation of this knowledge of the world are not relativistic but absolute. Finally, though it was not stated specifically in the last chapter, the ideal of consensual communication based on language as a transparent vehicle for thought (Garnham's "rational" inquiry) implies the existence of a unitary, coherent self. Indeed, alienation and false consciousness only emerge as concepts worthy of inquiry

³ Seidman, 6.

⁴ William Outhwaite, whom Mosco references for his "recent critical work in epistemology" (p. 5), describes realism as "a common-sense ontology, in the sense that it takes seriously the existence of the things, structures and mechanisms revealed by the sciences, at different levels of reality." William Outhwaite, *New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics, Critical Theory* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987), 19.

because of the *prior* commitment to a unitary, coherent self for whom false consciousness, etc., would be a problem. On these grounds it is not surprising that Mosco takes postmodernism to task for its failure to adhere to political economy's epistemological premises.

Mosco's writings, however, are quite rich on this point. In his 1996 book he is motivated by his observation that pluralistic and indeterminate modes of thought are gaining currency in the field of critical communication studies. Mosco's concern is made clear in two ways: (1) his 1996 text "Challenges on the Borders" to political economy examines cultural studies, and, by extension, postmodernism and post-structuralism; and (2) his response to a 1990 essay by James Curran in which he finds the seeds of "new revisionism".⁵

The essay merits some attention. In it, Curran says:

The most important and significant overall shift has been the steady advance of pluralist themes within the radical tradition: in particular, the repudiation of the totalizing, explanatory frameworks of Marxism, the reconceptualization of the audience as creative and active and the shift from the political to a popular aesthetic.⁶

It is precisely this that Mosco describes as "new revisionism", the abandonment of the totalizing Marxist framework, the reconceptualization of the audience as creative, and the shift to a popular aesthetic. These three sources of "revisionism" can themselves be analyzed further. The last (the rise of a popular aesthetic) and second (reconceptualization of the active audience) sources clearly refer to a cultural studies perspective. The first (repudiation of totalizing framework), however, refers specifically to postmodernism. Indeed, when he wrote of the

⁵ James Curran, "The New Revisionism in Mass Communication Research: A Reappraisal," *European Journal of Communication* 5 (1990): 135-164.

“repudiation of the totalizing, explanatory frameworks of Marxism,” Curran was making specific reference to the thought of Michel Foucault. Furthermore, Curran credits Foucault with the fact that Golding and Murdock have “retreat[ed] from former positions,” i.e. from more straightforwardly Marxist and class-based arguments.⁷

While Mosco is appreciative of Curran’s efforts to create a debate within political economy over such issues, he is ultimately defensive about the fact that many political economists such as himself, and Golding and Murdock, have decidedly *not* made such a flight of fancy into pluralism, postmodernism and new revisionism. Mosco writes:

Golding and Murdock disagree fundamentally with Curran’s interpretation of the field of communication studies, including political economy...Specifically, both contend that the suggestion of revisionism, buckling, or back-tracking fails to take into account the range of their work, which has consistently taken a broad view of Marxian theory that incorporates ideological critique, semiotics, social policy analysis, and a concern for the complete circuit of communicative activity, including production, distribution, and reception.⁸

Indeed, far from occasioning a retreat, Mosco makes the point throughout his 1996 text that the challenge posed by postmodernism to political economy’s epistemological bases has reinvigorated political economy. Therefore, in considering Golding and Murdock, Mosco writes: “Golding and Murdock have consistently taken a broad view of the approach that, in addition to the standard interest in social class, the commodity circuit, corporate structure and the state, insists on a critical, moral philosophical understanding of the wider social totality.”⁹ As such, Mosco rejects the “new revisionism” which would

⁶ James Curran, as quoted in, Mosco, 116.

⁷ Mosco, 116.

⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁹ Ibid., 118.

abandon the quest for totality in favour of the political economic status quo, confident in the tools of a modern critical epistemology and its analysis of the “wider social totality.”

Clearly, then, Mosco is fully aware of the alternative positions and objections raised by postmodernism and it is this awareness which drives his desire for renewal and insistence on the broader social totality. What becomes curious, however, is not that Mosco *rejects* postmodernism, but rather the way in which he does it. His rejection reads like a somewhat strategic refutation. He seems both to refute postmodernism outright as an irresponsible analytical discourse—“protagonists tend to take up the cause of post-structuralism and postmodernism, drawing on a Nietzschean tradition to attack the value of moral philosophy”¹⁰— and simultaneously to incorporate it into the breadth of political economy. “For now,” Mosco writes, “it suffices to concentrate on one particular response in political economy that acknowledges the *weight* of the postmodern view and yet retains an understanding of the social totality.”¹¹ On the one hand, he rejects postmodernism; on the other, he sees it as something which political economy easily incorporates into itself and does better anyway. It’s like saying “I did not steal that money and, at any rate, it wasn’t enough for what I needed anyway.” He denies the crime while committing it.

According to Mosco, political economy does not so much reject postmodernism¹² as it is perfectly able to absorb its indeterminacy and incredulity into its own dynamic

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 33. Emphasis added.

¹² The point here, that will become more apparent throughout this chapter, is that political economy holds itself up as a broader and more capable analytical pursuit than many others, in this case postmodernism. The language in which this refutation is often couched is one of acceptance and then of defining the ways in which political economy can do better.

and expansive analysis, by “making use of the social totality” that “does not require essentialism or reductionism of thought.”

In fact, as Marx, Gramsci, and Lukacs remind us, dialectical thinking leads us to recognize that reality is comprised of both parts and a whole, organized in the *concrete totality* of integration and contradiction that constitutes social life. The relationship among parts varies from loose to tight and the whole itself may contain numerous fissures, eruptions, and distortions.¹³

In this quotation, and especially in its last line which declares the social totality to be conscious and respective of fragmentation and indeterminacy, Mosco presents political economy, and its model of social totality, as an analytical paradigm for the study of communication, culture, and reality which extends beyond and can encompass the emphasis on pluralism, and, ultimately, the lack of a final cause observable in revisionist approaches. The social totality is meant, therefore, not merely to discount the postmodern platform in which “the term *society* is an attempt to apply a unity in discourse to something fundamentally divided, disconnected, and hence undefinable.” Rather, political economy’s careful mapping of the totality of communication and culture *includes* such indeterminacy and abundant pluralism. But it requires a little “rethinking” to redefine it as non-essentialist, non-reductionist, expansive, and unafraid of its critics.

Mosco, as well as Golding and Murdock, face incredulity head on with an apparently fluid and dynamic analytical template that is said to escape the charge of reductionism that undoubtedly—with “the implosions of twentieth-century life”—helped to cause incredulity and “new revisionism” to begin with. Whether or not political economy is able to keep this expansive promise will be the object of this chapter that examines the “rhetorical smokescreens” of political economy. More specifically, this

¹³ Ibid., 33.

chapter will reveal a number of different ways in which political economy can be seen to couch its analytical pursuits in a language of multiplicity and pluralism, no doubt presented as an answer to the many 'challenges on the borders' that political economy faces. This chapter will critique political economy's grand claims to dynamism and plurality at the level of the social totality and suggest that, rhetorical strategies aside, the premises revealed for political economy in the last chapter aim at a more or less economically determined model for the social totality. Such a model is understandable: it is very difficult to imagine a map toward social transformation and human emancipation if one also accepts pluralism, difference and indeterminacy of human action in a fundamental way. This chapter will argue that political economy, despite its proclamations to the contrary, does not accept these last (pluralism, difference, indeterminacy) in a substantial way, something which leads to an inevitable denigration of the paradigm which does, postmodernism.

II

Bait and Switch: The Rhetorical Smokescreens of Political Economy

i) Explaining the Strategy

Mosco's presentation of the analytical priorities of political economy that is both receptive to and yet surpasses postmodernism is a good introduction to the concept of 'bait and switch' that characterizes the political economic approach. This strategy follows from the fact that political economy continually defines itself against that which it is not. This strategy crops up in the pages of Golding and Murdock's brief introductory chapter to a tome of collected works on political economy.¹⁴ In listing developments for

¹⁴ Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, eds., *The Political Economy of the Media*, Vol. 1 (Cheltenham, UK: Elgar, 1997).

“later political economy” that “remain unresolved,” among them its relationship with Marxism as well as postmodernism, the authors also consider the fact that “political economy tends to define its parameters in opposition to that which it is not.”¹⁵ This admission is curious and may account for Mosco’s presentation of postmodernism above which both rejects and claims to include it. As Golding and Murdock suggest, it is a premise that is “unresolved;” that is, an undefined though undeniable dimension of the analytical approach of political economy. In this chapter I will argue that this “unresolved” premise of negative definition brings to the surface a particular rhetorical strategy for political economy that I am calling ‘bait and switch’— a strategy through which political economy attempts to deflect criticisms that its model for the social totality is reductive.

In other words, in response to numerous ‘challenges’ from other fields and paradigms, political economy insists on the expansive merits of its own discipline by defining the way in which, against these, it can encompass what they do and more (the bait). In actual practice, however, political economic analyses of the social totality invariably induce a more or less apparent economic determinism that brings its purportedly dynamic reading within the scope of a reductive base/superstructure model (the switch). In what follows I am not declaring a wittingly fraudulent practice on the part of political economy. Rather, the argument is simply that political economy refuses to acknowledge the inherent limitations of its own analyses. These are materialist

¹⁵ Graham Murdock and Peter Golding “Introduction: Communication and Capitalism,” xvi. Mosco also reveals this premise directly, “political economy of communications defines itself in part against a range of intellectual challenges.” Mosco, 81.

limitations that do not allow it to fully embrace the dynamic and pluralistic reading of the social totality that it claims it can.

ii) Some Examples of 'Bait and Switch'

Explaining this premise in greater detail, it is through 'negative definition' (defining political economy against that which it is not) in the service of a 'bait and switch' strategy that Golding and Murdock, for example, claim that their blend of political economy avoids the "twin temptations of instrumentalism and structuralism." This is the context against which this premise was hinted at in the last chapter. There, instrumentalism was placed in conjunction with Herman and Chomsky, while structuralism here refers to those commentators who conceive of "structures as building-like edifices, solid, permanent and immovable."¹⁶ Each presents a challenge for which Golding and Murdock define political economy against. In their baited reading, Golding and Murdock subscribe to Anthony Giddens's theory of "structuration". Mosco does, too, and uses it to explain that "we consider structure as a duality including constraining rules

¹⁶ Golding and Murdock, "Culture, Communications, and Political Economy," 15. No examples are given of analysts who subscribe to this 'dangerous' brand of social theory. Graham Murdock repeats the same point in his "Critical Inquiry and Audience Activity," 227-228, but also implicates Saussure's linguistic structuralism: "From this it follows that [structures] must be analyzed as historical formations that are subject to modification and not as the unchanging edifices presented, for example, in Saussure's influential model of language." It is not quite clear though how structuralism with respect to material conditions and structuralism with respect to a language model relate to one another, nor is this point elaborated. It can only be gleaned that undoubtedly Murdock would be suspicious of any theory that formalizes the properties of an object without recourse to material conditions or resources—the latter is something that Saussure's structuralist semiotics does do, which contradicts the point of Murdock's article which, although he denies a "determinate link," effectively links taste cultures and audience desire directly to class and material conditions.

and enabling resources.”¹⁷ Despite the fact that their analyses invariably only point to those structures that constrain, what I am referring to as the switch, “structuration” is held to be a more dynamic alternative to structuralism.¹⁸

Likewise, Murdock explains in an article devoted to bringing structural and economic considerations into audience research that it might help “[t]extual analysis [to play] a central role in critical activity” if we were to use the concept of “discursive formations” to analyze the interaction of the media and the social world at a symbolic level. Murdock presents the idea of “discursive formations” as being an alternative to a more reductive “dominant ideology thesis” within which texts are seen to be the straightforward ideological view of their producers. Discursive formations, on the other hand, are said to bring flexibility to textual analysis by showing that authorial intention

¹⁷ Mosco, 212; Golding and Murdock, “Culture, Communications, and Political Economy,” 15; Murdock, 227-228.

¹⁸ Or rather, not that the structures always constrain, but that it is only through a battle at the structural level that agency can be realized. As such, structuration is perhaps dynamic, but only to the point where this dynamism does not conflict with structural determination, which is *always* apparent, only flexible. That is, Mosco presents structuration as building upon Marx’s famous dictum that “people make history, but not under conditions of their own making.” As such, Mosco’s definition of structuration as analysis that respects how “Social life is comprised of the mutual constitution of structure and agency” does little more than suggest that these structures are always dictating agency. In fact, Mosco writes that “A major problem with structuration theory in Giddens...is that it tends to accentuate agency, leaving us with a conception of structure limited to a set of *operating rules* and a *store of resources* which individual agents to meet their needs” (p. 214; emphasis in original). It is not surprising on this basis that Mosco presents his account of hegemony in his chapter of structuration: “the ongoing formation of both image and information to produce a map of common sense sufficiently persuasive to most people that it provides the social coordinates that define the ‘natural’ attitude of social life.” The model for structuration that can be gleaned from this is that once actions are conducted within a structure, individual agency gives way to the overall hegemonic power of these structures over which the agent has little or no control. By this account structures can only enable, at best, different hegemonic relations. As such, structures always determine, for better or for worse, the “‘natural’ attitude of social life.” So while not “permanent and immovable,” structures would seem to always be constraining, i.e. determining, even in their flexibility. Mosco, 242.

does not necessarily dictate the types of meanings and uses derived by readers. Murdock writes: “First, although discursive formations are organized they are not necessarily coherent. They are frequently characterized by logical inconsistencies and contradictions. Moreover, there is often a disjunction between the analytical connections established by written or spoken exposition and the connotations attached to preferred images, particularly when these are open to widely varying interpretations, which they often are.”

Murdock presents these ideas in order to arrive at a more complex reading of the symbolic—extending even beyond structuration—through which people and media relate. This as part of “the wider project of teasing out the dynamic and dialectical relations between structural formations and audience activity.”¹⁹ In other words, the goal of his article “Critical Inquiry and Audience Activity,” as the title suggests, is to forge audience research and cultural analysis a substantive place along side broader “structural,” i.e. political economic, factors. The latter, Murdock argues, should be considered not in the *last*, as Marx held, but in the “*first*” instance as “a necessary starting point for analysis but not a destination.”²⁰

Given this shift in determination, Murdock is able to consider the symbolic and cultural dimension of audience activity using the full breadth of an analysis of texts and audience reception. An analysis in which texts are viewed as multifaceted and dynamic “discursive formations,” rather than straightforward “dominant ideology” producers. Examining audience activity in this way, according to Murdock:

¹⁹ Murdock, 246.

²⁰ Ibid., 229.

Breaks decisively with the “bucket” theory of meaning, which underpins a good deal of mainstream research...It views cultural forms as simple containers for carrying meaning from one place to another with no independent role to play on their own account. The perspective sketched here also avoids the crude textual determinism of some critical approaches, typified by Theodore Adorno’s assertion that popular music’s standardized formulas “hear the listener” precluding variations of response...Equally, it evades the opposite error, common to “uses and gratifications” research, of assuming that texts are an imaginary shopping mall in which audience members can wander at will selecting whatever suits them.²¹

This passage offers a good example of political economy’s ‘bait and switch’ rhetorical strategy. Murdock appears to be promising a lot that is not deterministic in his dynamic view of media texts, i.e., it does not suggest that audiences will always have the same response or that the effects of media messages are inherently positive or negative. This lack of textual determinism is itself buttressed by the earlier dismissal of a “‘bucket’ theory of meaning,” in order to allow agency into the equation between message and receiver. Finally, Murdock suggests that his approach contests “uses and gratifications” which, with the advent of many “active audience” approaches in cultural studies research, allows agency only at the expense of a complete embrace of the capitalist system. But what has Murdock really given here in terms of an analytical pursuit?

It can only be postulated that in his desire that political economy be taken as the necessary starting point of analysis in the *first* instance, it is also, no matter how dynamic a view of where one might go, ultimately an ending point as well. Structural considerations always linger somewhere close to the heart of “discursive formations.” The author’s presentation of the latter is simply a rhetorical smokescreen. By this I do not mean to imply that discursive analysis need not include economic considerations.

²¹ Ibid., 236.

Rather, Murdock's promise of a textured and multifaceted analysis of texts and receivers to counter "an analysis with an underdeveloped view of texts [that] is bound to oversimplify the complexity of potential reactions," falls a little short in actual practice. For example, consider Murdock's view of music and teenagers that follows his suggestion that we use "discursive formations" as the answer to reductionist accounts:

Statements of musical taste were never simply aesthetic choices. They were also statements about self-image and social affirmation. They played a key role in marking the boundary between those who were failing within the school system and those who were succeeding and as such acted as coded expressions of the structural divisions that produced these differential outcomes. Far from creating a classless "youth culture," as many had assumed, tastes in rock music simultaneously represented and reaffirmed existing class divisions.²²

Not to deny that his 1973 study of music and youth might have led him correctly to an association with class, but it does seem odd to have made such a point of presenting a dynamic reading of audience activity that dispenses with "crude determinism" and a "'bucket' theory of meaning." So much emphasis on the dynamism, complexity and "multidimensionality" of textual and audience analysis for conclusions that present a fairly straightforward structural account of taste, i.e., a rigidly class-based one? In this, the bait of dynamism and multifaceted-ness would appear to be a smokescreen masking a switch in which reductive structural conclusions are perpetually sought, found and recycled.²³

²² Murdock's conclusion here is based on two published accounts from 1973 by himself and two other researchers. The essay in which they are published is from 1989. *Ibid.*, 244.

²³ This class based analysis is furthered by Murdock's assessment of "The disdain for the commercialism of the Top 40 Charts and the preference for self-directed performers among a major section of the educationally successful students, for example, was strongly linked to...the new middle class from which most of them came." *Ibid.*, 244.

As will be demonstrated again through a brief examination of its debate with cultural studies below, this ‘bait and switch’ rhetorical strategy, whether intentional or not, appears often to be how political economy operates. By holding up certain alternative positions, whether in respect or disdain, it invariably suggests that the particular blend of political economy offered up does all that and more. The only problem is that in many cases it does not do all that or more—it does what it has always done, bring the analysis of communication and culture to the level of access to resources, class interests, and “structures of domination,” a term used by Garnham. And Garnham is no stranger to the particular ‘bait and switch’ tactic of political economy that is being outlined here.

In his 1990 *Capitalism and Communication*, Garnham is careful to stress his specific usage of the term “determination.” This is a prudent step considering that in its most extreme Marxist form ‘determination’ means positing a rigid base/superstructure model in which the economic base determines the ideational fabric of a society and consciousness directly. “It is important to stress,” Garnham writes, “since it often causes misunderstanding, that I use the term determination in the ‘soft’ sense.” Stating that he parts company with “many Marxist colleagues” who would use it in the ‘strong’ sense of the “dominant ideology as the maintenance of the status quo,” Garnham presents his ‘softer’, and presumably more flexible alternative in which “determination” is not seen “as fixing a simple causal relationship, but as a setting of limits. It does not predetermine human action in any unilateral sense, but it does make some courses of action more likely than others.”²⁴ A few pages later, Garnham stresses again that his political economy is

²⁴ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 6.

“not arguing any simple notion of economic determinism.” And, like Murdock, Garnham’s own explication leads inevitably to the question of “the type and range of symbolic forms circulated.”²⁵

On this, Garnham offers an acknowledgement of textual analysis as being important to the overall project of understanding the circuit of communication and culture. His “textualism” accepts that receivers bring to the “construction and interpretation” of texts—whether “a conversation, a narrative, an image or a piece of music [that] exists within a socially shared frame”—“knowledge of other texts and the non-textual world.”²⁶ This seems to be opening room up for a “soft” determination that accepts a certain complexity in the relationship between producer, message, and receiver, “not as fixing a simple causal relationship.” Here is Garnham’s “soft” determinism:

[P]olitical economy stresses that media texts structure the meanings available to consumers in determinate ways which are open to analysis. A newspaper article or TV programme is the way it is and carries one set of meanings, and by so doing excludes another set, because of the way in which production is organized. To put it crudely, the budget available and the given structure of the division of labour affects what you can say and how you can say it. In addition, the interpretive frames that are used to extract meanings from media texts are themselves determined by the wider socioeconomic structure. Whether and in what way you can draw from it will be determined by your pre-existing, pre-constructed social identity.²⁷

This passage is contained in the same *Culture and Communication* essay in which Garnham stresses his “soft” determinism. Having offered the bait of “no simple notion” of economic determinism, Garnham can only be seen to switch this promise of flexibility for a much more rigid account. This account presents not only a straightforward base/superstructure model in which the “budget available” “affects what you can say and

²⁵ Garnham, 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁷ Ibid., 15.

how you can say it.” It also suggests that it is only through class-consciousness, that is, “pre-constructed social identity” based on “the wider socioeconomic structure” that one can interpret (already determined) media messages. This passage, and Garnham’s more general political economic stance, is deterministic through and through, in the first, second, last, and all other instances. So why does the author suggest otherwise?²⁸

It is the argument here that the rhetorical strategy being postulated serves as a smokescreen through which political economy, against charges of reduction and the threat of “new revisionism,” buffers what it really wants to say within what appears *prima facie* as a rather complex and multifaceted language of totality. In the case of Garnham this language is belayed by what is most certainly the idea that the socioeconomic base determines social relations *tout court* and leads to unequal power relations and “structures of domination” that keep people from realizing their fully human

²⁸ In a later essay discussed below (see note 42) Garnham again reiterates the position for a robust political economy that is meant to “rescue the concept from the false image that circulates largely unquestioned within cultural studies” (p. 63). In his ensuing discussion the author suggests that “While in the past, some from within political economy may have argued for a narrow reflectionist or determinist relationship between the mode of production and cultural practices, such a position is not entailed by the general approach” (p. 65-66). From this postulation Garnham then reiterates the notion of “false consciousness” which he suggests is alive and well, and then turns to the “structures of domination” in which he suggests an economic base for racial and gender struggles. In this essay Garnham concludes: “The political economy of culture has never argued that all cultural practices are either determined by or functional for the mode of production of material life. But it has argued, and continues to do so, that the capitalist mode of production has certain core structural characteristics—above all that waged labor and commodity exchange constitute people’s necessary and unavoidable conditions of existence. These conditions shape in determinate ways the terrain upon which cultural practices take place—the physical environment, the available material and symbolic resources and spatial relations...they set the cultural agenda” (p. 71). As such, while it is undoubtedly true that earlier versions of political economy did argue a rigidly determinist approach, and it is also true that this approach is not unanimously accepted by the political economic tradition in general, it is difficult to see how Garnham’s refreshed political economy is marking a radical departure from this tradition and placing itself in line with this more “general approach.”

potential and fully enfranchised goals. So why not just say this? Why the need to present political economic analysis only after suggesting that it must be “dynamic,” “non-essential,” “non-reductive”?²⁹

This chapter will not seek to answer this question specifically. Suffice it to say that the premise of ‘negative definition’, couching within it a rhetorical strategy that is being dubbed here ‘bait and switch’, could have emerged in response to criticisms that the base/superstructure model on which political economy relied was too reductive.

Under late capitalism, post-industrialism, or post-modernism it has become difficult, so

²⁹ Mosco is also adamant that his “rethinking” of political economy “declines to reduce any apparent complexity in a person, relationship, or historical occurrence to a core essential or simplicity, e.g. that the economic or the cultural provides the essential causal impetus for historical change and that others are non essential” (p. 5). Mosco’s political economic approach eschews the positing of simple dichotomies or simple categorical approaches to defining communication and culture. Instead, Mosco uses the term “mutual constitution” to refer to the way in which social life and structures are intertwined through a series of “processes”—“structuration,” “spatialization,” “commodification” that are considered “entry points for the study of communication.” The language in Mosco’s “Introduction” is, therefore, wholly against reducing the complexity of society or culture to simplistic factors of determination. In his chapter on “Structuration,” Mosco, like Murdock, goes against the tide of instrumentalism or structuralism to suggest that “Social life is comprised of the mutual constitution of structure and agency” (p. 213). It would seem that Mosco is offering a complex theory that would leave the contradictory and complicated field of social relations open for equally contradictory analysis. A few pages into his chapter on structuration, however, the author begins with “social class” which is “*categorical* in the sense that it defines a category of people who occupy a position in society by virtue of their economic standing measured by wealth and/or income.” This sounds slightly less dynamic and “non-essential” than Mosco had promised. He salvages the dynamism through the idea that social class is not an essential property of social life but a “*relationship...connections* among people based on their relationship to the primary processes of social production and reproduction” (p. 216). Later, in discussing “hegemony” as a better alternative to “ideology” in understanding the workings of symbolic power, Mosco suggests that “Hegemony is...more powerful than ideology because it is not simply imposed by class power, but constituted *organically* out of the dynamic geometries of power embedded in social relations throughout society.” Despite all the fancy rhetoric in these passages it is very difficult to tell just how these views on power and the relationship between the self and structures really avoid any of the reductionist tendencies that Mosco claims to avoid.

the argument goes, to posit a straightforward relation back to the base. Some, like Janet Wasko, have faced the charge that political economy is “narrowly and overly deterministic” head on, making no attempt to suggest it is otherwise. Rather, Wasko enlists Marx and Engels to suggest that political economy has never been reductionist but simply interested in the material forces required for the “production and reproduction” of the social system.³⁰ It is, then, apparently only others who have inferred that this necessarily means the economic is determinant for critical political economy. Wasko quotes Engels:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this, neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase.³¹

What Murdock, Garnham, Mosco, and others have been asserting above is that dynamism is needed to understand the complexities of the “production and reproduction” for which the economic is but an “entry point.” And while it is true that, like with Marx and Engels, the economic is not being argued by these political economists as the *only* determining element for communication and culture, it is also true that no matter how much political economists state otherwise—and the rhetoric under consideration here does attempt to state otherwise—the economic is *always* an entry point, and is *always* a determining one for society and culture. In the first or last instance, therefore, all

Again, the analysis is strictly on class struggle and the power of structures over symbolic relations. Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 1-16, 212-245.

³⁰ Garnham makes the same argument about reproduction using Marx’s original writings on the subject in *Capitalism and Communication*, 4-10.

³¹ Engels, *Selected Works*, as quoted in, Janet Wasko, “What’s So ‘New’ About the ‘New’ Technologies in Hollywood? An Example of the Study of the Political Economy of Communications,” 476.

political economic analysis aimed at its dynamic model for the “social totality” must be reduced to this level. As Wasko writes, “analysis of political economic structure is a necessary foundation for understanding the limitations and constraints placed on the production and distribution of cultural products and has ideological implications for the reception of these products by audiences.”³² No more, no less, this is what political economy says. Couched in the language of an analytical model for media, culture, society and human life that professes to not be overtly deterministic, economistic, essentialist, reductive, categorical, is a critical program that, despite what it promises, can never extend beyond that which will always be crucial to it: an economic base that continually produces and reproduces the conditions of real life. A real life whose hegemonic screen is continually reinforced by the “structures of domination” that weigh heavy on the social totality.

iii) Political Economy versus Cultural Studies: Another Instance of Negative Definition

This chapter has aimed to identify a rhetorical strategy for political economy that has been said to follow from its avowed premise of defining itself against that which it is not. The strategy has been termed here a process of ‘bait and switch’, in which political economy follows its avowed premise of defining itself against that which it is not, or against ‘challenges on the borders’, and in doing so presents its discourse as broad, flexible, non-reductive and dynamic. One of these ‘challenges on the borders’ of political economy is cultural studies, a research template for communication and culture with which political economy has been embroiled in debate for several decades. The

³² Wasko, 477.

specifics of this debate will not be broached in any great detail, but can be outlined briefly.

The debate emerged in the early 1980s when, as Douglas Kellner suggests, “some of the participants in [a] discussion of the state of the art of media communications studies noted a bifurcation of the field between a culturalist approach and more empirical approaches in the study of mass-mediated communications.” This discussion can be found in *The Journal of Communication*, which in 1983 devoted a famous special issue to so-called “Ferment in the Field.”³³ In 1993 a conference entitled “Interfaces: culture and structure in communications research” continued the debate. Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding describe what was a number of “lively” proceedings at this event that in their summation point directly to an indisputable divide wedging itself into the study of communication and culture: “At one level the session rubric seemed straightforward enough, seeking to explore contrasts between ‘approaches broadly under the “cultural studies” umbrella, whose primary concern has been with texts, meaning and signification, and on the other hand, social and political science approaches more extensively interested in those features of social structure which shape communication processes and cultural products’.”³⁴ The debate continued in 1995 between Nicholas Garnham and Lawrence Grossberg, but including Oscar Gandy, Graham Murdock and James Carey, in the pages of *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*.³⁵ This dialogue is extended in the 1997

³³ See, Douglas Kellner, “Communications vs. Cultural Studies: Overcoming the Divide,” *Illuminations* (web page), <<http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell4.htm>>.

³⁴ Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, “Preface,” in *Cultural Studies in Question*, eds. Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (London: Sage, 1997), xi.

³⁵ See, “Colloquy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 12, no. 1 (1995): 60-100.

publication *Cultural Studies in Question*.³⁶ All in all, the debate itself is over the best terms of analysis through which to examine the field of culture and communications: political economy takes a macro-structuralist approach that examines the “context” of material production for cultural objects, cultural studies has emerged over the years as a paradigm interested in accounting for the “texts” of culture: their ideological implications as well as their reception and interpretations by audiences.

Examining the more specific contours of this debate, it reveals again a pattern through which political economy defines itself against other research programs and emerges as the dynamic and complex alternative. In opposition to cultural studies, the bait is that political economy can fully incorporate ideas from the former and still present itself as the guardian of the crucial area of communication studies that matters most: the broader “context” for culture that brings in structural elements at a crucial level of analysis. The switch is that for the most part political economy does not incorporate the expansive language of cultural studies into its own critique, or at least something like this does not appear to be the real priority. Rather, in debate with this challenger, political economy reinforces an analysis based on class and an inquiry aimed at examination of the base. Here is how Lawrence Grossberg, a cultural studies practitioner involved in these debates, describes the process of the encounters between the two poles:

[E]very few years, some political economist...writes the latest version of their attack on cultural studies, although the articles have not changed much since the mid-1970s. And they raise the same two criticisms: First, because cultural studies ignores the institutions of cultural production, it celebrates popular culture and gives up any oppositional role; second, because cultural studies ignores economics it is incapable of

³⁶ Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, eds. *Cultural Studies in Question* (London: Sage, 1997).

understanding the real structures of power, domination and oppression in the contemporary world.³⁷

This pattern can be traced in the literature of political economy, both within and exclusive of its formal debate with cultural studies. It is apparent in Magder's analysis outlined at length in the previous chapter in which cultural studies was held to be the limited analysis of texts while political economy gets to the really important affairs of the "economic, political, and social determinants" of culture. It is also apparent in the language of James Carey, himself not necessarily a political economist, but supportive of the latter in a 1997 outlet for these debates entitled *Cultural Studies in Question*. Carey laments what he sees as an unfortunate "encounter between British cultural studies and French structuralism and poststructuralism." Carey shares with Raymond Williams the view that:

When the well-known culturalism-structuralism divide was reached, the wrong road was taken and the price was an abandonment of the progressive program developed by Williams and Hoggart and also the virtual preclusion of any alliance between cultural studies and political economy... Williams argued that the tendency to treat cultural studies as a derivative of a group of *texts*, rather than as the interaction of a project and its formation, was not only a retreat to a type of what he called idealist history, but also the point at which cultural studies was lost as a project: it forgot its purposes and alliances.³⁸

Finally, Douglas Kellner has written on the need for cultural studies to reconfigure its alliances with political economy, the latter being able to bring it back to its original purpose:

³⁷ Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies vs. Political Economy: Is Anybody Else Bored with this Debate?" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 1 (1995): 72.

³⁸ James Carey, "Reflections on the Project of (American) Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies in Question*, eds. Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (London: Sage, 1997), 15.

Political economy...calls attention to the fact that culture is produced within relationships of domination and subordination and thus reproduces or resists existing structures of power. Such a perspective...provides a normative standard for cultural studies whereby the critic can attack aspects of cultural texts that reproduce class, gender, racial, and other hierarchal forms of domination and positively valorize aspects that resist or subvert existing domination, or depict forms of resistance and struggle against them...Rather than being antithetical approaches to culture, political economy can actually contribute to textual analysis and critique, as well as audience reception and uses of media texts...The system of production often determines what sort of artifacts will be produced, what structural limits there will be as to what can and cannot be said and shown, and what sort of audience expectations and usage the text may generate.³⁹

By presenting cultural studies as a project that has cut itself off from its original emancipatory roots, political economy positions itself as the dynamic alternative, more than able to pursue textual analysis, posit gender, racial and class struggles, while remaining interested in the “context” of communication and culture which provides a broad framework of social determination aimed at social transformation.

The pattern for this presentation of cultural studies on the part of political economy follows from the ‘bait and switch’ analogy previously outlined. Here this strategy might be more accurately dubbed that of “acknowledge/deflate,” or “yes, but...” in which importance is given to those templates outside political economy but is then used to bolster and support political economy’s own pursuits.

The “yes, but...” strategy can be felt in Magder’s inflation/deflation of cultural studies from the previous chapter: “Analysis of the ‘text’ is indeed vital to the study of culture, *but....*” Likewise Nicholas Garnham suggests that, “A political economy of communications and culture, therefore, fully accepts the arguments of textualists as to the

³⁹ Douglas Kellner, “The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation,” *Illuminations* (web page), <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell16.htm>.

centrality of the process of the construction and exchange of meaning in a social world made by intelligent, reflexive human agents. *Where it parts company decisively...*⁴⁰

Mosco devotes an entire chapter in his 1996 work to “Challenges on the Borders”. These challenges take the form of policy studies and cultural studies, and in the rhetorical “yes, but...” strategy the chapter is organized in such a way that these two platforms are not critiqued outright, but can offer “lessons” for political economy.

Indeed, in a section of his 1996 text devoted to the “challenge” of cultural studies, Mosco is full of praise for the latter and its expansion of critical work “beyond class analysis to include research inspired by feminism and those newer social movements committed, for example, to peace and environmentalism.” According to Mosco this “work has served to remind political economy that, though social class is a central dividing line...multiple overlapping hierarchies constitute the process of structuration.” And finally, Mosco quotes Richard Johnson to suggest that cultural studies can remind political economy to incorporate “the indirect results of capitalist and other social relations on the existing rules of language and discourse, especially class and gender-based struggles in their effects on different social symbols and signs.” *But*, Mosco then repudiates cultural studies on exactly those grounds for which he suggested it might offer a lesson to political economy. “Unfortunately,” Mosco writes, “in its haste to turn to new forms of social geometry and resistance, cultural studies has tended, with important exceptions,⁴¹ to simply reject outright those older forms, based on class and, specifically, wage-labor, whose centrality for comprehending and transforming social life political

⁴⁰ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 5.

⁴¹ It is important I think to note here that these exceptions are not cited or named, leaving the suggestion that this reference is more a cushion for what is otherwise a more or less outright dismissal of cultural studies.

economy quite rightly warrants.”⁴² On such dichotomous grounds, it is really not possible to see if or how Mosco would incorporate those elements of cultural studies that question class and economic determinants into his rather straightforward model of class and wage-labor analysis. So what exactly is going on in this rhetorical strategy?

It can only be suggested that the broader debate between cultural studies and political economy which, according to Grossberg, has largely been perpetuated by the latter,⁴³ are part and parcel with a strategy through which political economy claims to offer a dynamic alternative while really sticking to its traditional critique of capitalism. If cultural studies is only interested in “text,” this is fine, political economy can get at the “context.” The acknowledgement of textualism is also a condemnation of cultural studies for failing to develop an oppositional critique.⁴⁴ This, in turn, allows political economy to maintain a totalizing critique of capitalism. Where the former has done some interesting work broadening class analysis to incorporate gender, sexuality, and race as sites of domination and struggle it has also weakened the focus on class—political economy can take the lessons of this broadening without forgetting the irrefutable importance of class. Again, on the question of instrumentalism and structuralism raised earlier, political economy stands poised to suggest through recourse to “structuration” that structures are not immutable, and against instrumentalism that communication

⁴² Mosco, 250-253.

⁴³ Mosco suggests otherwise in his discussion of the political economic side of the debate that has, in the case of Garnham, often resorted to strong language. Such language “is not limited to one side of the debate. Proponents of a cultural studies view have tended to reject political economic approaches as economistic, totalizing, or simply derivative of the outmoded Marxism of *Capital*.” The latter is in reference to Baudrillard’s 1975 text *The Mirror of Production*. Mosco, 80.

⁴⁴ This is most apparent in Garnham’s attack on cultural studies in *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*. Nicholas Garnham, “Political Economy and Cultural

messages are not simply mouthpieces for capital. In this 'middle ground', as it were, political economy presents evidence of the expansive and detrimental range of capitalism and concentration of ownership that "prevents some forms of expression from finding a popular outlet and audience," with the disclaimer that this does not mean accepting instrumentalism or refuting human agency.

In dialectical fashion and trusted rhetorical form, therefore, political economy proceeds to define its academic discourse by positioning itself against other discourses it claims are unable to develop a flexible and inclusive understanding of media and communication leading to social transformation. This strategy can even be played out against its own template:

While in the past, some from within political economy may have argued for a narrow reflectionist or determinist relationship between the mode of production and cultural practices, such a position is not necessarily entailed by the general approach. Political economy certainly does argue that some institutional arrangements [sic], involving specific cultural practices, necessarily accompany a capitalist mode of production.⁴⁵

This quotation from Garnham occurs in his presentation of political economy for the 1995 debates in the pages of *CSMC*. Again the presentation follows the same general pattern as described above. Here, however, it is evident that what is denied is then again posited and affirmed. Specifically, Garnham suggests that there has been in the past a "narrow reflectionist or determinist relationship," something not necessary to the approach, and then declares that there are *always* certain cultural practices that "necessarily accompany a capitalist mode." Of these, Garnham discusses the "Structures

Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 1 (1995): 62-71.

⁴⁵ Garnham, "Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?", 66.

of Domination” in which a simple class struggle governs the entire system of communication and culture under capitalism: “To put the matter simply, political economy sees class—namely, the structure of access to the means of production and the structure of the distribution of the economic surplus—as the key to the structure of domination.”⁴⁶ It is difficult to discern how Garnham’s outlook here is not “narrowly reflectionist or determinist.” And it is on this point that Garnham then turns against cultural studies which sees, instead of class, “gender and race, along with other potential markers of difference, as alternative structures of domination in no way determined by class.”⁴⁷

All said, against cultural studies, political economy seems to accept fully the arguments made by the former, but then insists on a more or less straightforward account of the social totality based on class and power relations which imply a reading of the superstructure very much determined by the material base. Its debates with cultural studies are little more than a reaction to what it sees as the limitations of the former, and not really any fundamental attempt to reconfigure its ongoing critical analysis of culture. The point here is not so much to suggest that political economy need not stick to its critical guns, only to ask why it is necessary to attempt to incorporate cultural studies into the fold, even though political economy has no real interest in its differential premises? As Grossberg wittily writes in an exchange with Garnham in response to more or less the same question:

Garnham accuses cultural studies of paying too much attention to consumption, leisure, and everyday practices and not enough to production, work, and institutions: “Where in contemporary cultural

⁴⁶ Garnham, 70.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 70.

studies are the studies of the cultural producers and the organizational sites and practices the inhabit and through which they exercise power?" On the one hand, I am tempted to answer that they are in political economy; that is, after all, what political economists do, so why should they want cultural studies to do it?⁴⁸

In effect, this question can only point to the fact that what truly agitates political economy is not what cultural studies can offer it, but rather what cultural studies seems to have embraced in its efforts to push beyond an essentialist and reductive reading of class, power and base/superstructure relations. And what has cultural studies—or at least some aspects of it—embraced? As Carey states above, some branches of cultural studies have embraced "French poststructuralism." Indeed, as we shall see, behind the attack on cultural studies lies a deeper attack on 'postmodernism'; cultural studies is usually merely a stalking horse or code word for 'postmodernism.' Hence, in his declaration above that political economy "fully accepts the arguments of textualists," Garnham makes the point that political economy also "part[s] company decisively with the *post-modernist* current" (*italics added*). And Mosco, in detailing the lessons that cultural studies can offer political economy seems to conflate the former with an ambiguous postulation of the risks it necessarily runs by swimming too close to poststructuralism (which is held as more or less coterminous with postmodernism).⁴⁹ He writes, "Cultural studies has broadened the range of epistemological approaches beyond positivist and essentialist perspectives to encompass social constructivist approaches to knowledge," and in the next breath, "Suffice it to say that in the extreme, and post-structuralist work certainly

⁴⁸ Grossberg, 74.

⁴⁹ Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 36.

tests the limits of the extreme, social constructivism turns into a relativism that admits of little, if any, analytical or empirical certainty.”⁵⁰

As such, the rhetorical strategy under analysis allows political economy to state its goals in language borrowed from other discourses, especially postmodernism, and that deflects the criticisms leveled against it. It allows political economy to appear non-reductionist and non-essentialist without really incorporating this ‘revisionism’ into itself. Political economy’s rhetorical strategy of ‘bait and switch’ when examined within the context of its negative definition against cultural studies indicates what it is that political economy wants to screen out: postmodern discourses that express incredulity towards political economy’s claim to present *the* “social totality” for an entire realm of communication, culture and reality. On this note, this chapter is ready to move on to an examination of what political economy, its rhetorical strategies aside, specifically says about postmodernism.

III

Conclusion: A Final Examination of Political Economy’s Claims to a Dynamic and Pluralistic Social Totality

It has been argued throughout this chapter that in many instances the writings of the political economy of communication appear rife with contradictory stances that at one moment promise a multifaceted, dynamic account of communication and culture while at the next producing observations and conclusions which point toward nothing but a reductively narrow context of explanation.⁵¹ Through its admitted premise of defining

⁵⁰ Mosco, 250.

⁵¹ It should be added that this does not *always* have to come down to economics. At times the analysis is just simply narrow and unspecific, period. Consider the observations made by Golding and Murdock about gender and telephone usage (that followed the similar rhetoric that audience and textual analysis be dynamic, etc.):

itself in opposition to that which it is not, including instrumentalism, structuralism, cultural studies, essentialism, economic determinism, etc., political economy presents itself as a flexible and dynamic alternative, which is not necessarily the case. To solidify the points made above, this chapter will conclude with another consideration of the theorist through which it began: Mosco and his suggestion that, in the face of “revisionism,” a dynamic reading of the “social totality” is necessary.

Thus stated, Mosco’s 1996 *The Political Economy of Communication* claims to take “an explicitly non-reductionist and over-determined or multiply determined approach to research...it declines to reduce any apparent complexity in a person, relationship or historical occurrence to a core essentiality of simplicity, e.g. that the economic of the cultural provides the essential causal impetus for historical change and that others are non-essential.”⁵² But in the final analysis these complexities *are* reduced to a “Conclusion: A Return to Class Power.” Insisting that class power is one area in which political economy can be demarcated against a cultural studies or policy studies approach, Mosco states again his interest in “broadening the epistemological, ontological, and substantive scope of the discipline by critically evaluating notions, such as

“women’s prime responsibility for the ‘shadow work’...of shopping, cleaning, cooking and nurturing has fundamental consequences for their relation to the mass media. Not only are their choices often constrained by the prior demands of husbands and children, but the fact that no one else in the family is regenerating their *affective* resources leads them to look for other ways of maintaining psychological support. For example, where men mostly use the telephone instrumentally, to ‘get things done’, women often use it expressively, to sustain social networks. What appears from the outside to be trivial gossip is experienced from the inside as an emotional life saver.” Golding and Murdock, “Culture, Communications and Political Economy,” 28. It is primarily Mosco and not Golding and Murdock who stresses that his account is not essentialist, and this is a good thing because the latter’s views on women and men seem about as essentialist as possible.

⁵² Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 5.

essentialism and class power.” Mosco then offers a “proposal to build a political economy of communication that”:

1 starts from a realist, inclusive (i.e. non-essentialist), and critical epistemology; 2 takes an ontological stance that warrants the ubiquity of social process and social change; 3 develops a substantive position built on the entry processes of commodification, spatialization, and structuration.

These are the coordinates of social action within a political economy framework. Social class is the starting point for examining the process of structuration. Class power remains a central element in the political economy of communication, even if it gives up the essentialist view that would make it a position to which all others can be reduced.⁵³

It must be asked, in the interest of extrapolating a rhetorical strategy for political economy through which it promises more than it is able to deliver, has Mosco really given up an essentialist view? This passage does after all appear *after* Mosco has already outlined his three “entry processes” that are said to develop a substantive position. Also, as witnessed in the last chapter, any account of a political economic framework *must* begin from a realist and critical standpoint which is, admittedly, also to be inclusive (i.e. non-essentialist). The trouble with this is that a critical standpoint is also a moral standpoint—its realist epistemology conflates fact with value⁵⁴—and the moral story in

⁵³ Mosco, 270-271.

⁵⁴ It is very interesting on this small point to consider again how Mosco defines realism and compare this to a point made by Lyotard about the importance of theory and practice for Marx. Mosco writes, “*Realism* starts from the view that reality is made up of more than a set of subjectively determined nominal categories or of material embodiments of ideal categories...Not satisfied with nominalist or idealist views, a realist sees existence as mutually constituted by *both* sensory observation and explanatory practices” (Emphasis in original). Mosco, 2. As such, according to Mosco’s view it is possible to shift from fact to value without falling victim to idealism by simply explaining one’s empirical observation.

In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard points out a similar role for “theory” in Marx: “The latter is used to carry out what has been called a ‘correct analysis’, and that can go quite far, since it can bear upon the mode of distribution of goods called capitalism, and thus be subject of the might volumes called *Das Kapital*: an enormous theoretical discourse

Mosco's political economy as well as in political economy *tout court* is one that invariably positions corporate interest against public autonomy, domination against freedom of expression, true vs. false consciousness. Or, alternatively, the alienated working class against an elite class (Garnham says this outright). As will be argued in Chapter Five, from a postmodern perspective such dichotomous thinking leaves the concept of communication itself under theorized.

In keeping with the current point being made against Mosco, it is significant that as he has finished praising the merits of a position that examines processes and categories like class in a non-reductive, non-essentialist way, the political economist then lambastes much cultural theory that, in its wish to "account for the apparent support for conservative politics within the working class, or at least the seeming indifference of working people in the face of declining living standards," avoids class and examines instead other areas such as "gender, race, and ethnic divisions." The latter should all presumably be equally important entry points for Mosco's inclusive "rethinking" of political economy if his own admonition is to have any weight. But no, instead this move to other levels of determination or analysis beyond class is seen as unfortunate: "One of the more significant consequences of such an approach is to eliminate almost entirely any interest in work and the labor process in communication. Though the working class appears from time to time in cultural studies research, it almost never shows up in the factory or the office."⁵⁵ It seems then that political economy's dialogue only remains

meant to ground the legitimacy of a communist distribution of these goods." Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans., Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985), 20.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 271.

inclusive until it thwarts its own claims and then institutes a “return” to more essentialist categories like class and economic determinism.

Likewise, if Garnham’s analysis of false consciousness from the last chapter is supposed to represent a “flexible” discourse on economic determination, as Garnham argued above, then what exactly is a rigid view? Despite all its efforts to position itself as a dynamic and more productive alternative to other templates for communication study, political economy does not necessarily present a flexible, textured, indeterminate, or dynamic account of communication and culture. Its interest in “broadening the epistemological scope” or creating an inclusive dialogue in any fundamental sense is often thwarted by its reduction of analysis of communication and culture to an economistic and class-based paradigm. Certainly political economists may promise such a broad analysis. But such pronouncements have trouble reconciling the fact that from the very outset, when confronted with the full range of human endeavours, experiences, actions, reactions, creations, receptions, interpretations, imaginings to which the realm of communication and culture opens up, political economy begins at a point of reduction, of closure, in a context of determination. The keys toward this context were laid out in the last chapter and in the block quotation from Mosco above. This is not to discount the value of political economy’s insights in its reading of communication and culture. It is only to suggest that its own claims do not encompass the arguments of others, most notably postmodernists, who do in fact say something quite different from political economy and that might be hard to reconcile with it.

To conclude, this chapter opened by showing that the claims to reflexivity on the part of political economy (in Mosco) are at least partly, if not wholly, driven by certain

threats. These threats are those of “new revisionism” and postmodernism that has called into question the reductiveness of a class-based, base/superstructure approach to communication and culture. Defining itself against this, political economy has insisted on the necessity of presenting a determinate model of the “social totality,” a model that can cover both the parts and the whole of reality, indeterminacy and determinacy, unity and discord, capitalism and contradiction. Here is how Mosco again describes a responsible application of the social totality that he finds in the pages of Dwayne Winseck’s 1998 *Reconvergence*:

Eschewing the understandable but restrictive tendencies to an instrumentalism that would see forms of convergence resulting solely and simply from the interests of say, Bell Canada, Winseck is aware that social formations are complex and dynamic, comprised of numerous conflicting forces and tendencies that are positioned all over the social and political map. What emerges from this analysis is a sense of the social whole riven with conflicts and contradictions, at times loosely and at times tightly integrated with changing centers of continental and global power.⁵⁶

While this passage reveals once again the premise of negative definition that has been under scrutiny, the goal of this chapter has not been to claim that political economy’s attempts at mapping the social totality are exercises in academic futility, unable to get at the density of the terrain of the global capitalist media. Quite the contrary, this is exactly what political economy does, and has always done, in many instances intricately well.⁵⁷ And this is exactly the point of the chapter. Political economy’s language of totality and analysis of the social whole serves it well so long as the dynamic scope of its conceptual understanding is always held in dialectical tow with

⁵⁶ Vincent Mosco, Foreword, *Reconvergence*, by Dwayne Winseck (Cresskill, NJ.: Hampton P, 1998), xix-xx.

⁵⁷ There can be no disputing that Winseck’s 1998 text fulfills exactly the terms for analysis of a social whole as laid out by Mosco. Winseck’s historical and

capitalism itself: a context of determination always “at times loosely and at times tightly integrated with changing centers of continental and global power.” So it is that the same kind of dialectical integration must encompass each area of the total sphere of communication and culture. Audience activity, as was seen in Murdock, can be understood as dynamic, but only to the point where the dynamics of response are continually characterized within an overall structural analysis hinged upon the capitalist base of production. In Garnham, “determination” of culture, texts, even audience response, was conceived of in a “soft sense.” A flexible analysis of the social totality in which, Garnham reveals:

A political economy of communications and culture, therefore, fully accepts the arguments of the textualists as to the centrality of the process of the construction and exchange of meaning in a world made by intelligent, reflexive human agents. Where it parts company decisively with the post-modernist current, is in continuing to hold to the idea that discourse is capable of expressing a truth about a world external to that discourse, and further, that discourse has a determinate relation to the actions of human agents...

But crucially a political economy of communications and culture stresses that all mediated forms of communication involve the use of scarce resources and the mobilization of competences and dispositions which are themselves in important ways determined by access to scarce resources; that the understanding we have of the world, and thus our ability to change it, will be in their turn determined by the ways in which access to and control over those scarce resources is structured.⁵⁸

This passage by Garnham again exemplifies the operations of political economy, its smokescreens and its limitations which this chapter has sought to identify. Hence, political economy claims already to incorporate the full breadth of arguments and analysis made by textualists, post-modernists, and the like. This is the bait and it is

contemporary examination of the telecommunications landscape in Canada is extremely intricate in its attention to detail and empirical analysis.

⁵⁸ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 5-6.

expressed in such phrases as “the flexible and multifaceted analytical model of totality”.

Unfortunately, in Garnham’s case, his first paragraph—“the centrality of the process of the construction and exchange of meaning in a world made by intelligent, reflexive human agents”—is contradicted by his second paragraph—“the understanding we have of the world, and thus our ability to change it, will be in their turn *determined*....”

Surfacing here is the language of false consciousness arising within an analysis of the social totality that is otherwise held to be dynamic, flexible and “soft” in its determination. The point, again, political economy is more than within its rights to apply strong and deterministic language, but why suggest that such language also can and does cover the analytical approach of fields that run contrary to such pursuits, namely postmodernism?

This last question will ultimately not be answered in this chapter. Rather, the arguments made above have simply pointed out a number of instances in which political economy does express a desire to couch its more straightforward analytical priorities—those aimed at an ultimately materialist context of understanding of the social totality in the interest of changing this totality—within a language that suggests it is interested in including more into its analysis than it actually needs or is capable of seriously reconciling with itself. Undoubtedly its rhetorical strategy of ‘bait and switch’ has arisen in response to the challenges it has faced within a global context marked by increasing technological change and overwhelming plurality in which many have expressed incredulity toward the possibility of ever postulating a complete picture that can encompass the full breadth of the term *society*. Using its strategy, political economy can appear to be an answer to the complexity of this sphere, while keeping its materialist

emancipatory promise alive and well, couched in a strong language of credulity that its model and moral evaluation of the social totality (or, its descriptive and prescriptive claims) are not merely a language game, or one of many possible models, but *the* metanarrative through which human emancipation can be realized under the present “structures of domination.”

In the final analysis, political economy, despite its proclamations to the contrary, does not accept the baited language of difference, fragmentation and plurality that it professes to accept in any substantial way. Not because it does not want to, although it most likely doesn't, but because its own modern critical epistemological premises limit its ability to do so. This is something that can only lead to a confrontation, and, as will be shown, a denigration of the paradigm that *does* accept these things: postmodernism.

Chapter IV

What Political Economy Says III: The Political Economic View of Postmodernism

“much writing that appears under the designer label poststructuralism/postmodernism is, quite bluntly, *crap*”¹

“This is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is the knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.”²

I

Introduction

The last chapter argued that political economy, in an effort to counter the growth of ‘revisionist’ and postmodernist positions for the study of communication, has presented its own platform as able to reconcile these positions within its dynamic conception of the “social totality.” Using a number of examples from political economists who suggest this, but betray their dynamic promise with an analysis of the social totality that remains determined by economic factors, this platform was called a ‘smokescreen’ through which political economy attempts to do more than it is capable of. Faced with the possible infringement of ‘postmodern’ social theories into its own modernist platform, political economy has responded with a position that downplays this threat, suggests political economy can work with it, and then pushes forward with premises for political economy (outlined in Chapter Two) that do not reconcile a postmodern epistemology, but maintain a modernist status quo.

¹ Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990), 199. Emphasis in original.

² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 41.

That political economy should maintain its traditional holistic and realist/materialist premises against postmodern tendencies is understandable. But, to repeat a question that has already been raised, why pay so much attention to the “weight” of postmodernism if there is really no intention of engaging with its outlook in any fundamental way? As will become apparent over the course of this chapter, what political economy says about postmodernism runs contrary to its claims that it is fully prepared to acknowledge the full weight of the paradigm, as Mosco suggested. Instead, a defensive discourse emerges in a number of political economic accounts that downplay the breadth of a postmodern epistemology and presents it as a useless and dangerous nihilism.

The overall goal for this chapter will be to examine the model of postmodernism that emerges from political economic commentary upon it. This model does not account for the full breadth of a postmodern approach, as was outlined in the first chapter. Rather, given its roots in a modernist epistemological context, it may not be surprising that political economy denigrates postmodernism and finds nothing more useful in it than nihilism and irrationalism. Indeed, it never attempts to explain why the proponents of postmodernism would choose such a supposedly irrational path for the study of media and culture. In leaving this unsaid, and in denigrating postmodernism, political economy re-surfaces with a defensive discourse that attests to the fact that there is something threatening about postmodernism for the fabric of political economy. Indeed, the postmodern language game may call into question the very procedures of political economy. As such, this chapter will conclude with the argument that the strong polemical stance taken by political economy against postmodernism can be better

understood as an instance of what Lyotard calls a “differend,” or an argument between two sides in which no consensual rule of judgment can obtain. Viewed in this way, the discord between political economy and postmodernism can be better viewed as a conflict between two very different language games. However, it is evident in what follows that lending any credibility to the language game of postmodernism is not an outcome in which political economy has any interest. This will become immediately apparent as this chapter begins with a reassessment of the “incredulous” stance of postmodernism.

II

Incredulity Revisited

As opposed to a postmodern perspective that is characterized by incredulity toward metanarratives, political economy requires credulity in metanarratives, a faith in a determinate model for the social totality that is not merely a ‘language game’ but that paints a realist picture of reality ‘as it really is’. As has been demonstrated previously, especially in the work of McChesney and Magder, critical political economy believes that configurations of society and human action, as well as media content, can be determined with moral certainty as either right or wrong, good or bad. And finally, it believes that knowledge of the economic infrastructure effectively exhausts knowledge of cultural products; their meaning and pattern of consumption is given in the process of production. As a result, specific examination of the ideational content of cultural products is frequently dismissed as trivial (the occupation of cultural studies) as compared to political economy’s emphasis on context (a materialist context). This is why the last chapter argued that no matter how dynamic and multifaceted political economy’s

analytical model of the social totality became, it invariably made economic factors a key determinant in the production *and reception* of culture.

Postmodern positions largely run contrary to these aspects of political economy. They are incredulous of the possibility of finding a metanarrative that can speak directly to a universal understanding of reality. Postmodernism rejects the view of language as a transparent vehicle for thought which both faithfully captures the reality of the world and places those renderings faithfully and undistortedly into the minds of others. This rejection stems from the view of language as consisting of heterogeneous language games – rules for the formation of statements – which must be studied not from the point of view of faithfulness to reality but from the pragmatic perspective of the speaker's intentions. Postmodernism asks not of language “what does it show?” but rather “what does the speaker intend?” This, in turn, leads to the view that science is one particular language game amongst many and that its internal requirement for verifiability or falsifiability is itself the principle generator of postmodernism's incredulity towards metanarratives. When science asks “how do we know?”, it raises an epistemological problem, usually answered by the administration of proof. But when the requirement of falsifiability turns to the proof administered and to the manner of its administration (“what is this proof worth?”, “what is the way in which it was collected, organized, presented, etc., worth?”), then the very possibility of faith in an ultimate certainty vanishes. The next chapter will look more closely at postmodern thinking with a return to the work of Lyotard and an articulation of the concept of language games. Indeed, rather than view postmodernism through the lens of political economy's *discourse upon it*, and in order to highlight the differend which opposes political economy and

postmodernism, this chapter will accept postmodernism on its own terms as though it *really were* a viable analytical model for understanding communication. However, before proceeding to this phase, it may be useful to examine one more time the specific way in which political economy *produces a discourse about* postmodernism in order to undermine the very possibility of accepting postmodernism as a viable approach to the study of communication. What, therefore, does political economy *say* postmodernism is? Answering this question through the work of Mosco, Garnham and Murdock will be the first goal of this chapter.

III

Political Economy on Postmodernism: The Unwarranted Choice of Nihilism

Mosco's *Political Economy of Communication* is a good place to start because the author is careful to assess the challenge of postmodernism for his field. Despite the fact that he ultimately downplays the threat and views postmodernism as an "elliptical," i.e. incomplete, analytical approach, Mosco does present a quite valid reading of the approach itself. It is a reading that follows from Mosco's consideration of Lyotard presented in the last chapter:

According to [the postmodern] view, the implosions of twentieth-century life, set off in part by the power of new communication and information technologies, have broken apart totalities, taking with them measures of time and space that ultimately used to provide some degree of unity... We are left with the task of understanding the local, the fragmented, the parts, of what used to be thought of as elements of a wider whole, but which are, in reality, unconnected or loosely tied pieces. By removing the ideological glue of social unity, one can comprehend the real value of these pieces and, ultimately, celebrate them in their resistance to all totalizers—including capitalism, the state, and the producers of all metanarratives.³

³ Mosco, 32-33.

Despite the fact that Mosco may play up the 'celebratory' nature of postmodernism,⁴ there is little here that would suggest a misreading of the template itself and its emphasis on 'little narratives' as opposed to 'metanarratives'.⁵ As such, to agree or disagree with this postmodern imperative would appear to be a matter of theoretical preference. The only trouble is that choosing the postmodern view is not accorded much privilege from the point of view of Mosco.⁶ The specific methodology of postmodernism focussing on

⁴ Within the context of cultural theory, Rasheed Araeen has been very critical of what he calls the "postcolonial celebrity" who has given up on structural concerns while claiming freedom and agency through the "rhetoric of postmodernism." Individuals such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak are targeted by Araeen as representative of this trend. Suffice it to say that this type of celebration, that is a justifiable criticism of some recent work in cultural studies (especially Bhabha), does not appear in Lyotard. Rasheed Araeen, "A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics," *Third Text* 50 (2000): 3-20.

⁵ It is, however, possible to suggest that Mosco's is a *selective* reading of Lyotard's 'celebration' of the local. In Section 10 of *The Postmodern Condition*, "Delegitimation," Lyotard does suggest that "In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms" (p. 37). But almost immediately after Lyotard has stressed this observation he raises the case that "delegitimation" is moreover, and can be more specifically identified as, a product of the infinite epistemological regress of modernist science itself. Lyotard is quite clear on this issue: "the 'crisis' of scientific knowledge, signs of which have been accumulating since the end of the nineteenth century, is not born of a chance proliferation of sciences, itself an effect of progress in technology and the expansion of capitalism. It represents, rather, an internal erosion of the legitimacy principle of knowledge. There is an erosion at work inside the speculative game, and by loosening the weave of the encyclopedic net in which each science was to find its place, it eventually sets them free" (p. 39). Perhaps rather than a misreading of Lyotard by Mosco it is a characteristic re-reading specifically from the point of view of political economy which is spontaneously interested *not* in questioning the procedures of scientific investigation but in demonstrating the ills of sedimented social interest – which would be obvious in technology. In other words, he characterizes postmodernism in terms of the items for which his approach is already well adapted.

⁶ Echoing this idea is the Marxist political theorist Alex Callinicos whose 1989 polemic *Against Postmodernism* describes the paradigm as an abstract theoretical position that has no basis in reality and is therefore just a choice on the part of theorists who are guided by a certain feeling. Callinicos writes, "The absence of successful socialist revolution is a contingent historical fact. Postmodernity by contrast is merely a theoretical construct, of interest primarily as a symptom of the current mood of the

“loosely tied pieces” rather than on overly determined ones, for the purpose of keeping language games open and ‘in play’, so to speak, is skirted by Mosco in favour of a dialectical materialist methodology with a holistic end goal which he presents immediately following, and against, his reading of Lyotard.⁷ Mosco’s subsequent handling of postmodernism makes the latter seem wholly apolitical, amoral, and nihilistic, with very little in the way of productive academic outcome.

This is especially apparent as Mosco goes on to consider the premise of a strong moral commitment that is integral to the political economic approach. As shown in Chapter Two above, this moral imperative is absolute and has to be established before and in order for analysis to begin. Drawing on the work of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus (who “warns of the moral consequences of unchecked population”⁸) as well as Karl Marx, Mosco suggests that these historical figures “felt an essential element of their responsibility as social philosophers was identifying visions of a morally appropriate way of living.”⁹ Whereas it may have been possible to reconcile postmodernism’s focus on “parts” with an ongoing commitment to the concept of social totality, it is clear that no reconciliation is possible between political economy and postmodernism on the question of morality. In political economy’s view a focus on parts necessarily leads to a contrary moral claim or to the absence of moral claims, lending its reading of postmodernism to the charge of “relativism” that will be examined later in this chapter. Here, political

Western intelligentsia....” Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity P, 1989), 9.

⁷ Mosco writes, “as Marx, Gramsci, and Lukacs remind us, dialectical thinking leads us to recognize that reality is comprised of both parts and a whole, organized in the *concrete totality* of integration and contradiction that constitutes social life.” Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 33. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Mosco, 35. This view strikes me as borderline authoritarian and technocratic (or at least carries within it a moral view very close to social engineering).

economy clearly begins to paint postmodernism as a threat and irrational discourse.

Mosco begins with a discussion of Althusserian structuralism which leads into the following quotation which is of particular interest:

The Marxian and institutional traditions are steeped in debates over the place of moral philosophy. One of the major forms these have taken in recent years is over the challenge that Althusserian structuralism posed to the humanistic versions of Marxian thought...The attack continues today, though protagonists tend to take up the cause of post-structuralism and postmodernism, drawing on a Nietzschean tradition to attack the value of moral philosophy. Nevertheless, the moral dimension remains strong in Marxian political economy because it provides a strong defense of democracy, equality, and the public sphere in the face of powerful private interests. This is one reason why, despite the attacks from analytic and deconstructionist quarters, political economists of communication retain a strong position on the importance of a moral philosophical position.¹⁰

Hence, on the question of morality and determining the social good, Mosco draws a firm line against a postmodern view that is described as an outright assault on the value of “moral philosophy.” Not much is presented in terms of why postmodernists would launch such an attack, nor is there any consideration of the fact that Lyotard—the philosopher Mosco uses in his reading of postmodernism above—actually concludes *The Postmodern Condition* with the specific question of justice. Albeit for Lyotard the question of justice is one in which the right and the good can only be established through an understanding of and respect for the pragmatics and incommensurability of language games. As Patrick McKinlay writes on the subject, “The postmodern draws our attention to the instability of our criteria for judgement. This instability does not remove our ability to judge; rather the postmodern emphasizes the faculty of imagination, the effort to experiment and create again new criteria for judgement. Lyotard calls this form of

⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

experimentation 'parology'."¹¹ However, by arguing that postmodernism attacks morality, Mosco can then claim a priority for political economy in the defense of "democracy, equality, and the public sphere" while suggesting that postmodernism is oblivious to these things. In so doing, political economy treats postmodernism as a senseless affirmation of iconoclastic ideas aimed at destroying enlightened rational critique.

So it is hardly surprising that Nicholas Garnham, whose views as pronounced in Chapter Two above aim to establish a framework for consensus through which to judge the media, should refer to postmodernism as a rejection of such an effort. He writes, "This project has come down to us from the Enlightenment and at a time when this heritage is under widespread attack intellectually from Nietzschean post-modernists, and politically from neo-conservatives, it is important to restate its basic lineaments."¹² This denunciation of postmodernism, as well as its conflation with neo-conservatism, comes before a passage about consensus and inter-subjective agreement in which Garnham reasserts the importance of a realist epistemology and "shared rules of discourse" through which to establish criteria for judgment of the media and their structures. After outlining these criteria, Garnham continues his pointed critique of postmodernism: "A social science which cuts its links with this rationalist project of human liberation either sinks to the trivial level where mere intellectual games are played...or it joins the ranks of those who, throughout history, have perfected and wielded the technologies of domination...."¹³ Previous to these condemnations on postmodernism, Garnham had

¹¹ Patrick F. McKinlay, "Postmodernism and Democracy: Learning from Lyotard and Lefort," *The Journal of Politics* 60, no. 2 (1998): 483.

¹² Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 2.

¹³ Garnham, 3.

already set a condescending tone which compared postmodernism with “the bacillus of romanticism and its longing to escape from the determining material and social constraints of human life, from what is seen as the alienation of human essence, into a world of unanchored, non-referential signification and the free play of desire.”¹⁴

The point here is not to suggest that Garnham’s own model for the study of communication rooted in a consensus-based language paradigm and agreement upon facts about the world is itself untenable. What is important, as with Mosco, is the way in which Garnham’s presentation of postmodernism turns the latter into a body of work interested in nothing more than hedonistic nihilism. In a further re-enactment of political economy’s rhetorical strategies, as outlined in the previous chapter, Garnham’s treatment of postmodernism does allow political economy to emerge as a “rationalist” buffer against that which, since the Enlightenment, has been identified as the ‘other’ of rational thought: nihilism. In effect, by sequestering the “Nietzschean post-modernists,” Garnham allows political economy to reassert its modern epistemological premises, but fails to come to any understanding of postmodernism that would engage with the issues that it raises.

Following along this path, it can be argued that, yes, postmodernists do tend to question the unabashed affirmation of a consensus-based knowledge and language paradigm. Yes, postmodernists are more prone to look at language as a series of discourses and therefore with a greater degree of epistemological relativism than many political economists and critical Marxists. Does this imply that postmodernists think nothing can be known about the world or that no truths, or no pragmatically agreed upon

¹⁴ Ibid., 1-2.

ethical procedures can be reached between people, even across cultures?¹⁵ Doubtful, but what it does affirm—against a realist epistemology—is that any such agreements when achieved are *not* to be legitimated through reference to the presumed consensual knowledge about the world itself (i.e., prescriptive statements about how we *should* live can not be legitimated by denotative statements about how the world *is* because the denotative statements are precisely the ones that require infinite epistemological regress and that impose ways of life which themselves may be anti-thetical to human emancipation when they are taken as *proven*).¹⁶ Does this mean that truth can only be established through discourse? Arguably,¹⁷ it certainly does suggest that narrative is what communicates and legitimates any truth-claim, including that of science that is often held to be antithetical to narrative. But does this mean that under postmodernism anything goes and that all discourses are equally valid and equally relevant or irrelevant?

¹⁵ It should be mentioned that Habermas comes close to this view in his effort to reconcile American pragmatism with Marxism. Where Habermas stops short as a “modernist” and against postmodernism is in placing pragmatically and linguistically reached agreement between people in the service of a broader and more universal consensus aimed at social transformation. Shalin has made a poignant critique of Habermas’ problems with attempting to mix the logical conclusions of the pragmatist tradition that demand individual responsibility and agreement on issues without referring to an absolute and “rational” benchmark, and Habermas’ own goals which demand rational consensus in order that human beings and social life should be emancipated. Dmitri Shalin, “Critical Theory and the Pragmatist Challenge,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 2 (1992): 253-275.

¹⁶ McKinlay presents something similar to this as Lyotard’s view about modern judicial legitimation: “according to Lyotard, political science (since Hobbes) is modern, because it primarily seeks denotative or descriptive knowledge and attempts to justify a particular conception of justice on the basis of its description of what is.” McKinlay, 485. This would also seem to be the idea behind the quotation and points made directly from *The Postmodern Condition* above (page 8): “In this context, the only role positive knowledge can play is to inform the practical subject about the *reality within which the execution of the prescription is to be inscribed*.” Lyotard, 36. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ A persuasive case is made for this hotly contested position in a recent article by Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, “Agency in the Discursive Condition,” *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 34-58.

No, this does not necessarily follow. It simply means that postmodernism pays critical attention to language paradigms, cultural understanding, values and interests and how these effect knowledge claims. On this basis 'postmodernists' might agree with Garnham's claim which differentiates the two paradigms: "Where [political economy] parts company decisively with the post-modernist current, is in continuing to hold to the idea that discourse is capable of expressing a truth about a world external to that discourse, and further, that discourse has a determinate relation to the actions of human agents, actions about which it is possible to make normative judgments. We can say meaningfully of such actions that they are good, bad, or mistaken."¹⁸

This quotation by Garnham is both interesting and revealing as it presupposes the differences between postmodern 'language games'—the terms for which will be outlined in the next chapter—and a political economic realist epistemology that makes no distinction between different sorts of speech acts that constitute knowledge formation and usage. That is, in this short passage, Garnham is laying out the rules of the language game of political economy and within those rules, many striking statements can be made. We can certainly agree that by using X set of presuppositions we shall be able to assert Y set of conclusions. That is surely the whole point of all critical approaches—to propose a specific way of observing and thinking about the world in order to arrive at the conclusions prescribed by the proposer of the method. Note, however, that Garnham ends the quotation by saying that the strategy he proposes will allow us to make statements that can be judged to be good, bad or mistaken. The distinction good/bad is purely prescriptive or normative and rests upon a prior, and apparently unstated, presumption about goodness—this, no doubt, is political economy's encounter with

¹⁸ Garnham, 5.

morality. The claim about being able to judge whether statements are mistaken, however, grows out of denotative (scientific) true/false statements. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, one of the great tasks of Lyotard is to show that true/false and good/bad statements are not only of different orders but can also not be used to legitimate one another, as was the historical tendency within modernity. As such, undoubtedly Garnham's passage would be acceptable for both a political economist and a postmodernist, hence revealing the extent to which their epistemological criteria differ. The only trouble is that Garnham never gets so far as mentioning any such premises for postmodernism beyond that of nihilism and 'romantic yearning'. His passage thus marks a denigration of postmodernism rather than a useful analysis of the way each template differs. Such can also be said of Mosco whose presentation of postmodernism and post-structuralism from above appeared well informed. In the final analysis, however, Mosco ultimately suggests that work performed under the name of the latter "turns into a relativism that admits of little, if any, analytical or empirical certainty."¹⁹

The charge of relativism leveled at postmodernism by political economists such as Mosco, and that also courses through Garnham's suggestion above that political economy is able to make normative truth judgments whereas postmodernists can't, is a prevalent one. This criticism of postmodernism can also be found in the work of Graham Murdock who refers to a "happy relativism" that has emerged in cultural studies as a real danger and threat to political economy's endeavours. Of course, cultural studies should not be conflated with postmodernism; nonetheless, Lyotard's shadow is felt in Murdock's observation that "there has been a tendency in recent work in cultural studies to dissolve the notion of the common good in the acid bath of difference." That is, "contemporary

¹⁹ Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 250.

cultural studies has steadily retreated from questions of judgment, and too often lapsed into a happy relativism...For some commentators this is an unavoidable consequence of the collapse of grand communal narratives and a shared discursive world.”²⁰ In his criticism of postmodernism, Murdock is reacting to the “populist” turn in cultural studies in which many cultural studies’ practitioners in recent years have been seen to “drift” away, if not “abandon” entirely, the original Marxist critical project of British cultural studies under the tutelage of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall.²¹ The last chapter dealt with some of the contours of this debate, which certainly has ties to the rift between political economy and postmodernism. While it is certainly true that much cultural studies work is relatively moot on issues of universal consensus and universal emancipation, it is not necessarily true that all that is left from this silence is an “acid bath” of discursive relativity. For political economists such as Murdock, an “acid bath” is the logical conclusion of an analytical viewpoint that lets language and discourse (even “popular” cultural forms) and their celebration of individual pleasure get in the way of universal agreement and understanding. However, the consideration of language and difference is unlikely to result in such extremes (i.e., the abandonment of all hope of consensual understanding) unless the analysis already has built into it an end point such as human emancipation *tout court*, for which a “grand communal narrative” is imperative.

²⁰ Graham Murdock, “Base Notes: The Conditions of Cultural Practice,” *Cultural Studies in Question*, eds. Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (London: Sage, 1997), 92.

²¹ Murdock, “Base Notes,” 92. Todd Gitlin’s “The Anti-political Populism of Cultural Studies,” in the same volume presents a critical account of this “drift.” Todd Gitlin, “The Anti-political Populism of Cultural Studies,” in *Cultural Studies in Question*, eds. Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (London: Sage, 1997), 25-38.

And this would appear to be what is really at stake in political economy's recent affirmation of its modernist goal of emancipation set against postmodernism that is said to be actively attacking these larger ends for theory. Garnham's most recent publication *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity* (2000) therefore again establishes a polemic against postmodernism that political economy overcomes in its ongoing commitment. Garnham begins by sketching the terrain of the current academic climate through an historical map provided by the battle between the ancients and the moderns that plagued different schools of thought at the beginning of the European Enlightenment:

In this new battle we find in one camp those who wish, whatever their internal differences, broadly to uphold those Enlightenment standards of truth, justice, and beauty originally developed in response to modernity; those who believe that, however flawed in its execution, the Enlightenment project remains unfinished business so long as human social life continues to be stunted by coercive inequality and avoidable ignorance. Indeed for this camp the human sciences themselves, to which this book is a modest contribution, derive their purpose from the contribution they can make to this more general emancipatory project. In the other camp, often in strange alliance, stand both those who derive their position from the Ancients and from that strand of counter-Enlightenment thought stemming from Hamman, Herder, and Nietzsche who never accepted the Enlightenment project as either possible or desirable, seeing the attempt to break with tradition and bring human life under rational control as dangerous hubris, and also those who argue that the Enlightenment was a false dawn and that the Dialectic of Enlightenment has betrayed the original emancipatory thrust by erecting Reason, particularly in its economic and bureaucratic forms, as the new source of domination. This post-modernist school of thought argues, just as the old Moderns did, that we are entering or have entered a new age which requires us to throw off the chains of enlightenment thought and emancipate ourselves from its universalistic rationalist pretensions in the name of difference and desire.²²

Leaving aside the specific analogy between the 'Ancients' and 'Moderns' that Garnham is making here, and which becomes confusing as post-modernists seem to be

²² Nicholas Garnham, *Emancipation, Modernity and the Media* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 2.

both 'Ancient' and 'Modern', what is important to extract is again the division that Garnham makes between modern and postmodern analytical pursuits. Garnham's political economic perspective is in league with the goals of "the Enlightenment project" said to uphold, despite trivial differences, "standards of truth, justice, and beauty." The goal of striving to prescribe a standard for these concepts is part of political economy's overall contribution to a "more general emancipatory project." Against these efforts stand antagonists from postmodernism raised through Nietzsche who "never accepted the Enlightenment project as either possible or acceptable." In Garnham's analysis, what these figures argue is that the goals of the Enlightenment should be fought against, and the only viable alternative is to live at the whim of "difference and desire."

The usage of the term "emancipate" in the context of "difference and desire" above is interesting. Against political economy, that works toward human emancipation through reason, Garnham's postmodernism is presented as a template in which individual emancipation is achieved by doing whatever one feels is best: rendering it completely relativistic, amoral and anarchistic. What emerges from this frame of reference for postmodernism is an either/or equation in which modern thought and its attributes—"standards of truth, justice and beauty"—can be worked toward (what political economy does) or attacked (what postmodernism, according to political economy, does). For Garnham the latter course is unproductive and irrational (an understandable sentiment given what postmodernism is said to do). In the argumentative process, Garnham's modern epistemological frame for political economy is continually upheld, the language of consensus running through the passage above: that through which standards can be postulated. Also appearing in this passage is the assumption of language as an innocuous

tool to describe a reality that can be universally agreed upon by all: the idea that, despite “internal differences,” standards can be upheld. As far as postmodernism is concerned, neither postulate (knowledge of the end goals of life and language as transparent medium) is upheld because of a reliance upon “difference and desire” which allegedly leads to an undefined, irrational and individual “emancipat[ion]”. It therefore becomes very difficult to imagine who in his or her right mind would wish to become a postmodernist.

So who would become a postmodernist? What is the value of postmodernism other than to be an annoying thorn in the side of those working toward a better world for all? It is the view here that these questions are hardly the only ones or the best ones or the necessary ones to ask of postmodernism. Such questions only emerge from within the modernist epistemological frame of political economy that refuses, despite its own rhetoric, to acknowledge the “weight” of a postmodern perspective. In refusing to present postmodernism as anything other than nihilism, no attempt is made by political economy in its polemic against the paradigm to acknowledge that postmodern thought may present a competing epistemological frame for understanding knowledge, language and communication.

IV

Political Economy and Postmodernism: From Polemic to “Differend”

It is useful at this point to summarize the basic argument advanced by this description of political economy’s view of postmodernism. This chapter has argued that through the modern epistemological lens of political economy, postmodernism emerges as a nihilistic and anti-modern (or anti-Enlightenment) paradigm concerned with achieving nothing

more than the dissolution of projects aimed at equality, justice and truth. The analyses from political economy presented above are obviously satisfied with this reading of postmodernism. But what would one say if one were inclined to a postmodern view but had never really felt the nihilistic fervor that is said to accompany it? It is apparent that perhaps political economy is not presenting postmodernism with a keen interest in acknowledging its claims. This is not surprising given that political economy is not a postmodern, but modern, template. But this rather logical formulation actually points to a fundamental problematic that reaches well beyond the simple rift between political economy and postmodernism. For the very problem that comes to the fore in political economy's presentation of postmodernism is the general reluctance to acknowledge that postmodern theory can have any validity. More pointedly, because political economy speaks through a language game which takes knowledge to be self-identical with reality itself and language to be the tool for the transmission of such knowledge claims, its epistemological premises are of a different and incommensurable order from those of postmodernism which examines the density of language before leaping to knowledge claims about reality. This problem can be more simply phrased by stating that where 1) political economy justifies its descriptive and moral claims about reality through reference to reality itself, 2) a postmodern perspective first postulates how language frames reality in different ways (depending on the language game applied), and then suggests that any claims about reality must be made within the context of a language community that can agree upon such claims. Between 1 and 2 there is a rift that runs deeper than a polemic, it is question of rules, and how these should be applied in order to understand communication and culture. This section will argue that this equation is best

viewed therefore not as a polemic but as an instance of a “differend” within communication studies.

On this point, it is fitting to recall the argument about postmodernism made in the first chapter of this thesis. One of the major goals of that chapter was to define postmodernism along terms set not by modern thought, but through the terms of postmodernism itself. The interpretations of postmodernism offered in the analyses of political economy do not seem to allow this. It is an apt time therefore to repeat and extend a quotation from the first chapter by educational theorist Roger Mourad, jr. concerning the terms for postmodernism:

[P]ostmodern work is usually interpreted in modern terms, rather than on its own terms. The common tendency is to carry modern categories and criteria into the reading of postmodern work and to apply these categories in order to understand it. This is the most pervasive problem with most interpretations of postmodern thought. It is understandable in part. Given the difficulty of the texts, and the fact that postmodernists themselves disavow any association with new universalistic truth claims, the idea that postmodern thought has its own terms may seem problematic. However, the result is to largely or even to utterly miss the point.²³

It is possible to agree wholeheartedly with Mourad that some postmodern concepts and writings can attain a level bordering on obscurantism. This is not sufficient reason, however, to denounce postmodernism in general. So has political economy missed the point about postmodernism? In a word, yes. But such an outcome is understandable given that political economy can only consider postmodernism within its modern conceptual lens. As such, faced with a postmodern template that sees language not as a single unified system but as a series of discontinuous games or practices which shape knowledge, there can be no recourse for political economy’s realist epistemology other than to suggest that postmodernism is dangerously relativistic. Likewise, because

postmodernism is incredulous toward metanarratives that, for political economy, unproblematically and ineluctably justify the normative and prescriptive basis of its ethical project, nothing can follow for postmodernism but a denunciation of it as amoral and in opposition to the values of 'truth, justice, and democracy'. These criticisms of postmodernism by political economy can be summarized by recourse again to Mourad who has eloquently written about how postmodernism is often characterized by those who view it from a modern vantage point. Discussing approaches that can be taken when confronted with postmodern thought, Mourad identifies what usually results in the "charge of radical relativism" whereby what is rejected is "the idea that postmodern thought is a coherent critique of anything at all, but is instead the wholesale leveling of any and all intellectual and moral distinctions, or at least the ones that are basic to most people, including most scholars. Therefore, goes this interpretation, postmodern thought is nihilistic."²⁴

Though Mourad's analysis is aimed at a broader field than political economy, his observations about how postmodernism can be unconstructively (mis)understood as nihilism serve the purposes of this chapter very well. For it can be observed in the writings of Mosco, Garnham and Murdock that a political economic perspective for communication and culture views postmodernism as a nihilistic 'other' to its rational and universal project of human emancipation. Why a body of thought like postmodernism would have emerged with such force and predominance over the last few decades is not readily considered, nor is much effort given to explaining the perspective along any justifiable and viable terms. If such terms are considered, as they were in the opening

²³ Mourad, 4.

²⁴ Ibid., 4.

chapter to this thesis and will be extrapolated further in the next chapter, a more sober and rational portrait of postmodernism begins to emerge. Undoubtedly such terms might still be deemed repugnant by a modern analytical template like political economy.

However, recognizing postmodernism on its own terms—whether these are accepted or not—is useful for a very specific purpose. Within the context of the emerging rift between postmodern and political economic perspectives for the analysis of communication, recognizing the former as an analytical template formulated along differential premises than the latter would do the service of changing this emerging debate from a polemic (always unproductive) to an instance of what Lyotard calls a “differend.” The difference between a polemic and a differend has to do with the rules through which language games are presented. In a polemic, one side of a debate attempts to argue at all costs that its view is the only right and justifiable one. Alternatively a differend, as defined by Lyotard:

would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them.²⁵

In this analysis of political economy’s presentation of postmodernism the recognition of a differend is thwarted by the polemical stance that political economy takes toward postmodernism. Firm in its modern epistemological premises, political economy argues that the path of postmodernism should not be engaged because it undermines the moral value and democratic potential of critical analysis. The rule of judgment that political economy uses to make this assessment of postmodernism however

is its own, and belongs to modern epistemological criteria. In Michael Peters' estimation the result of such a scenario is to arrive at a differend:

Where multiple parties are involved from a variety of genres of discourse, each with a different perspective or argument, as is the case in the modernity-postmodernity debate, it is, perhaps, no wonder that there is no ruling or hegemonic genre, no overarching metadiscourse, language game or metanarrative, and no rules of judgment applicable to all arguments (in spite of claims and counterarguments to the contrary). The explosion of the modernity-postmodernity debate is itself a differend...²⁶

Given political economy's credulity in metanarratives and faith in the ability to consensually speak through a metadiscourse that *is* capable of judging all arguments, it follows that postmodernism cannot be understood as anything other than nihilistic and dangerously relativistic. In this much, what political economy says about postmodernism is not very instructive and can only do damage to one of the parties involved: the one being judged. In this case, postmodernism's defense cannot be postulated in terms acceptable to political economy because each is involved in a different language game and pursues analysis according to different rules that result in different outcomes and goals. Such a scenario is presumably fine for political economy because its realist premises position it as a normative critical pursuit aimed at social transformation, rather than as a paradigm of study that follows the rules of a particular language game. But such a point of view does hurt any legitimate attempt to come to terms with postmodernism, which, ironically, takes as one of its major goals the examination and tolerance to bear witness to instances of incommensurability between language games. As Peters continues, "The aim of philosophy...Lyotard argues, is to detect differends (a

²⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), xi.

²⁶ Michael Peters, "Introduction," in *Education and the Postmodern Condition*, ed., Michael Peters (London: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), xxv.

cognitive task) and to bear witness to them (an ethical obligation).”²⁷ This section has borne witness to an instance of a differend between political economy and postmodern analytical perspectives. To say this, however, is to already assume something political economy does not: that postmodernism is not simply an irrational nihilism, but a different methodology and analytical template aimed at understanding communication, culture and the social world.

V

Conclusion: Political Economy and its Critique of Postmodernism

As has been demonstrated above, for Garnham postmodernism is associated strictly with a Nietzschean strain of thought that has abandoned the use of reason and plunged headlong into a celebration of difference and acceptance of desire. As with Mosco and Murdock, postmodernism is held to be an unfounded and unfortunate theoretical choice that is morally bankrupt and can offer nothing to the emancipatory pursuits of political economy. In terms of specifics, postmodernism is said to refute efforts at realizing a “common good” in its affirmation of an “acid bath of relativism,” as Murdock suggested above, and to go against the “strong defense of democracy, equality, and the public sphere” that Mosco presented as the provinces of political economy. And finally, in Garnham, postmodernism is held to be a nihilistic and irrational pursuit that “cuts its links with this rationalist project of human liberation” and chooses instead to play trivial “intellectual games.”

Following the views of these key thinkers, what political economy says about postmodernism is that it is an academic endeavour not amounting to much, certainly not

²⁷ Peters, xxv.

if one has an interest in human emancipation, moral philosophy, and establishing criteria for a just society. What political economy does not say is that postmodernism *has* arisen specifically in response to complicated theoretical and sociocultural problems. These are many of the same problems—of how best to think about democracy, justice, truth in an age of plurality and advanced communication and technological developments—which concern political economy within the historical framework of a late capitalist, industrialized and/or post-industrialized age.

The rules applied by a postmodern perspective in order to approach these problems and issues are what demarcate it from a modern perspective. A postmodern view places a higher tolerance on difference and the possible incommensurability that can obtain between different language games. Political economy, reluctant to see its difference from postmodernism as an instance of a differend (the concept itself has no basis in the realist epistemology of political economy), views the prospect of incommensurability with suspicion. Postmodernism is flagged as an “anything goes” philosophy that turns the discursive field into a dangerous proliferation of fragments in which no consensus can obtain and therefore no social transformation can be achieved. As Garnham argued above, consensus is required in order to prescribe a morally correct conception of media and the public sphere within which a model for the exercise of reason and the faculties of judgment can follow. From a postmodern perspective, however, the criteria seem somehow reversed: it is at the local and individual level that one can continually think anew about one’s relationship between and within different language games. Here is how Lyotard responds to the problem of capitalism and the systems world, agency, and the use of the faculties of reason, as well as the charge that

views such as his are ‘irrational’. It is an excerpt from one of many letters written to students in which he attempts to “explain” the postmodern:

My “irrationalism.” Imagine...I’ve struggled in different ways against capitalism’s regime of pseudorationality and performativity. I’ve emphasized the importance of the moment of dissent in the process of constructing knowledge, lying at the heart of the community of thought...A few months ago I sent to your young friend Jacques a short dispatch on the confusion of reasons. People who invoke “Reason” perpetuate the confusion. We must take care to distinguish different reasons: the reason pertaining to phenomena, the reason able to legitimate a political regime, the reason allowing each person to live in his or her own singularity, the reason that says work is admirable, and also the reason why there is duty, or a debt. Making such distinctions is the activity of critical rationalism. They lay the foundations for what Adorno saw as a “politics” of micrologies. They trace an immediate line of resistance to the current “totalitarianism.”²⁸

Contained within Lyotard’s observation that the function of “Reason” is better understood as “different reasons” in which knowledge ceases to be aimed at the general and universal emancipation of humanity and instead follows the rules of particular language games, is an epistemological and analytical method. The goal of the next chapter will be to demystify this method and summarize it as a series of observations about language, knowledge and the self. These observations are certainly far removed from the epistemological premises for political economy encountered in Chapter Two, and cannot be encompassed within political economy’s rhetorical deployment of a dynamic “social totality” that was presented in Chapter Three. They also share little with the model of postmodernism as nihilism that has emerged in answering the question that was the goal for this chapter, not *what is* postmodernism, but what does *political economy* say postmodernism is? In the last section it was argued that in the language of political economy the problem of postmodernism summons a polemic. To understand

²⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 73.

and appreciate postmodernism, however, this polemic must be turned into a differend. This latter task presents the most important and contentious ‘move’ of this chapter, as well as this thesis: a move in which a space is cleared for an understanding of postmodernism outside the bounds of political economy and its modern epistemological understanding—and subsequent denigration—of postmodern developments.

Chapter V

Political Economy and Postmodernism: The Making and Breaking of a Polemic, or, Recognizing the Differend

“The reality is that there are many languages and...new languages are added to old ones, like suburbs of an old town.”¹

“And when you say, ‘to change worlds’, that means ‘to change pragmatic positions’. There are many ways of changing positions, of changing the pragmatic positions, and these ways define a language game.”²

I

Introduction

Having made a crucial ‘move’ at the end of the last chapter, this thesis comes close to fulfilling its main objective. This ‘move’ shifted the polemic between political economy and postmodernism to a more productive consideration that sees this rift as an example of two incommensurable language games based on different rules. Obvious from the last three chapters, this is not how political economy chooses to view the matter; opting instead for a dismissal of postmodernism as dangerous nihilism. It is only after accepting the differend between political economy and postmodernism that the first chapter of this thesis, which concerned postmodernism, re-emerges retrospectively as standing on its own terms, terms which this thesis believes should be given consideration. Reinforcing and clarifying these terms through a return to postmodernism via Lyotard’s conception of “language games” will be the goal of this chapter. But first, a slight recapitulation of what has been done so far.

¹ Michael Peters, “Legitimation Problems: Knowledge and Education in the Postmodern Condition,” in *Education and the Postmodern Condition*, ed., Michael Peters (London: Bergin & Garvey, 1995), 32. The reference to “suburbs of an old town” is a metaphor used by both Wittgenstein and, later, Lyotard.

This thesis began with a chapter which argued that Lyotard's, and to a lesser extent Derrida's and Foucault's, views on postmodernism are sociohistorically and theoretically justifiable. The main idea was that the postmodern is marked by its incredulity toward metanarratives, understood as an unwillingness to believe in the universal "grand narratives" which had legitimated the ends of knowledge in modern thought. The first chapter outlined a context for this incredulity as it can be seen to take shape in the work of Toynbee, Ihab Hassan, and eventually Lyotard, whose 1979 text *The Postmodern Condition* provides a canonical analysis of the character of knowledge in the wake of this incredulity. Chapter One concluded with the reminder that underlying Lyotard's analysis is the principle idea that "In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses."³ These "different terms" for understanding knowledge can now more precisely be understood as "language games," a concept that was introduced but not fully developed in the first chapter. What is most important to understand, however, is that while Lyotard gives numerous examples for why the credibility of grand narratives is currently under threat—a list that does include Nietzsche, but only in so much as he pointed out early an inherent characteristic of modern speculative thought: that its proof requires an infinite regression of further proofs—he is not interested in carrying this line too far. Rather, Lyotard can be bluntly heard to declare: this is the postmodern condition and here is how knowledge functions

² Jean-Francois Lyotard in conversation with Jean-Loup Thebaud. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans., Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985), 51-52.

³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 37.

within it (language games). The reader can ostensibly take-or-leave this position, but as Lyotard states at the outset of his 1985 *Just Gaming*, “You take it or leave it, but if you leave it, it means that it has produced no effects.”⁴

One modern discourse of communication studies that has chosen to “leave it” is political economy. Chapter Two, therefore, turned to an examination of the analytical template of political economy that has spoken out critically on postmodernism. Chapter Two aimed to chart the undercurrents of the rift between postmodernism and political economy and it began by detailing the modern epistemological platform of political economy. Chapter Three deepened the investigation by examining the rhetoric of political economy which claims that its premises stand up to the scrutiny of postmodern and revisionist critics. As a result, Chapter Four showed what image of postmodernism emerged from the discourse of political economy. The political economic reading of postmodernism emerged in stark contrast to the pursuits of the paradigm established in Chapter One. It is, therefore, more than apparent that in choosing to “leave it,” political economy has not only denied the possible effects of a postmodern understanding of communication, but can even be seen to misconstrue what the latter says. The disagreement between political economy and postmodernism, the first’s mischaracterization of the second, was called a “differend”. It emerged from their use of incommensurable language games.

The current chapter is aimed at bearing witness to the differend between these two discourses for understanding communication. It will suggest that we “take it,” if only in

⁴ Lyotard is not discussing *The Postmodern Condition* but rather his 1974 *L'Economie libidinale*. He is defending the work against Thebaud’s assertion that “its mode of writing is such as to make it a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.” In fact, this

order to see what effects such an acceptance of a postmodern perspective might bring for a practical understanding of communication.

It therefore remains to be stated why a defense of postmodernism “on its own terms” matters and what such a reading of the analytical template looks like, as well as a final understanding of how this differs from political economy. To engage these issues, this chapter will begin with a look at how political economy differs from postmodernism in its consideration of communication and language. This will lead inevitably and contextually to an outline of Lyotard’s conception of “language games,” the analytical criterion the French philosopher applies to understand communication and social interaction within the “postmodern condition.” The Conclusion to this thesis will extrapolate why understanding communication as language games, or respecting the differend, matters.

II

Political Economy as Language Game

Given political economy’s realist/materialist premises outlined in Chapter Two, it is not surprising that it takes issue with the analytical pursuits of postmodernism and harps on the latter’s affiliation with nihilism. This point has already been stated. What this thesis is taking issue with is not that postmodernism and political economy are very different in their respective approaches to communication, but simply that the latter has tended to short change postmodernism or indeed to misconstrue it as a consequence of their difference. Given political economy’s prominent position in the field of communication studies, this thesis takes the position that such a distortion of postmodernism, deliberate

similar trait could undoubtedly be seen to follow in the writing of *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard and Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, 3.

or not, is unfortunate and academically unproductive and limiting.⁵ This distortion of postmodernism undoubtedly follows from the fact that the realist premises of political economy do not readily lend themselves to the notion that they, too, are a rule-governed language game. This is, however, precisely what a postmodern position believes any theoretical approach and paradigm consists of, whether it be normative, critical or otherwise. In contrast, as has been witnessed consistently in the chapters above, political economy aims to isolate real facts about the real world, or the “social totality,” and to use this knowledge, in conjunction with a firm moral philosophy, to bring about social transformation.

In this process—and this is not a critique of the process only an explication of what political economy does—the paradigm asserts its realist/materialist understanding of the world: reality exists independently of the observer; observers possess non-distorting tools for grasping and representing that reality to each other; their direct access to reality gives them understanding of the nature or structure of the social good; their possession of non-distorting tools allow them to reach consensus which is itself guaranteed by the non-perverse and invariant nature of reality; and their consensually established true understanding grounds their transformative social action. If access to the world is impeded (i.e., if the tools for grasping and representing it fail to work), if the correct conclusions are not reached (i.e., if people fail to recognize their own true interests), if observers fail to exchange representations amongst themselves honestly,

⁵ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth seems to share this concern in her defense of postmodernism. In her essay “Agency in the Discursive Condition” Ermarth comments on the “willful incomprehensions among political activists who are intent on bringing previously marginal groups into the political mainstream and who see postmodernity as a threat to that modern project.” Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “Agency in the Discursive Condition,” *History and Theory* 40 (2001): 34.

genuinely, or sincerely, in short, if democracy, justice and consensus fail to occur, then this is because of some force acting over and against the fullness of the non-distorting tools of observation and representation. That force is invariably the capitalist media system and unequal resource allocation.

In the most extreme rendition of this process, as provided by Garnham, these media, or “structures of domination,” lull the masses into false consciousness, the effects of which impede the ends of knowledge embraced and championed by political economy. It is therefore the specific role of the intellectual to tear away the veil of false consciousness, to expose relations of power and structures of domination, to ‘empower’ the dispossessed and to reassert and prescribe the good ends of knowledge:

[O]nly such a concept [false consciousness] gives intellectuals a valid role. First, organic intellectuals, in a necessary and legitimate division of labor, create the consciousness of a class out of the fragments of that class’s experience. Second, intellectuals provide a political strategy by providing a map of the structure of domination and the terrain of struggle.⁶

The point of this section is not to revisit the matter of false consciousness or political economy’s premises in any great detail. This ground has already been covered. What this reconsideration of Garnham is aimed at currently is to present how communication is formulated as a concept in the language game of political economy, a conceptual understanding that will be seen to differ substantially from a postmodern view. The key terms to understand how communication is viewed by political economy can be gleaned from Garnham’s passage above.

In Garnham’s estimation “organic intellectuals” are capable of understanding the True and authentic wants, needs and desires of a particular class’s “experience,” i.e. the

⁶ Garnham, “Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce?,” 68.

way that class seeks, or would otherwise, live a good, just and fully human life. This idea is reflected in political economy's prescriptive strategy aimed at putting together the "fragmented" pieces of class-consciousness that have suffered under the "structures of domination." According to Garnham the intellectual can formulate this prescriptive model "by providing the map of the structures of domination and the terrain of struggle."

It can safely be assumed that this map, and the political strategy that flows from it, is to be established through more than just discursive interaction. That is, there exist *extra-discursive* criteria which permit a certain judgment about the "social totality." This is what is implied in Garnham's statement of the difference between postmodernism and political economy that was highlighted in the last chapter:

[I]n continuing to hold to the idea that discourse is capable of expressing a truth about a world *external to that discourse*, and further, that discourse has a determinate relation to the actions of human agents, actions about which it is possible to make normative judgments. We can say meaningfully of such actions that they are good, bad, or mistaken.⁷

In the last chapter this passage was examined for what it reveals about political economy's epistemological premises. Here I would like to re-consider it, along with the ideas expressed in the other passage by Garnham above (false consciousness), in order to glean how communication is conceptualized by political economy.

In both these passages Garnham is laying out the rules of the language paradigm (the general rules by which political economy forms statements, i.e., plays language games) of political economy, rules that will effectively liberate people from their false consciousness and point the way toward a true and just society. As in all critical theories,

⁷ Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 5.

Garnham is proposing a specific way of observing and thinking about the world in order to arrive at the conclusions prescribed by the proposer of the method—i.e. those of the “organic intellectual.” Garnham ends the quotation above by saying that the strategy he proposes will allow us to make statements that can be judged to be good, bad or mistaken. This is important because ‘good, bad or mistaken’ refers to *prescriptive* statements which have an ethical value (good/bad) and *denotative* statements which have a truth-value (mistaken/truthful). The claim is, of course, to be able to found prescriptives within denotatives, i.e., to make value claims which are not subject to revision or dispute because they are grounded in the very truth of reality itself such that to disagree with them would be a genuine sign of perversity meriting disqualification from further discourse.

In Garnham’s estimation, the organic intellectual is provided with the task of making a denotative statement about the world, in the form of a “map.” As a result of this map, a judgment is made, and a morally superior model for social life and interaction is postulated. Those who are not suffering from false consciousness, and this is an important point, will be able to reach a consensus concerning the way the map should be made and the judgment which flows from it and, by implementing the judgment (praxis), they will lead the way toward human emancipation from the structures of domination which would prevent us from achieving consensus or coming to know the map. The point about false consciousness is noted because it is this problem above all which the discourse of political economy holds as an impediment to consensus on matters of truth, justice and the social good. Were it not for those elements of distorted communication and morally degenerate media and cultural messages (N.B. that for Garnham “discourse

has a determinate relation to the actions of human agents”), it is held that rationally minded individuals would be capable of reaching a consensus over such matters. That such a consensus can be reached, and that intellectuals are capable of knowing what the steps toward this would be (i.e. they do not suffer from false consciousness), is made possible because knowledge and truth are not solely a product of discourse or socially mediated understanding, but are derived from the world itself, from truths about the world “external to that discourse.”

I do not mean to be convoluted in this description of political economy. These conclusions about the paradigm’s views on knowledge, consensus and truth all follow from the realist premises outlined for political economy in Chapter Two. The reading of this last passage was not meant to infer that no knowledge or truth can be made about the world, nor that consensus can never be reached over issues, political or otherwise. The pragmatics of a postmodern view would, however, question the necessity or possibility of the world itself, i.e. Reality, being the arbiter (or proof) for truth claims about it, external to the mediating properties of language. Or, in keeping with language that will become relevant below, postmodernism rejects the notion that prescriptives can be based in denotatives, that moral claims can lay claim to a grounding in objective truth thereby making them unassailable.

To stick with this idea for a moment and briefly preface the analysis of postmodernism that will follow, such was the very pattern of religious belief against which modernity rebelled and it is not in keeping with the spirit of modernity itself to erect new ‘transcendences’ which link anew moral prescriptions with claims to truth. Indeed, postmodernism holds that the 20th century has given us ample evidence that we

do the worst to each other in the name of values we hold to be truths. Its project is to found justice and ethics in something that would not claim to be transcendent and that would accept fully the indeterminacy of speech acts. The project is not an easy one and it consists, for postmodernism, of turning modernity into its own tradition, of coming to realize the traps into which it has led itself and the resources which it continues to possess to evade them. But those resources often lead us along paths which merely underscore the difficult necessity of eschewing all claims to Truth. For this reason, emancipation is a good end but not one that can be reached by claiming, as religion did, that certain actions are imperative and that to deny them is to cast oneself outside the community. Indeed, consensus itself becomes highly problematic in that it describes not the living movement of thought and debate but rather the moment at which that movement ceases and exchange is no longer necessary because everyone thinks the same thing. It is not a theory of communication but of the end of communication. It, therefore, does not describe how communication works but the conditions under which it can cease to work. If emancipation is to mean anything, it might also mean freedom from the requirement to think in this way.

The major point being made here is simply that political economy establishes a framework for knowledge in which its overriding and universal use is to inform the speculative conditions required for emancipation. In the epistemological model of political economy language and communication take on a specific role: they serve as a neutral tool through which knowledge about the world (which is not relative but absolute and universal) can be agreed upon (the rule of consensus using the tool of language) such that emancipation will follow. As a result, emancipation becomes not the by-product of

individual or human action but conformity of the group with perceived reality. This model, which sounds somewhat like Habermas' conception of the "ideal speech situation," was seen in Chapter Two to be that which Garnham and political economy more generally subscribe to. Its rules are also thoroughly *modern*. On this point a return to Lyotard is in order:

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse...making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end—universal peace.⁸

As has been demonstrated over the course of this thesis, and recapitulated in this section, the rules by which political economy plays its language games adhere to that which Lyotard dubs modern, as opposed to postmodern. This conclusion should come as no surprise, and undoubtedly an individual like Garnham would not wish to contest such an observation. Garnham's "organic intellectuals," and political economy more broadly, establish in their epistemological premises that knowledge be placed in the service of working "toward a good ethico-political end," not quite universal peace, but certainly the type of social transformation that would lead to universal peace. Having a metadiscursive idea of what such an end is, political economy attempts to diagnose the impediments to its attainment.⁹ In contrast, legislating justice without such an Idea (see

⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984 [1979]), xxiii-xxiv.

⁹ This point is made by Lyotard in a passage from *Just Gaming*, in which the philosopher capitalizes the Platonic "Idea," i.e., a political rule of judgment that is ascertained because a higher order Idea, or model, has already been devised as superior. It is a point that Lyotard makes not only in relation to Plato, but Marx as well: "Actually,

note 9) is the ethico-political act of postmodernism.¹⁰ On this point, therefore, the question of the differend surfaces once again. But its emergence can now be seen more constructively as falling on the heels of how the concept of communication is differentially treated between the respective paradigms of political economy and postmodernism.

Revisiting as this section has done the rules for the language game of political economy, reveals a concept of communication which fails to discriminate between different forms and uses of knowledge, language and communication. Rather, in postulating a model of the “social totality” that is to inform its political strategy, political economy passes unproblematically from denotative claims (i.e. true/false scientific or empirical claims) to prescriptive claims (i.e. good/bad judgments) without assessing the specific use of language and knowledge in each case. These elements are not considered because, for political economy, rationality is singular and unified; knowledge is useful for the general and universalizing task of human emancipation or social transformation. The ends of knowledge are, therefore, also singular and unified. Any particular statement or claim finds its justification by being referred to the grand narrative of human emancipation and the grand narrative finds its enactment in particular statements. Indeed, the hallmark of modern Enlightenment thought has been the motivation to reach a universal consensus over matters of truth, justice and the social good. But as many

among all these thinkers, not only Plato but Marx as well, there is the deep conviction that there is a true being of society, and that society will be just if it is brought into conformity with this true being, and therefore one can draw just prescriptions from a description that is true, in the sense of ‘correct’.” Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, 23.

¹⁰ The particularities of a postmodern conception of justice will not be outlined here, but the key ingredients for it are all clearly outlined below when the issue of language games is taken up. Lyotard lays out an idea of his concept of justice in *Just Gaming*, 15-18.

postmodernists have been at pains to point out, such a conception of language and communication leaves these very areas—what is true, what constitutes justice, what is good—somewhat underdeveloped.

For Lyotard, a major problem with this sort of “communication theory” is that it ultimately leaves only two options for understanding how language and communication work and inflect the social bond: either language is fully expressive of our intentions and is dialogue or language is manipulation (false consciousness), the attempt to transmit ideas unilaterally. However, given the extent to which communication and informational technologies have become part and parcel of daily life and work, the extent to which communication itself has become the paradigm for cybernetics, genetics, computer science, psychoanalysis, etc., Lyotard suggests, “It would be superficial to reduce [language’s] significance to the traditional alternative between manipulatory speech and the unilateral transmission of messages on the one hand, and free expression and dialogue on the other.”¹¹ This section will conclude with the argument that such a dichotomous view of communication and knowledge is what is revealed in the discourse of political economy, a view that will differ in turn from the pragmatic position of Lyotard’s language games. What is required momentarily is a consideration of how the dichotomous view plays itself out in political economy, and how this differs in turn from a postmodern view of communication as “language games.”

To this end, political economy adheres to a language game that makes no distinction between different *genres* of speech acts or variations in communication through which knowledge is produced and used. By virtue of this lack of distinction

¹¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 16.

between the specific elements that comprise language use and communicative practices, the main problem political economy sees as impeding the use of rational discourse aimed at consensus over issues of the public good are materialist and economic factors—access to resources. This idea is elaborated, for example, in Murdock’s defensive comments concerning political economy’s approach to the concept of pleasure: “It is not, as some critics claim, that critical political economy is a ‘dismal science.’ [Political economy] has a strong interest in pleasure, or more correctly, in the *preconditions of pleasure and self-expression*.”¹² Murdock’s comments on pleasure are interesting because they infer that “self-expression” (a very encompassing term it will be noted) can only be effectively and authentically pursued within a realm of free or undistorted communication, i.e. outside the bounds of manipulative systems—these are the “preconditions” that must be satisfied; preconditions that would require a different organization of material resources and access to them. Using the examples of “shops,” Murdock illustrates this idea further: “From the perspective of critical political economy, what is interesting about shops is where the contents have come from, under what conditions they have been produced, who has access to them, and the links between ‘freedom’ of choice enjoyed by shoppers and the denial of choices endured by streetpeople, beggars, and bag ladies.”¹³ Not to deny the seriousness of issues such as homelessness or the fact that much clothing available in big brand stores is made by workers under less than reputable conditions, but satisfying all these conditions (i.e., ensuring complete and equal access on terms set by Murdock) as the preconditions *before* one can partake in genuine self-expression or

¹² Graham Murdock, “Across the Great Divide: Cultural Analysis and the Condition of Democracy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (1995): 93. Emphasis added.

¹³ Murdock, 93.

pleasure would seem a difficult, even arbitrary, line to walk in contemporary Western society. This is not to say one can not make discriminating choices. Rather, it *is* to say that despite a perceived deficiency of ideal, equal or democratic preconditions it is still possible to make discriminating choices and to act reasonably. To prescribe the grounds for complete freedom of self-expression *before* self-expression can effectively and authentically happen seems to greatly beg the question of what communication is for and how it works (again, the idea lingering here is that the ends for communication in political economy would also signal an end to communication).

From a postmodern perspective, far from being able to establish “preconditions” for self-expression, nowhere does one stand outside what Lyotard calls the “agonistic aspect of society.” That is, social beings are never outside the social bond of pragmatic communicative relationships and language games through which language and communication is exchanged in order to work, consume, derive pleasure, live ethically, improve one’s lot, create awareness over social issues, etc. As Lyotard says of the matter:

[T]here is no need to resort to some fiction of social origins to establish that language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist; even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.¹⁴

Contained in this passage by Lyotard is not some radical idea about how language has “invaded the universal problematic,” to use Derrida’s words,¹⁵ but the simple observation that to live in the social world is already to be a player within a range of different language games, whether as sender, addressee, or referent. Note how this model for

¹⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ermarth, 40.

understanding communication as language games removes itself from a view of the concept (communication) as either referring to free expression or manipulative speech. From a pragmatic perspective there are no extra-linguistic “preconditions” (consensus?) to be found that would ensure the stability of either of these scenarios. This is not to say that language and communication cannot function as the exchange of self-expression between minds, but it is to say that such an exchange only happens within the pragmatics of particular language games that *always* position its interlocutors in a certain way. All this will become clearer as this chapter turns to examine the concept of language games in the next section. In the meantime, this section will conclude with another consideration of how a political economic understanding of communication dichotomizes the function of language to a role of either free expression or manipulative speech.

Another example of satisfying the “preconditions” for communication before genuine and authentic (free) expression can be reached, and that will be shown to differ considerably from a postmodern perspective of language, gets specific elaboration in Magder’s political economic assessment of “the cultural sphere.” In a text that was encountered previously in Chapter Two, Magder gives examples of what comprises this sphere: “bounded by the traditional arts: such as theatre, dance, and painting, on the one side and by the cultural industries, such as television, radio, cinema, and the press, on the other.”¹⁶ Magder makes an important point that these cultural forms are neither primordial, “These practices are not the epiphenomena of supposedly more basic social activities,” nor simply “a condition of ‘leisure’ or the experience of ‘entertainment’.”

¹⁶ Ted Magder, “Taking Culture Seriously: A Political Economy of Communication,” in *The New Canadian Political Economy*, eds., Wallace Clement and Glen Williams (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1989), 278.

Instead, according to Magder, the media have a strong role to play in how individuals interpret the social world and each other:

Through cultural practices individuals gain a sense of themselves and how they can relate to others—as citizens, as members of a class or social group, as men or women, as natives or blacks, as Quebecois or westerners.

As was already stipulated in Chapter Two, Magder's political economy of culture is not interested in examining the "texts" that arise within the cultural sphere (i.e. the myriad of different forms of self-expression), but the "context" for the sphere itself, under what conditions these texts are produced. This context is one in which, "Increasing concentration and monopolization within the cultural industries have helped standardize and homogenize cultural production."¹⁷ As also encountered in Chapter Two, "Hollywood" is Magder's major example of this concentration. It does not take denying the fact of media concentration to suggest that there is a potentially reductive dichotomy at work in Magder's reading of communication and culture, a reading which couches within it an implicit interest in establishing Murdock's "preconditions of pleasure and self-expression." That is, Magder himself gives a list of numerous different media within which it is possible to make messages (i.e. forms of self-expression). He then goes on to suggest that these media can help establish how individuals relate to one another along lines of citizenship, race, class and gender, etc. But in Magder's political economic model the potential for the cultural sphere to speak along these lines is thwarted by the manipulative potential of the "context" surrounding possible forms of self-expression: "That 'Hollywood' refers both to the most dominant film production and distribution companies is proof positive of these trends."¹⁸ According to the rules of Magder's

¹⁷ All quotes from Magder, 278-279.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

political economic guidelines his final analysis of “the cultural sphere” is a dichotomous one that outlines communication as either “free expression” or “manipulative speech.” “[W]hile there is still considerable space for resistance to these trends,” Magder writes, “the constraints on creative and democratic cultural production must be recognized and analysed.”¹⁹

This outline of Magder and Murdock can be contrasted with a pragmatic view of language such as that outlined by Lyotard. That is, to continue with Magder, the latter compiles a list of numerous different media forms that comprise the “cultural sphere.” It is a list that is certainly not exhaustive and could be extended to include literature, magazines, public art, sculpture, Internet forums and ‘zines’, to name just a few. Because Magder is by his own admission not really interested in “texts,” he makes no attempt to describe how language and knowledge are applied within each of these media and cultural forms, save “Hollywood” which is isolated on the basis that it homogenizes cultural production. This lack of emphasis can only be expected because the ends for language and communication within and across the entire realm of the cultural sphere can be aimed at either of two things in Magder’s political economic view: 1) “resisting” the increasing concentration of media, or 2) accepting or succumbing to it. What are not analyzed in any great detail are the specific genres of language and speech acts that take place within and across any and all communicative communities to greater or lesser effect—what Lyotard calls “language games.” These elements are not considered because, as has been argued above, for political economy rationality is singular and unified; knowledge and communication is useful for the general and universalizing task

¹⁹ Ibid., 279.

of human emancipation or social transformation. Or, to keep with the terminology raised in these paragraphs, authentic and “free” self-expression can only happen once the prescribed preconditions for communication have been met.

On this basis, a political economic analysis does not necessarily ask what are the different uses and ends of language and communication in different theatre or dance productions? Or, are all television shows aimed at satisfying the same ends? What are the different language games comprised in the cultural form of radio, or the press? This critique is not meant to deny or downplay the commercial relevancy of television, for example, or its affinity with advertising (though what one thinks of these things is another matter), but it is meant as support for Lyotard’s relevant observation that it is increasingly difficult to think of communication as a simple dichotomy between free expression and manipulative speech if one is interested in gaining a critical understanding of communication. As will be seen in a moment, in contrast to such dichotomous thinking, Lyotard’s pragmatic view of language and communication breaks down different genres of speech acts (i.e. language games) according to the aims (rules) under which language, knowledge and communication are placed in each: “messages have quite different forms depending on whether they are, for example, denotatives, prescriptives, evaluatives, performatives, etc. It is clear that what is important is not simply the fact that they communicate information.”²⁰ It might be added in the comparison here that what is important is not merely whether this information is a product of genuine self-expression or manipulated speech. Fleshing out the specifics of different language games

²⁰ Lyotard, 16.

for communication and knowledge is exactly what is behind a postmodern pragmatic perspective.

To think of a possible example to illustrate such an analysis, the traditional cultural category of “dance” given by Magder plays a number of different language games depending on who the players are and what the rules laid out for the particular game is. Britney Spears (to begin with a populist figure who is undoubtedly no saint in the bulk of critical analyses), or whoever is planning her videos and on her management team, enlists the cultural form of dance in a way and to an effect (accepted or not by the addressees, her fan-base) that is quite far removed from how such a phenomenon might take shape in, say, performance art, or a holiday stage performance (i.e. *The Nutcracker*). But even this is generalizing, because who is to say that the ends for communication will be the same in each of these more specific outlets? In this case it is interesting to take the case of performance art that can be seen in certain instances—i.e. Guy Debord and the Situationists—to follow the rules of a prescriptive language game in the aim of creating a moral message against capitalism (for which the sender assumes a certain authority, the referent is a specific reading of the social world, the addressee(s) are placed in a position of following the message or not). In other instances “performance art” might be denotative and interpretive in orientation—i.e. an artist whose interests reside in an examination of human form and its expressive possibilities (in which case the addressee is placed in a position of evaluating the sender’s account based upon certain criteria—it might be that the artist is too far removed from the reality of the addressee to be accepted at all). Extending beyond this, it can be imagined that there are performance pieces whose rules aim to create awareness about a particular social issue (racism, AIDS,

homophobia, etc.), or others that simply attempt to be funny, whether this contains a moral message or not. In all this diversity and plurality of the language games for “dance,” or “performance art,” there is no necessary commensurability between the ends for language and knowledge in each particular instance (nor for the required role of the addressee and referents in each particular game).²¹ To suggest, as Magder and Murdock would seem to, that capitalism or media concentration overrides this plurality does not follow, or at least, this is a separate problem. One would have to examine specific instances again: AIDS awareness campaigns not only require intention and self-expression, they also require funding, Britney Spears and her record company are out to sell records, no question, but are they aimed at world domination and could they accomplish this if they wished? Unlikely, the rules and players in this commercial music language game are, despite how her marketing campaigns might make it seem, too limited (i.e. the addressees are limited in scope—a peasant farmer in China or business person in Brazil might have little interest in being a player in her game—as is her referent, her body, that will become exasperated eventually).²²

²¹ This point goes some way to explain that one can watch a Britney Spears video for much different reasons than delivering a paper at a conference or going to the opera—the ability to participate in any of these are not hindered or contradicted by each other because one’s human ‘essence’ and/or intention is never exhausted by the rules of any one language game, nor are the rules required to participate in each the same.

²² There is a point where I feel this analysis might effectively be limited, and it has to do with the relationship between government funding and the arts. It is possible to think of a language game within the arts that capitalism, and many individual citizens, would want very little to do with. In this case many small artist run centers or artistic projects in Canada and elsewhere do require government funding in order to be realized. If this funding is pulled then it might indeed threaten the ability to communicate. The way around this point from a language games perspective, however, would undoubtedly be the idea that such a scenario does not limit the ideational potential of the artists involved in the production whose funding was cut, just their financial stability. To say this is undoubtedly to say exactly what political economy says in its materialist critique. However, the question then becomes how to secure more funding? Without the use of

There is a fear that the comparative argument being made above will be seen to skirt over the serious issues which political economy raises in its analyses of communication. It is important to stress that nowhere do I think political economists would disagree with the plurality of language games just mentioned. Magder himself admits that there “is still considerable space for resistance to these trends,” i.e., that many cultural forms continue to manage to avoid the infringement of capitalist imperatives or the threats associated with media concentration. But such a statement is exactly of the order that a model of language games dispenses. Lyotard’s original quotation—which started this whole interrogation—is based on the idea that it is becoming increasingly difficult in the highly developed west to uphold a view of communication as either free or manipulated. In other words, it is difficult to see the productive value of a sweeping claim such that communication and the cultural sphere can establish and abet one’s identity as “citizens, as members of a class or social group, as men or women, as natives or blacks, as Quebecois or westerners,” or it cannot. Therefore, in contrast to a political economy view that would make no distinction between forms of self-expression except in so far as these can be seen to speak in the interest of capital or not (and therefore speak in the authentic interests of citizens, blacks, women, etc.), a postmodern or pragmatic view analyzes communication according to how language and knowledge are placed into service in each particular “game,” and how the “atoms” of society, i.e., social beings, are implicated in and are called—or better, free—to negotiate these different frames. Such is not to deny the existence of media concentration or its possible implications in being able to set the rules for certain language games (as will be seen below, the language game of

force, i.e. extortion or robbing a bank, the only way to secure funding is through playing language games, connecting with people and institutions, writing proposals, etc. The

“performativity” is very much this sort of game). Rather, the postmodern view outlined here, *pace* political economy, finds it analytically reductive to make this criteria (capitalist media concentration) or its negation the fundamental rule through which to examine the full breadth of “the cultural sphere,” or any other communicative relation or social bond.

The social bond is instead understood as a plurality of different language games lacking the preconditions guaranteeing their existence, or at least, “language games” already assume the form of the social bond.²³ This point is important. Contained in the lack of an extra-linguistic ground that would otherwise secure and guarantee authentic, free, and undistorted communication is the promise that the negative part of political economy’s dichotomous view can never take hold, or is at best hypothetical. That is, the notion of manipulative speech, or false-consciousness, conceives of an equally extra-linguistic hold on human reason—the market has the power to render one’s

point being made here will be picked up again later in this chapter.

²³ Lyotard declares that while a model of language games might not be sufficient to cover the entire gamut of social relations, “there is no need to resort to some fiction of social origins to establish that language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist.” Lyotard, 15. It is tempting to place the idea of Murdock’s “preconditions” along the order of Lyotard’s “social origins,” in that Murdock’s view seems to suggest that there is some ideal and equal arrangement for communication and culture between human beings that is threatened under the present (capitalist) organization of society. No doubt there are inequalities in terms of communication or other aspects of society, but there is no reason to suggest that this is something that has successfully been avoided within prior configurations of the social, or that would necessarily be avoided in any future state, i.e. communism (as Marx conceived of it).

Foucault, speaking in an interview with Alessandro Fontana in 1977, gives credence to the idea being put forward here. He is talking about the nostalgia that informs a Marxian view of society: “Behind these concepts and among those who (properly or improperly) employ them, there is a kind of nostalgia: behind the concept of ideology, the nostalgia for a quasi-transparent form of knowledge, free from all error and illusion, and behind the concept of repression, the longing for a form of power innocent of all coercion, discipline, and normalization.” Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in

consciousness inauthentic and false. It is a situation for which political economy continually warns threatens to enact its presence “in a society whose communication component is becoming more prominent day by day, both as reality and as issue.”²⁴ Aware of the practical and realistic need for a critical rationality in the face of the reality and issue of growing communication and linguistic-based technologies,²⁵ Lyotard contends that there must be more to understanding communication than the theoretically reductive view that language either conveys self-expression or is manipulated. The dynamic method he proposed to engage this problem is that of language games.

III

Lyotard's (Postmodern) Method: Language Games, Knowledge, and Reasons

The previous section outlined the major difference between the conceptual understanding of communication in political economy and in postmodernism. For political economy, communication is viewed as a tool for reaching consensus over knowledge claims, in the interest of contributing to an overall project of human emancipation. What is seen to impede this rationalist project, and thus that which contrasts a Marxist view from a bourgeois one, are material and economic factors that distort, prevent, or snarl the production and reception of (morally appropriate) media messages. In this process, the relationship between communication, language and knowledge never receives much scrutiny. In contrast to political economy's lack of conceptual development regarding communication stands the analytical method of language games articulated by Lyotard in

Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 117.

²⁴ Lyotard, 17.

²⁵ Lyotard observes at the outset to *The Postmodern Condition* that “it is fair to say that for the last forty years the ‘leading’ sciences and technologies have had to do

The Postmodern Condition. This contrast can be seen to mark the space of the differend between the two paradigms; that is, it is in their differential conceptions of the relationship between language, communication and knowledge that political economy and postmodernism reveal the incommensurability between their respective modern and postmodern epistemological premises.

The strongest marker of this incommensurability is postmodernism's incredulity toward metanarratives and the analytical method of language games that follows from it. Turning first to an articulation of language games, it is possible to begin through a couple of avenues. The most obvious is that of Wittgenstein, another, more surprisingly, is to be found in relation to Kant. This section will deal with each of these influences in turn, beginning with Wittgenstein. It then completes the analysis in Section IV by placing this mature reading of language games into the context of incredulity outlined in *The Postmodern Condition*.

i) Wittgenstein and Speech Act Theory

Lyotard readily attributes his use of the term "language games" to Wittgenstein and clearly articulates what is meant by it:

Wittgenstein, taking up the study of language again from scratch, focuses his attention on the effects of different modes of discourse; he calls the various types of utterances he identifies along the way...*language games*. What he means by this term is that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put—in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them.²⁶

with language." He compiles a fairly exhaustive list of such technologies on the same page. Lyotard, 3-4.

²⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 10.

Lyotard gives examples of language games to be found in the work of speech act theorists such as J.L. Austin,²⁷ using the latter's notion of a "performative" utterance, for example, "The university is open."²⁸ The language game of performatives is that in which a sender endowed with the proper specifications enacts an effect upon a referent through the act of enunciation (Austin gives the examples of a wedding vow and the naming of a ship). In contrast, a "denotative" utterance, "The university is sick," and a "prescriptive" declaration, "Give money to the university," are given as examples of two other types of language games that require a different sort of justification, and command a different role for the sender and addressee of the particular communicative message. In a denotative utterance the sender of the message is the "knower," his or her addressee must evaluate the quality of the utterance (i.e., is it true/false?). The addressee may, therefore, withhold consent or demand further proof and it is this permanent demand for further proof and the infinite epistemological regress it produces which characterizes the language game of science. On the other hand, a prescriptive utterance, according to Lyotard, requires a certain authority of the sender, and a commitment on the part of the addressee: "he expects the addressee to perform the action referred to."²⁹

Furthermore, a prescriptive need not take the form of a simple declarative. A prayer (I beg of you), a command (do this), a declarative (it is cold = shut the window), a wish (wouldn't it be wonderful if), etc., can all be prescriptives; they need only be understood with the unspoken pre-text "it would be good if" these things were carried

²⁷ Lyotard gives a list of his sources for the different speech acts that comprise language games. These references include Austin's 1962 *How to do things with Words* and John Searle's 1969 *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*.

²⁸ Lyotard, 9.

²⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

out. A prescriptive clearly demands a favourable response from the addressee and besides placing the speaker in a position of authority also positions the receiver in a position of submission or acquiescence. Lyotard also alludes to the fact that there might be an infinitesimal number of language games comprising different orders of and ends for communication: "Of a different order again is the efficiency of a question, a promise, a literary description, a narration, etc."³⁰ Having outlined these Wittgensteinian characteristics, Lyotard then summarizes the main points to make about language games, the last of which refers explicitly to the incommensurability between different language games mentioned above and on which the philosopher will insist:

The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players (which is not to say the players invent the rules). The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a "move" or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define. The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a move in the game.³¹

It is this last point which charts a move toward understanding language games as a method for social analysis. This will be returned to below. What is important about all these elements of language and language games is that the rules for each language game are specific and appropriate to the game itself. Rules for specific language games can be adhered to or changed in the form of a "move," as Lyotard suggests. But between a denotative and a prescriptive utterance, for example, there is no commensurability, no underlying or common goal or end, no single rule to which language and knowledge always correspond: "a 'move' or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid., 10.

to the game.” This incommensurability was witnessed in the examples for dance and performance art in the previous section in which the ends for knowledge, the referent of the message, and the role for the sender and addressee(s) were seen to differ in each.

To pick up on this last point, a denotative statement, for example, commands an addressee to evaluate its speculative claims on the basis of falsification. The “contract” between the players in the denotative game is based on true/false criteria in which the sender will be successful in the game if the addressee accepts the claim being made. Consequently, denotatives typically call upon the application of increasingly sophisticated technology for the more precise and detailed observation of reality (the administration of proof) in order to make them more persuasive to the addressee (to make it easier for the addressee to give assent). For a prescriptive statement to be successful, however, there must also be a contract between players, but here the evaluative criteria on the part of the addressee are no longer of the same order as they were in the denotative. The prescriptive language game asks not that the statement be judged on the basis of falsification; it makes no logical sense (unless one is already committed to affirming the prescriptive) to say it is true/false that we should give money to the university, to stick with Lyotard’s original example. Rather, prescriptive utterances must be evaluated on the basis of whether they are good or bad. In other words, in the case of prescriptive statements, the addressee can not judge them by observing reality but by referring them to a persuasive metanarrative in which they must find their place. If they do not, they are unsuccessful prescriptives. Hence, in a world that believes in human emancipation, the prescriptive “Free the slaves!” (it would be good if the slaves were free) has tremendous power and is taken up in the formulation of other prescriptives “Free the workers!”, “Free

the oppressed!”, “Free the innocent!” (it would be good if.... were free). Their power derives from their ability to locate themselves within the grand narrative of human emancipation. Consequently, other similar prescriptives unable to locate themselves within the same grand narrative—“Free the cats!” or “Free the dancers!”—have considerably less power or seem merely trivial. Nonetheless, the speculative requirement (i.e., the response expected of the addressee) is different in both instances of speech acts and it cannot be the case, according to Lyotard, that the denotative (true/false) statement serves as the proof for the prescriptive (good/bad). As Lyotard suggests:

[T]he difference between a denotative statement with cognitive value and a prescriptive statement with practical value is one of relevance, therefore of competence. There is nothing to prove that if a statement describing a real situation is true, it follows that a prescriptive statement based upon it (the effect of which will necessarily be a modification of that reality) will be just.³²

Lyotard’s method of language games does not postulate the logical possibility or productive viability that prescriptive statements should find their objective and truthful justification on the backs of denotative claims about the world. According to Lyotard it is this attempted move from an “is” to an “ought”³³ that characterizes the end goal for knowledge as this is seen to take form under the guiding metanarratives of modernity: “such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject....” As is now abundantly clear, Lyotard defines the postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives, that for modern thought are pressed into the service of legitimating the move between a denotative and a prescriptive

³² Ibid., 40.

³³ Haynes Horne, “Jameson’s Strategies of Containment,” in *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, ed., Douglas Kellner (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve P, 1989), 276.

language game (because they ensure correspondence between what we know to be and the way we should therefore act).

To make this talk of the legitimating power of metanarratives less abstract, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth presents a helpful reading. It underscores the idea (encountered through Seidman in Chapter One) that metanarratives are continually applied, even as a majority has become incredulous toward them:

So it is possible for a US Senator to defend the massive 2001 tax cut on national (and also, don't forget, on international) television by simply claiming that it provides relief to "the individual" and "the family"; he has waved the talismans and thus can ignore completely the systemic influences that initially motivated and that will for years to come flow from the bill. How does he get away with such simple-minded talk about complex social issues? Assuming for the moment that he speaks earnestly, if not with the best will in the world, he gets away with it *because he speaks the language of a citizenry* almost entirely unaware of the destructive inadequacy of such terms. Those terms...belong to the entire heritage of modernity that "post" modernity has already put at risk.³⁴

Ermarth's passage outlines what Lyotard would define as a bourgeois metanarrative.

Over the course of this thesis political economy has been articulated as an example of a modern discourse for understanding communication that remains credulous towards another type of metanarrative defined by Lyotard: "emancipation of the working subject."

Unlike Ermarth's US Senator who speaks the language of citizenship, it is the working subject (or working class) which legitimizes and universalizes the ends of rational knowledge within the discourse of political economy. This has been encountered in Chapter Three in the strong insistence, in the face of postmodern or revisionist influences, on a model of class struggle in the work of both Garnham and Mosco. Whether the metanarrative supported is bourgeois or Marxist in orientation, however, it is

³⁴ Ermarth, 38. Emphasis added.

on the point of (in)credulity toward it that the disparity (differend) between a modern analytical pursuit, and Lyotard's postmodern analytical method of language games become clear. Obviously this thesis is taking up the specific differend encountered between political economy and postmodernism, a disparity that can now be located as a differential understanding of how knowledge, language and communication are intertwined.

As opposed to a political economy perspective, Lyotard's method of understanding knowledge and communication in terms of language games declares that knowledge is better understood through a linguistic model in which its particular ends are defined by the rules set out in the game and the "contract" between its players. Mourad, jr., describes the idea further:

The rules of the language game that concerns truth, as in all language games, are the basis of a contract, which may or may not be explicit, among the participants. The 'contract' is simply the rules of the kind of game that is being played. The process of scientific proof is one version of the language game of truth with its own rules, which vary among and within fields of inquiry.³⁵

As this subordination of science to the rules of a "language game of truth" would suggest, there is a significant reversal going on in Lyotard's conception of language games between the relationships of knowledge, language and communication. From the postmodern perspective it is not the case that language and communication act as the neutral vehicle for the transmission of consensual and universal knowledge, or at least, this phrase has no meaning outside the pragmatic bounds of the rules for each particular language game. In each language game the specific requirements for knowledge are

³⁵ Mourad, jr., 28-29.

different, and position the sender and addressee of the particular contract in different ways.

According to Lyotard the goal of this contract is to make “moves” between the players in the game in order to “win,” or as Mourad, jr., suggests, “to win in the sense of realizing a desired outcome.”³⁶ As such, it is *possible* to conceive of consensus as a requirement of knowledge in a language game, but reaching this consensus would only signal a “move” in the game, leading to another outcome, another game, etc. For Lyotard consensus is not the universal goal for knowledge and communication, yet it might be a necessary move in a particular game. On the other hand, it might not: “A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention: what else is involved in that labor of language harassment undertaken by popular speech and by literature?”³⁷ What is most important to realize in all this is that knowledge itself is not something that is the sole priority of, or exhausted within, any one particular game, i.e. that of establishing truth criteria in science as opposed to turning a phrase in literature. For Lyotard the epistemological field is in this respect ‘flattened’ (in a literal rather than figural sense of that term):

Knowledge...is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color (auditory and visual sensibility), etc. Understood in this way, knowledge is what makes someone capable of forming “good” denotative utterances, but also “good” prescriptive and “good” evaluative utterances....It is not a competence relative to a particular class of statements (for example, cognitive ones) to the exclusion of all others.³⁸

³⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 10; Mourad, jr., 28.

³⁷ Lyotard, 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

It can be remarked in the passage above that such a view of knowledge gives both the category itself, and the ability for people to enact critical or rational faculties, a high degree of respect. As such, it is clear that for Lyotard the multiplicity of possible language games is a concept that does not stand against reason. It does, however, specify that there can only be different “reasons,” knowledge pressed into the service of the rules for each pragmatic game—the orders of which (i.e. denotative vs. prescriptive) are incommensurable. Such is the force and specific texture behind Lyotard’s “critical rationalism” in the passage that marked the end of the last chapter that sought to identify and characterize the pluralist employment of all these different “reasons.” This is not to say that Lyotard thinks people always act reasonably, rationally or critically in language games. Quite often they don’t: “there is also the fact...that very often, for many of us, probably for most of us, when we play some of these games, we play them without inventiveness.”³⁹ But note how this observation is of a much different kind than saying that this lack of invention is the product of some extra-linguistic determination like false-consciousness or hegemony. These terms are banned from Lyotard’s vocabulary that places a refreshing reliance on the reasonable capacities of the human subject who is “contracted,” increasingly under the postmodern condition, within an infinitesimal number of a different language games. The language Lyotard uses to make this rather important point in *The Postmodern Condition* is unnecessarily convoluted, characterized as “the agonistic aspect of society”:

The atoms are placed at the crossroads of pragmatic relationships, but they are also displaced by the messages that transverse them, in perpetual motion. Each language partner, when a “move” pertaining to him is made, undergoes a “displacement,” an alteration of some kind that not only affects him in his capacity as addressee and referent, but also as sender.

³⁹ Lyotard and Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, 61.

These “moves” necessarily provoke “countermoves”—and everyone knows that a countermove that is merely reactionary is not a “good” move... That is why it is important to increase displacement in the games, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected “move” (a new statement).⁴⁰

Having reached this point, it is almost time to consider how Lyotard’s conception of language games is configured as a method of social analysis within the pages of *The Postmodern Condition*. That is, there is obviously more behind the idea of language games than abstract theoretical fancy. Lyotard is diagnosing a normative state of affairs (let’s say appropriately that he is making a denotative claim, no more) in contemporary society that involves an understanding of the character of knowledge in the contemporary West, and how language, communication and the self are configured within this process. Before turning specifically to this context it is necessary I feel to touch briefly on another figure that Lyotard enlists to give theoretical and philosophical force to the concept of language games. Up to this point the idea has mainly been considered with respect to its logical formulation in Wittgenstein and speech act theory. Another figure to consider is Immanuel Kant, whom Horne describes as “a powerful and unexpected ally” in Lyotard’s work.⁴¹

ii) An Unlikely Influence: Kant

This section will not make too much of Lyotard’s affiliation with Kant, only to point out that it is from this unlikely source that Lyotard finds cause to bolster his formulation concerning the incommensurability between language games; that is, the rationale behind his insistence that the game of “is” cannot and should not be placed in the service of an “ought.” As Horne suggests above, it might seem odd to consider that Lyotard enlists

⁴⁰ Lyotard, 16.

⁴¹ Horne, 273.

Kant, or at least a certain reading of Kant, in his articulation of language games. The figure of Kant does, after all, conjure an image of universal rationality more in keeping with a modern, rather than postmodern epistemological proclivity. For example, though Kant does not appear often in Garnham's 1990 *Capitalism and Communication* he does nonetheless figure prominently in the book's opening in relation to how the Enlightenment project can help guide a healthy conception of the public sphere. Acknowledging that for Kant the proper moral order "was already given and to be discovered rather than produced by consensus-forming debate," Garnham nonetheless appreciates Kant's originary idea that just as "epistemological presuppositions" could be agreed upon on the basis of "commonly possessed faculties of perception...so through a process of empathy and unconstrained debate [human beings] could arrive at a similar common agreement on a desirable moral order." This Kantian sentiment, Garnham suggests, "ultimately underlies the concept of the public sphere and of the political centrality of the values of free communication within the western political tradition."⁴² Without wishing to dispute this reading, the question does arise: what then is Kant doing in conjunction with Lyotard?

Kant's image can be glimpsed in an earlier quotation from Lyotard above that describes knowledge as that which allows one to negotiate according to the particular rules of different language games. Furthermore, the games which Lyotard mentions specifically though not exclusively involve "the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color (auditory and visual sensibility), etc." There is a direct affinity between the character of these games and the three faculties of judgment outlined in

⁴² Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 4.

Kant: “epistemological, ethical and aesthetic.”⁴³ Oddly, these are also the three standards for judgment that Garnham’s political economy claims to uphold against postmodern: “Enlightenment standards of truth, justice, and beauty originally developed in response to modernity.” So what exactly is going on?

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to get into an elongated discussion over whose claim to Kant is correct or more justifiable; undoubtedly Garnham and Lyotard would disagree over what project Kant’s Enlightenment specifically endorsed. For Garnham this legacy involves the rational quest to arrive consensually at universal agreement over issues of morality and the public good. For Lyotard’s Kant there appears to be no such quest toward totality or universality.⁴⁴ Leaving this debate aside as irrelevant for present purposes, a mature understanding of the theoretical force behind

⁴³ Horne, 274.

⁴⁴ This reading of Kant comes from Horne’s thoroughly insightful essay comparing the thought of Jameson and Lyotard, “Jameson’s Strategies of Containment,” that has already been cited in this thesis. The other source I am using for this reading of Lyotard through the lens of the Kantian division between different faculties of reason is Kimberley Hutchings, “Lyotard: Phrasing the Political,” in *Kant, Critique and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996). Lyotard is also more than clear on how he understands Kant in *Just Gaming*, a position which sees the latter as holding the possibility of judgment as available on grounds other than denotative evidence: “The ability to judge does not hang upon the observance of criteria. The form that it will take in the last *Critique* is that of the imagination. An imagination that is constitutive. It is not only an ability to judge; it is a power to invent criteria” (p. 17). Lyotard says considerably less on the matter in *The Postmodern Condition*, although he does specifically compare the incommensurability of language games to Kant’s division of the faculties in that work in reference to one of the major “conflicts” faced by the grand narrative of modernity to be found in the speculative game of the University. Or, Humboldt’s declaration that the university should “orient its constituent element, science, to ‘the spiritual and moral training of the nation’.” In this declaration Lyotard sees Humboldt as facing “a major conflict, in some ways reminiscent of the split introduced by the Kantian critique between knowing and willing: it is a conflict between a language game made of denotations answerable only to the criterion of truth, and a language game governing ethical, social, and political practice that necessarily involves...utterances expected to be just rather than true and which in the final analysis lie outside the realm of scientific knowledge.” Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 32-33.

language games can only be done in consideration of how and why Lyotard enlists Kant as he does. The key idea here resides in the difference between standards of judgment, and the types of criteria that are consigned by reason and knowledge in each particular case. Haynes Horne summarizes the crucial point: "Lyotard's is a Kant who demarcates very carefully between types of judgments, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic, a Kant for whom the imperative of holding these realms apart cannot be overstated, a Kant for whom the derivation, even by negation, of a form of civil society from a phenomenological description of existence is clearly marked as dogmatism."⁴⁵

This insistence on a Kantian demarcation between different types of language games, which in the end describes a firm reluctance to legitimate prescriptive utterances on the back of a denotative, can be felt in Lyotard's postulation quoted much earlier in this thesis in reference to my disclaimer against emancipatory theory:

[I]t must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games (which, under the name of the faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience.⁴⁶

This quote by Lyotard is a powerful one. In order to grasp its full prowess it is important to understand the sentiment behind its first line, "it is not our business to supply reality." The nature of "supply reality" here refers to the endeavour to use reality as the proof for a

⁴⁵ Horne, 274.

⁴⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984 [1979]), 81-82.

prescriptive statement or ethical judgment about it; that is, “to make reality come forward (to supply) proof.” This project, akin to the move from a denotative to prescriptive judgment that Lyotard insists Kant emphatically warned against in his postulation of the different faculties of reason, is for Lyotard linked to potential terror. Why is this so? A possible answer to this question lies in the fact that the 20th-century was beset by ideologies—totalitarianisms of the right and of the left—which claimed to have a purchase on reality, to see deeply into it, to know its substance and direction. In the name of this claim to absolute knowledge the world was forced into the shape of ideological presuppositions: the kulaks were exterminated, along with the Armenians, the Jews, the Ukrainians, the Gypsies, and all sorts of others. They were “supplied” as proof of the knowledge claim. Of course, it is impossible that a denotative claim is able to supply such a proof, thus it can only be seen that a prescriptive (it is good that the world be of a certain order) determined the denotative perception in the service of establishing who was good and bad, not the other way round. It is on the heels of such a supplication of reality, a will to mold the fabric of reality through the tools of practical action, that this move from an “ought” to an “is” can be seen to have resulted in very real instances of terror. This is the warning that Lyotard gives, and hence his hesitation to bridge the “chasm” between denotative and prescriptive statements that would give orthodoxy to totalitarian movements no matter what their political intent. Horne is again eloquent in illustrating this point: “It is a realization fundamental to Lyotard’s postmodernism that any theory or concept capable of justifying ‘the praxis whereby political militants seek to bring that radically different future social order into being’ is equally capable of bringing in a reign of terror—indeed, that the two may not even be objectively distinguishable.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Horne, 275.

It is clear that Kant enters into a consideration of language games at the precise moment that we distinguish between the particular rules and speculative criteria of the game of denotative utterances and those of prescriptive utterances. Indeed, the specific attribute of language games already stated by Lyotard—"that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players"—means that any attempt to move the contract outside its pragmatic linguistic bounds and into the territory of a different order of language game would logically result in a violent conclusion. That is, Lyotard sees a problem in bringing incommensurable language games into "real unity," because there is no standard for judgment to be found between them: it is only by a resolute force, or in the name of a metanarrative, that a denotative game can legitimate the criteria for a prescriptive. Incommensurable language games can not be brought together—that is to say subjected to the same rules of play—because to do so implies that they can or do share a single, common set of rules. However, they do not. To claim that they do is to misinterpret the fundamental nature of language games. Furthermore, such a claim can result in 'terror'—in unjust, undesirable, inhumane social outcomes—by requiring that reality come into conformity with prescriptive utterances and/or that prescriptive utterances never move beyond the most basic ascertainable state of denotative utterances. To say that we can not hope because we do not know reality is ethically equivalent to saying that reality must conform to what we hope; both make ethical behaviour impossible.

Why the insistence on this incommensurability of language games, which he sees as supported in a Kantian frame, matters so much for Lyotard will be understood more clearly as this chapter turns momentarily to an examination of how language games

function as an analytical method within the context of *The Postmodern Condition*. In the meantime, an excellent analysis of what we have been discussing, which relates Kant to language games in the interest of Lyotard's concerns over the "terror" implicit in the "real unity" of the reasons, can be found in Kimberly Hutchings essay "Lyotard: Phrasing the Political."⁴⁸

Hutchings takes up Lyotard's claim in *Just Gaming* that, in her paraphrase, "the language game of truth and the language game of justice (prescription) are absolutely different and that neither can be grounded in the other."⁴⁹ According to Hutchings, Lyotard's assessment of Kant is actually quite close to Kant's own notion of a "republican" politics. Writing in his 1795 treatise *Perpetual Peace*, Kant's notion of a "republic" is based on the practical question of how a state, or combination of states, can avoid war, which was to Kant a practice that Reason "utterly condemns."⁵⁰ The philosophical solution to this problem for Kant came in the form of a balance of powers in which the executive body for the state (that which could decide on the question of going to war) is separated from the legislative assembly (that which could legislate the act of war). The judicial component of society also remains distinct and has no authority over the legislature or the executive. Hutchings explains the model further:

The relation of the three powers to each other is complex; each has its own ultimate authority and yet each works in subordination to the other, so that the sovereign may neither judge nor punish, the ruler may not legislate or judge and the judge may not legislate or rule. In so far as each carries authority, it is by virtue of its identification with pure practical reason in idea; in so far as each has its authority limited, it is by virtue of the others' identification with pure practical reason in idea.⁵¹

⁴⁸ For reference see note 33.

⁴⁹ Hutchings, "Lyotard: Phrasing the Political," 131.

⁵⁰ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972 [1945]), 712.

⁵¹ Hutchings, 132.

What is most important to pull from Hutchings' description of Kant's "republicanism" is the way in which the philosopher attempts to limit the possibility of bringing any one authority's "identification with pure practical reason in idea" into complete fruition, or "real unity." In this much Hutchings declares that there are strong affinities between Kant's "republicanism" and the three faculties of judgments demarcated above and affiliated with Lyotard: "understanding, reason and judgment."⁵² By linking these three orders of republican power to the general division of faculties, Hutchings claims to have located the philosophical impetus behind Lyotard's conception of language games. The quotation she draws from Lyotard's 1993 *Political Writings* in support of her observations is more than relevant to the analysis here:

The examination of language games, just like the critique of the faculties, identifies and separates language from itself. There is no unity to language; there are islands of language, each of them ruled by a different regime, untranslatable into the others. This dispersion is good in itself and ought to be respected. It is deadly when one phrase regime prevails over others.⁵³

It can be seen in Hutchings' quotation of Lyotard and throughout the analysis above that Lyotard uses Kant's division of the faculties in order to bolster the pluralistic nature of language games. Kant's recognition of three orders of cognition and three types of judgments is interpreted by Lyotard as congruent with his own assertion of incommensurable between language games. This plurality of different language "regimes"—that I am inclined at this point again to call "reasons"—in which a "chasm" exists between the rules and speculative criteria for each is held by Lyotard to be a healthy condition for democracy. It is a condition in which no one reason can speak over top of, or claim absolute authority over another; the lack of unity over language and the

⁵² Hutchings, 132.

incommensurability between different reasons described in the quote above ensure for Lyotard's model an avoidance of the naturalization/universalization of a single point of view. The model of language games is itself democratic and anti-terroristic because it ensures that the democratic debate is never over, because it enshrines the perpetuity of the very thing that makes 'society' possible, i.e., more language games. That Lyotard would have solidified such a pluralistic democratic potential for language games on the heels of Kant is perhaps not surprising. Here is how Bertrand Russell summarized the latter's enterprise in 1945, well before Lyotard's re-reading of the thinker:

Kant maintains...that we ought so to act to treat every man as an end in himself. This may be regarded as an abstract form of the doctrine of the rights of man, and it is open to the same objections. If taken seriously, it would make it impossible to reach a decision whenever two people's interests conflict. The difficulties are particularly obvious in political philosophy, which requires some principle, such as preference for the majority, by which the interests of some can, when necessary, be sacrificed to those of others...It is possible, however, to interpret Kant's principle as meaning, not that each man is an absolute end, but that all men should count equally in determining actions by which many are affected. So interpreted, the principle may be regarded as giving an ethical basis for democracy.⁵⁴

It would have undoubtedly surprised Russell to see this ethical democratic potential in Kant taken up in Lyotard's postmodern vein that mixes the faculties of reason with the model of language games. The latter after all being derived from Russell's once student Wittgenstein, who Russell would eventually admonish for his belief that there are no real philosophical problems but only puzzles to solve.⁵⁵ Lyotard's mixture of these two

⁵³ As quoted in, *ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁴ Russell, 711-712.

⁵⁵ An entertaining and informative reading of the eventual discord that would beset the once productive academic relationship between Russell and Wittgenstein, but that more particularly covers the instance of a heated exchange between Wittgenstein and Karl Popper, is available in, David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

influences places a healthy wedge in this discord and significantly substantiates the analytical and political potential of the concept of language games. The latter, so defined, is neither arbitrary nor trivial.

iii) Language Games and Different Reasons: Wittgenstein and Kant

This section has asserted how Kant is interpreted as a not inconsequential figure to bolster the philosophical underpinnings of Lyotard's analytical model of language games. To conclude this outline of language games, it has been seen in Hutchings and throughout the analysis above that Lyotard uses Kant's division of the faculties in order to bolster the pluralistic nature of language games. To recap the major point, Lyotard's model of language games is one in which a prescriptive claim (an "ought") cannot be objectively legitimated and put into practical application on the back of a denotative (an "is"), and through the auspices of a guiding metanarrative that claims to justify and legitimate such a move. "It is deadly when one phrase regime prevails over others." Furthermore, says Lyotard, the majority have become increasingly incredulous toward metanarratives that claim to do just that. A word on this last point.

On this basis we can see clearly the inadequacy of the metanarrative that was pressed into service to legitimate the US senator's fiscal game of "tax cuts" on behalf of its being in the best interest of the "citizenry," to refer back to Ermarth's example. This is not to say that such political use or misuse of metanarratives does not currently take place; of course it does. But such is not the point. The main point in all this—a point that will help to finally bring this analysis of language games back to the specific context of Lyotard's 1979 text—is not to argue over whether metanarratives are continually used in order to justify the move from a descriptive to a prescriptive in any number of contexts

or games. That they are, continually, is not in question. What *is* in question, for Lyotard and a postmodern perspective more broadly, is the practical usefulness of totalizing thinking (metanarratives) as that which can bring about a healthy social transformation or the conditions of human emancipation.

Rather, the point is that the majority—in the scientific community and elsewhere—have become more than aware of the inadequacies, deficiencies, and potential “terror” that have been seen to follow from language games that speak in the name of a totality (“the systemic influences...that will for years to come flow from the bill,” to stick with Ermarth’s example). This is not to say that scientific developments in the West and elsewhere are not continually, though not solely, marketed and legitimated on the basis of their being in the interest of a “common humanity,” or “nationalistic interest.” Of course they are. But it is undoubtedly the case that many are reluctant that human progress aimed at emancipation can be located through the general and universal project of scientific knowledge? The same could be said about art. The language game of art consists of many different moves, many different endeavours, no doubt created in the interest of many different reasons. Galleries large and small house collections and artists continue to contribute to and receive their impetus from the ‘art world’ as much as from the real world. Undoubtedly there are reasons for making art that are consistent with the language game of capital, and others consistent with the language game which aims to escape it. That certainly does not exhaust all possible games involving art, which would overlook a crucial one, consistent with Lyotard, involving an artistic move for the sheer pleasure of creating. How many would therefore believe that it is through a universal and rational aesthetic project that a common human emancipation is to be

located? Such a project is consistent with modernism—a movement that has now been chronicled historically for its very attempt to achieve just that.

The key point being made here is that which is consistent with an understanding of the postmodern as an incredulity toward metanarratives, that, as was revealed in Chapter One can be productively understood through closer examination of that unsuspecting term, “incredulity.” As Nicholas Burbules pointed out: “‘incredulity’—a fascinating and unsuspecting word. Incredulity is not a denial or rejection or refutation; it is an inability to believe. In this...I think we see what is most distinctive and penetrating in the postmodern insight.”⁵⁶ And why this inability to believe in guiding metanarratives such as “the emancipation of the rational or working subject,” or the “dialectics of Spirit”? There are a few rather simple possibilities: (a) efforts to bring the Idea into accordance with reality have produced bad social outcomes (Auschwitz, Soviet totalitarianism, nuclear weapons); (b) instead of ‘emancipating’ us from arbitrary authority, the guiding metanarratives of modernity—especially that of a belief in scientific progress in the interest of the emancipation of the rational subject—have imposed their own forms of behaviour (the disempowering force of technocracy, the regimentation of everyday life, our sense of being increasingly caught up within complex systems which we can neither understand nor affect); (c) guiding metanarratives have been opposed by the very thing which supported them—individualism. This last point is both relevant and important because one of the things that happen when God, Nietzsche, Man and society are declared dead is the unleashing of the individual. And it is directly to the individual—the affirmation of self-interest—that such forms as consumer

⁵⁶ Nicholas Burbules, “Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education,” 2.

capitalism are directed. In the twilight of grand narratives the individual makes a noisy return, proposing micro-narratives, local norms, contradictory desires, etc. Such an individual is unlikely to cede to the didactic impulse of high modernism, to agree to conform to some rule which some authority has claimed will grant some coherence, some consistency with the order of reality. Recall the quote from Stuart Hall in Chapter Two, “the left has never understood the capacity of the market to become identified in the minds of the mass of ordinary people, not as fair and decent and socially responsible (it never was), *but as an expansive popular system.*”⁵⁷ Everybody from the avid viewer of entertainment news to Montana survivalists is touched by the rise of increasingly radical forms of individualism, increasingly unconstrained by any believable authority; they all reject authority, disbelieve its claims, peer behind its façade, turn it into an object of entertainment or opposition. To point to these dimensions of incredulity is not to be an apologist for the system or to endorse an apolitical ‘anything goes’ philosophy. It is, however, to be realistic about what it means to discuss and analyze the social totality under present day capitalism. It is also perhaps a warning against misconceiving the plurality of different reasons (language games) incorporated into the social bond—especially if one’s end goal for analysis is to place rational knowledge and communication into the service of establishing the conditions for emancipation or social transformation, while at the same time assuming that there can be no other reasonable ends for knowledge.

What Lyotard’s idea of language games points out, therefore, and what incredulity is all about, is the logical inconsistency that must take place between different

⁵⁷ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, as quoted in, Angela McRobbie, 64. Emphasis added.

orders of games when we speak in a language of totality. Such a language of totality is that which can be seen in Marx, Hegel, even Habermas, and which is upheld in contemporary political economy. Bringing in Kant's conception of the division between the faculties supports the value of Lyotard's observation by grounding the inconsistency of a move across different orders of games in a language far more encompassing than speech act theory. Where Lyotard begins with Wittgenstein in order to describe the relevant method for social analysis he also, thanks to Kant, provides a framework for understanding language games that has a direct bearing on the respective use of knowledge, communication and rationality that can be seen to be a party to each. Between these two influences, a powerful analytical model for language games emerges which suggests that to transgress the boundaries between incommensurable games is to do more than just inconsequential damage to those involved in the contract. Rather, it is to place one order of reason against another, one use of knowledge against another, without any commensurable rule to arbitrate between these different orders of rationality. The model of language games emerges in this respect as the model of the differend. And for Lyotard the space of incommensurability must be respected. On this there can be no exception. "We must take care to distinguish different reasons." In turning now to the specific context of *The Postmodern Condition* it is possible to see the productive value of such an insight as a form of social analysis appropriate to understanding the character of knowledge, language and the self in "the most highly developed societies."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii. I have added this quote to remind about the specific target of Lyotard's survey. Lyotard has been criticized for ignoring the plight of those who do not have access, "even in the advanced economies," to "French Scent and Far Eastern travel." Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 162. Callinicos is taking issue with a passage from Lyotard's essay "What is Postmodernism?" that follows his analysis in *The Postmodern Condition* (and that is also in *The Postmodern*

IV

The Postmodern Condition: Language Games in Context

It is time now to examine language games specifically as they surface in the context of incredulity examined in Lyotard's 1979 text. Not to dwell too much on the point being made above concerning the incommensurability of language games (although Lyotard does dwell on it), it is imperative to be clear on the concept itself before it can be seen to hold up in the specific context of *The Postmodern Condition*. As such, I want to express one more idea in very simple terms just to ensure that the concept of language games and incredulity is not seen as "trivial." This was one of the charges made by Garnham against those who do not locate knowledge within the general project of human emancipation. If the analysis of language games above has been properly understood it does, I feel, deflect or render meaningless such an accusation.

To make this point, in discussing language games it becomes clear in conjunction with Kant that Lyotard is discussing all levels of speech acts in the widest possible sense of that term, but it is also clear that for Lyotard these games are linked to the use of reason(s). That is, Lyotard nowhere suggests that one uses reason only when discussing philosophy or plotting a political strategy but not when at work programming a computer for a business, or even shopping, cleaning, for example. Each of these pursuits, of which some may certainly seem more consequential, is an instance of different games and each requires knowledge and the use of reason to conform to different rules. If one is inventive in the game then one can make a "move" that changes the rules of the game (to

Explained). The unfortunate thing is that the target of Lyotard's analysis in *The Postmodern Condition* is very specific and nowhere seems to have been supposed to take up issues of structural inequality that, as this thesis is in fact aimed at demonstrating, really have little to do with what Lyotard's postmodernism is saying.

indulge in the least imaginative of the examples above, one can think of how a change in the rules of cleaning might change the game itself, make it easier, multitasking, etc.). Overall, therefore, when discussing language games it is important to remember that this is to discuss knowledge and the use of human reason—nowhere should any of this seem trivial as we (assume) that we are dealing with rational, thinking beings regardless of what particular form this takes.

Without a reliance on the concept of false consciousness the model of language games has little choice but to begin at the level of individual self-interest, human rationality, and the potential and inevitability of “moves” within language games as the basis upon which to consider an understanding of communication and culture. There are language games and there are reasons, and analysis must work in accordance with this stark realization. This seems to be the guiding principle behind the analytical template of language games as it is realized in *The Postmodern Condition*:

Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. Science “smiling into its beard” at every other belief has taught them the harsh austerity of realism.⁵⁹

Finally, *The Postmodern Condition*.

It is productive to begin this description of how language games function as an analytical tool in Lyotard’s text at the point of “deligitimation” of knowledge. It is in this section of his analysis (section 10) that the above quotation occurs and in which Lyotard, although he had introduced the term much earlier, once again takes up the position of Wittgenstein and language games. The terms of Lyotard’s first outline of the concept

⁵⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 41.

have been covered above, it is at this later point in *The Postmodern Condition* that language games are reconciled with the specific context of incredulity, or the “delegitimation” of knowledge. It need only briefly be said that by this point in his work Lyotard has made clear the notion that in the postmodern world speculative knowledge seeks a different mode of unification than in modernity: “In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms.”⁶⁰

Prior to this Lyotard indicates two significant and consequential examples of modern science pressed into the service of metanarratives that in his view marked the beginning of the end of faith in science legitimating other games. The first mark of incredulity surfaces in the wake of Stalinism, in which “the sciences only figure as citations from the metanarrative of the march toward socialism,” the other is a speech made by Heidegger on May 27, 1933 upon attaining the rectorship at the university of Freiburg-in-Breisgau. The sentiment of the speech asserted the role of the University and its “metadiscourse” in the service of realizing the “true world of the spirit” for the German people. The conclusions that Lyotard extracts from that totalizing discourse account for one of the most unfortunate instances of a “theoretically inconsistent” move from an “is” to an “ought.”⁶¹ For his affiliation with Nazism Heidegger never recanted, nor changed his mind. Not to deny the impact that Heidegger’s philosophy has had on generations of other thinkers (including Derrida), but it is the case that the way in which this speech asked reality to conform to speculative reason, embodied in the will of the Aryan race to purify itself, can only be seen as the major world-historic example of the

⁶⁰ Lyotard, 37.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

potential terror involved in the move to legitimate prescriptive utterances on the basis of speculative thought placed into the service of a grand and horrific narrative. As these examples more than show for Lyotard, “The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.”⁶² What follows in its wake? “Delegitimation,” or a different form of legitimation for scientific knowledge: the game of “performativity.”

The language game of performativity for postmodern speculative thought is directly linked for Lyotard to the rise in technologies following World War Two capable of providing increasingly complex and contingent truth criteria and allowing increased propensity for scientific innovation. More specifically, technologies become important because of the new mode of unification. It is when grand narratives begin to wane—probably some time at the end of the 19th-century—that science needs new ways to administer the proof of its denotative statements. It is no longer sufficient to claim that X will lead to emancipation. It becomes necessary to gain the assent of the listener in new ways. Two things happen: (a) science abandons the claim of making ‘universal’ statements and asks its listeners to assent only to this or that specific and local language game and (b) it turns to technologies through which to provide increasingly complex proofs. The first move (abandon universal claims) results in the explicit acknowledgment by science that it is really only a language games amongst others, in fact that it is many language games amongst others. The second move (turn to technology) results in a shift of legitimation away from metanarrative and toward performativity. It becomes

⁶² Ibid., 37. The idea of “mode of unification” encountered in this quote refers to the specific way in which speculative thought achieves its legitimacy. I.e., the mode of unification for Stalinism’s use of speculative or scientific reason was the grand narrative of socialism.

increasingly difficult to refute the proof of technology; reality bends to it. Whoever has the best technology—that is to say, whoever has the deepest pockets—is likeliest to be right.

Why performativity? Because science works on the basis of denotatives but technology does not. It does not say “the world is as X or as Y”. Technology merely enacts those presuppositions; it is designed to do so. What technology does is make the presupposition efficient or inefficient; we ask of technology not whether it speaks truly or falsely but whether it is designed in such a way as to make the presupposition clear and powerful or not. In this link between technology and knowledge there is a shift in character in the speculative game: “Technology is...a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical ‘move’ is ‘good’ when it does better and/or expends less energy than another.”⁶³ What this need for efficiency does is render scientific knowledge subservient both to “the principle of optimal performance,” but also to the need for capital: the technologies required for the scientific game are expensive. On this Lyotard diagnoses a condition that has been identified by many others both before and after him: “The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today’s financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.”⁶⁴ The university itself is caught up in the rules for the language game of performativity, as Mourad, jr., writes, “higher education has become increasingly defined by its capacity to create and produce skills indispensable to competition in world markets and the efficient

⁶³ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 46.

maintenance of internal social cohesion, whereas according to the modern metanarratives, the education of elites was for the purpose of creating leaders for the emancipation or realization of society.”⁶⁵

What Lyotard is diagnosing in his analysis of the performative game of contemporary scientific and speculative knowledge is the link between power and knowledge which is of concern to many, including political economy, faced with the historical framework of late capitalism, post-industrialism, post-Fordism, etc. This is why in his analysis Lyotard suggests that the general characterization of these developments as post-industrial is really not the most inventive part of his pursuits. Rather, the inventiveness in Lyotard comes in the specific analytical method he uses in order to understand the general condition that he, on the backs of others, is describing. This method is language games and, as we have now seen, the particular configuration it outlines between knowledge and communication differs considerably from the modern approach of political economy. As such, where the scenario that Lyotard has been describing concerning the rule of efficiency for contemporary speculative knowledge could possibly signal the end of reason and rationality, in a political economic approach that does not distinguish between different faculties for knowledge, Lyotard places these issues within the context of their specific game. The rules for the performative criteria signal the “move” of efficiency. This “move” signals the need for innovation, and the application of reason to serve these ends. This is not to say that any “move” is ever final in this particular game, but these are the general traits that Lyotard identifies for the game of performativity. But these observations on the performative game, while relevant in the

⁶⁵ Mourad, 32.

context of the language game of science, by no means exhaust the field of knowledge and reasons that constitute the social plane. In fact, one of the paradoxical and hopeful points Lyotard makes in his analysis follows from the observation that precisely because performativity demands inventiveness, it opens the possibility of overcoming performativity as the sole legitimation.

On this, it is a key feature of the analytical model of language games that it follows logically and normatively on the heels of the point of “delegitimation” of metanarratives and knowledge itself. That is, if it the case that “science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games,”⁶⁶ then it follows that there is a plurality of language games, each with its own self-affirmed model of legitimation based on the rules and a contract between players. This is both a specific feature and unavoidable consequence of incredulity. The language game of postmodern science can be seen to adhere to an efficiency criteria, thus demanding a certain role from knowledge, but this rule for knowledge is not commensurable with other rules for other games. In fact, if one were to begin at the level of the individual (the “atom” in Lyotard’s analysis), it can only be stated that the s/he assumes positions within any number of contracts that inform the plurality of different games that make up the postmodern “social bond.” Here is how Lyotard characterizes this idea which follows directly from the conditions of incredulity and the deligitimation of knowledge:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of different language games obeying different rules.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 40.

⁶⁷ Lyotard., 40.

Lyotard confirms that this model for social analysis and the role of the individual within it could indeed be dubbed “pessimistic,” namely on the basis that it does not acknowledge any basis for “social unity”:

We may form a pessimistic impression of this splintering: nobody speaks all of those languages, they have no universal metanarrative, the project of the system-subject is a failure, the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science, we are stuck in the positivism of this or that discipline of learning, the learned scholars have turned into scientists, the diminished tasks of research have become compartmentalized and no one can master them all.⁶⁸

So what does Lyotard give in order to confront the potentially dire consequences of this scenario in which there would appear to be no unity or legitimation for truth, knowledge and/or justice? A choice. One can lament the “lost narrative” that was the guiding force behind the modern metanarrative of scientific thought placed in the service of human emancipation, or one can act, even fight. But in the method of language games to fight should not be understood in the sense of formulating a prescriptive model of reunification aimed at emancipation or social transformation (the goal of praxis in the political economic model). Rather, to fight in the pragmatic context of Lyotard means to speak, to make moves in the particular language games in which one finds oneself. It is only by making “moves” in the game that the rules for the game can be changed. This is not an abstract, but practical observation. It is one that stipulates, as has been mentioned above, that to make a move in the game is unproductive if it simply reacts or opposes another player’s move. Lyotard confronts the logical (political economic) rebuttal to his method that undoubtedly there are institutional and bureaucratic arrangements that make the capacity to move appear unlikely. To this Lyotard asks how else except through linguistic agonistics could a change in the rules come about?

[The] point of departure is an overly “reifying” view of what is institutionalized. We know today that the limits the institution imposes on potential language “moves” are never established once and for all...Rather, the limits are themselves the stakes and provisional results of language strategies, within the institution and without. Examples: Does the university have a place for language experiments (poetics)? Can you tell stories in a cabinet meeting?...The answers are clear: yes, if the university opens creative studios, yes, if the cabinet works with prospective scenarios...⁶⁹

There are noted affinities between the ideas in this passage and the sentiment behind structuration that surfaces in the political economy of Mosco and Golding and Murdock in which institutional structures are said both to enable and constrain. For political economy structuration is also meant as a direct counter to a reificatory view of institutional structures. The major difference between structuration and what is being outlined here, however, concerns the crucial fact that Lyotard does not link his agonistics to an emancipatory end or ultimate goal. This is a major point to consider in an understanding of the social according to the method of language games, and is consistent with Lyotard’s view that a politics begins at the level of involvement in any number of different language games and applications of reasons.

That Lyotard has faith in the continued capacities of enacting reason and placing knowledge in the service of making moves in particular games is clear from the consideration of Kant. By insisting also on the incommensurability between specific games, Lyotard aims to make sure that these capacities remain in place, or at least that an overall plurality and respect for different games is maintained. But the most crucial consideration of all that might be derived from the particular method of language games in the context of *The Postmodern Condition* is the difference between the type of move

⁶⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

which is required by the system (that is, required by the language game of speculative and scientific reason), what Lyotard calls “innovation,” and another move, “paralogy.” The latter is an inventive and pragmatic move that would establish a change in the rules of a game itself. It is brought about by the very nature of the “performative” rules at the base of “postmodern” science: “what extra performativity depends on in the final analysis is ‘imagination’, which allows one either to make a new move or change the rules of the game.”⁷⁰ Of course the normative field will always stabilize, Lyotard contends, “But what is striking is that someone always comes along to disturb the order of ‘reason’.” Lyotard’s analysis of language games holds onto the possibility for such a disturbance and reordering of reason, but not insofar as such a disturbance can be seen to usher in a new reality, or a “real unity” between the “is” and the “ought.” All that one can ask is for the realization of a particular move, which may result in a reconfiguration of the rules of the game (or not), but which never escapes the pragmatics of the model of language games themselves: “Consensus is a horizon that is never reached.”⁷¹ There are no ultimate ends for knowledge or reasons, except that, through a healthy respect for the difference between games, these are never exhausted. Contained in this realization by Lyotard which follows from the analysis of language games in this chapter is, from a postmodern perspective, a real promise of emancipation: located somewhere in that chasm between the imagination, and its practical application in real life.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

V

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to bear witness to the specific fabric of the differend which demarcates a postmodern analytical position from the modern critical discourse of political economy. In order to articulate this difference, this chapter has charted a course between a dichotomous view of communication that can be seen to adhere from a political economic perspective (free expression/false consciousness), and the pragmatic position of postmodern language games (language games already define the social bond for which there is a plurality of reasons). Having described how communication is understood in each case, and what type of analysis follows from such an understanding, this chapter will conclude with a final return to political economy and its conception of the importance of human reason in the service of realizing human emancipation and social transformation.

It is now safe to say that, as far as this analysis is concerned, the fundamental rift between a postmodern and political economic outlook consists in the value that is placed on the idea that the universal end for knowledge and communication is to reach consensus over the terms for emancipation. For postmodernism such an end for communication is unrealistic because it goes against the very fabric of human intention itself, and the different ways in which reason is used for many different intentions and effects. As such, this conclusion will revisit the question of emancipation one last time, for it has hopefully become clear over the course of this chapter that both Lyotard and political economy are ultimately interested in the same thing: a democratic, pluralistic, and egalitarian communicative sphere.

⁷¹ Ibid., 61.

On the basis of the dichotomous understanding of communication outlined above, however, what does not readily enter the purview of political economy's realist epistemology is the consideration that one of the biggest inhibitors to realizing the conditions of emancipation or social transformation that it feels are essential to "free" communication might be something much less suspicious and tangible than media conglomeration. The germ might be communication itself. This point does not refer to the idea that the culture industries have become so pervasive that the masses have forgotten the goal of emancipation—that is an argument of false consciousness. Rather, the critical idea here is the practical observation that the goals for language, knowledge and acts of communication are not all of the same order. By the same token, unless the conceptualization of false consciousness is applied which would suggest that people do *not* genuinely act in their own self-interest as players in language games (i.e. the sender or addressee of linguistic messages) because of external forces, then some legitimacy must be given for the fact that human interests and intentions are not always aimed at common or universalizing ends. Or, to invoke Lyotard's observation on Reason and "critical rationality" that marked the end of the last chapter, "We must take care to distinguish different reasons: the reason pertaining to phenomena, the reason able to legitimate a political regime, the reason allowing each person to live in his or her own singularity, the reason that says work is admirable, and also the reason why there is duty, or a debt."

As can now be seen, the sentiment behind Lyotard's comment above reveals an analytical method outlined and based on the pragmatic concept of language games (or "reasons"). Lyotard's consideration that "critical rationality" should be viewed as plural

and able to conceive of an infinite number of language games and differential utterances could not stand in starker contrast to the *singularity* with which the same term (critical rationality) is used in Garnham's political economic outlook, for example. Outlining his defense of the "Enlightenment project" now under attack by postmodernism, Garnham writes that, "In breaking with religious explanation it placed responsibility for human action and human salvation in human hands and sought the answer to the questions it posed in the concept and practice of human reason."⁷² This is a perfectly viable observation about the Enlightenment project. But as this chapter has more than attempted to show, Lyotard does not deny or contest the human faculty of reason. Far from it; he simply asks that the various ends for which reason, or reasons (the use of knowledge and communication) be analyzed in and for their specificity. This idea is of crucial importance in understanding Lyotard's postmodernism as it has been outlined over the course of this thesis. Suffice it to say that in contrast to Lyotard, Garnham, and it is fair to say political economy more broadly, makes no such distinction between reason and reasons. Garnham is clear, therefore, on what a project that does *not* invoke reason results in: "A social science which cuts its links with this rationalist project...sinks to the trivial level where mere intellectual games are played...or it joins the ranks of those who...have perfected and wielded the technologies of domination."

Reason or unreason, knowledge placed in the service of human emancipation or human domination, free expression or manipulative speech, realist politics or intellectual "games": these are the binary or dichotomous choices for political economy whose view of rational communication in the service of consensus works to invoke the positive

⁷² Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication*, 3.

element of the pair (i.e. **reason**/unreason; **free expression**/manipulative speech).⁷³ For Magder, as we have seen, such a dichotomous understanding led him to suggest that communication is able to create and uphold “citizenship” or “Quebécois” identity, etc., or it is not, speaking instead the language of capitalism. On this basis the political argument for political economy is clear: “If the new political economy is to remain committed to social change, to the development of a more progressive, democratic, and egalitarian system, we need to establish a cultural sphere radically different from the current commercialized, centralized, and undemocratic structures.”⁷⁴ Not to quibble with the *cause* (a progressive, democratic, and egalitarian system) outlined by Magder or political economy, but, as Lyotard says with respect to Habermas’ ideal of consensus, “The cause is good...the argument is not.”⁷⁵ The same sentiment could be expressed here, and throughout this entire thesis, with respect to political economy; from a postmodern perspective the latter’s arguments do not warrant the cause.

On this consideration, it is simply not the case that what can adequately be called “postmodern theory” represents nothing more than a group of disenchanted and dogmatic radicals who would see to it that the social sphere become unbound under some undefined nihilistic impulse. Neither is it the case that postmodernism upholds an “anything goes” relativism that makes no room for the exchange of reason, ideas, cultural understandings, etc. (In the Conclusion I will, however, take up this last point in which some cultural studies has seemed to reify the concept of language games in such a way.)

⁷³ This point is not meant to be fortuitous and follows straightforwardly from a post-structuralist view on language like that which was confronted in Derrida in the first chapter above. For a concise illustration of how binary relations work in this context see Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed., Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 234-235.

⁷⁴ Magder, 279.

It is quite possible that some bad press has been associated with the paradigm given the density and obscurity through which some ‘postmodernists’, including Lyotard, have come to share their ideas. The latter is unfortunate, but then again, language does have the capacity to take on a certain complexity when it is held to be more than just a transparent vessel for transmitting knowledge (when it becomes “performative”?). All this to say that it is foolish and misguided to misconstrue the bulk of postmodern thought as disinterested in politics, or against working toward the creation of a truly democratic, pluralistic, and respectful social world. Its cause is, as such, on par with that of political economy.

But the conceptual understanding of this cause and the argument through which it is to be realized could not be farther removed between a postmodern and political economic perspective (and here I obviously am taking a line much different from that of Best and Kellner from the top of this thesis, which is why their attempts at a reconciliation between these two poles was critiqued in the first chapter). The first chapter of this thesis outlined a number of different postmodern arguments as these were conceived in the thought of Hassan, Derrida and Foucault. This chapter has picked up on, and more thoroughly outlined, what is to my estimation one of the more fruitful and thoughtful arguments to have surfaced from a postmodern perspective: Lyotard’s model of “language games.” Failing to acknowledge the political or analytical possibilities of this model is fine, but failing to acknowledge the argument is not. By suggesting in Chapter Three that its analytical pursuits are more than capable of reconciling a postmodern perspective into its own, political economy can be seen to have done just that. The “weight” of the postmodern argument as it stands against the epistemological

⁷⁵ Lyotard, 66.

premises and goals of political economy as outlined in Chapter Two can now be articulated. It is as follows.

From a postmodern point of view it is misguided and potentially dangerous to suggest that the only way to ensure integral and authentic communication is through a total transformation of the system itself, a transformation over which there must be universal and unanimous consensus, even if—and this is the most important point—the majority (deemed to be suffering from false consciousness) are not aware of the potential benefits of such an effort. Such an argument denies the pluralistic fabric of contemporary life and communication in which the majority of people are not sitting on their latent human potential awaiting someone to point the way toward emancipation. Rather, individuals are already located on the threshold of numerous different language games, putting into place and effectuating numerous different ends for knowledge and reasons. To start at this (linguistic) point of understanding—the social bond—is not to deny the possibility of politics, of working toward change, of being active in one's community, large or small. It is also not to deny that there are many who do none of these things, for whatever reason.⁷⁶ But it is to uphold a fundamental and irrevocable place for ongoing

⁷⁶ Of which, certainly, unemployment, one's class position, etc. undoubtedly can play a part (I am anticipating the logical argument). But these criteria do not necessarily and exclusively remove one from the social bond and language games. In no way, save through the use of what Lyotard calls "terrorist" tactics (i.e. physical barriers to access), can there be a *determinate* cause that completely bars one from participating in language games. There might be conditions that make participation or inventiveness more or less likely or easy, and there are undoubtedly language games that are more exclusive and discriminating than others (by which I mean not only supremacist games or those which go on in male-only golf clubhouses, but also the various games of hip-hop, country, political, business or artistic communities, etc., each the fabric and rules of which, save the first whose alteration would seem to be of judicial concern, could only be changed through inventive "moves" within the game itself). But to say that such factors are wholly determinate and must or can only be altered through extra-linguistic processes is to completely deny free will as a political philosophy.

communication as the hallmark for any political or ethical pursuit. It is only upon the realization of the “agonistic element of society,” and the plurality and incommensurability of language games that a postmodern critical analysis of communication can begin. An analysis that is aware of the risk of committing violence to the potential heterogeneity of the social bond through the arrogance and assumptions of claiming to have an objective and extra-discursive moral prescription that will create a better world for all.

Instead of attempting to secure a radically different cultural sphere before authentic communication is to be able to take place, Lyotard suggests that we are careful to analyze the use of reasons as they pertain to different language games. The most inventive uses of knowledge, what Lyotard dubs “paralogy,” might in fact present a new move in the game and a ‘change in pragmatic positions’. It is only through the endless invention of language games—and never through their stabilization or preference of one game over all others—that we are free to create our world and re-visit our current conditions. This is both the challenge and the cause for postmodernism, equally emancipatory, ethical, and democratic as the goals set for political economy.

The arguments toward effectively implementing these respective ends from a political economic and postmodern position, however, could not be further removed. They are separated by the space of the differend, which this chapter has attempted to outline as a fundamental difference over how to conceive of knowledge, communication and the self in the present sociohistorical moment. For political economy it would seem that communication and knowledge serve to establish the preconditions upon which authentic communication can take place, preconditions that always seem to be threatened

by material and economic factors. For postmodernism there are no preconditions, there is only communication and the pragmatic use of knowledge. But in spite of this, or more rightly because of it, as Lyotard suggested at the top of this paper, “There are many ways of changing positions, of changing the pragmatic positions, and these ways define a language game.” This would also seem to define the particular emancipatory model for postmodernism, one which veritably describes—ironically given how the paradigm is viewed by political economy—a very realist, or at least realistic, understanding of communication and its relationship to knowledge, language, and, most importantly, the self.

Chapter VI

Conclusion: Why the Postmodern?

“Well, that certainly sounds bad—no truths, no knowledge, no reality, no morality, no judgments, no objectivity—and if postmodernists are saying *that*, they are not so much dangerous as silly. Luckily, however, postmodernists say no such thing, and what they do say, if understood at all, is unlikely to provoke either the anger or the alarm of our modern Paul Reveres.”¹

The last chapter provided a close reading of Lyotard’s analytical method of language games, a method that configures knowledge, communication and the self in a much different way than has been seen to be the case with political economy. Lyotard’s postmodern conception of language games is one in which the individual is compelled, one could say free, to use rational creativity and imagination in the instance of an infinitesimal number of language games which make possible the individual’s self-positioning within the postmodern social bond. Of course there is no necessary reason to act, and it might be more than reasonable to suggest that the majority do not. But there is the choice to act, or “fight,” as Lyotard phrases it in a particularly linguistic reference.

This possibility is something that Lyotard’s postmodern reading of communication and culture postulates at the very outset of analysis. It asks that a “critical rationalism” chart the different configurations of language games which can account for the “agonistics” which comprise the “nature of the social bond” under postmodern conditions of incredulity; conditions in which individuals confront a heterogeneity of language games, and enact reason in many differing and disparate ways. Lyotard’s postmodernism is, as Jere Paul Surber suggests, “an affirmative view of

¹ Stanley Fish, “Postmodern Warfare,” *Harper’s* July, 2002: 33.

postmodernity.”² But to say that Lyotard holds a positive outlook for/on the social terrain he is analyzing is not to suggest that he is not political, discriminating, rational, or otherwise.

So why choose a postmodern method? This conclusion will present a number of points to clarify and substantiate the positive benefits and potential contributions that a postmodern perspective can bring to communication and social analysis. It will begin by clarifying and supporting postmodernism’s noted pragmatic ethical basis that can be clearly seen in the thought of Lyotard. An analytical method based on the concept of language games is powerful because it locates the ability to use reason and enact judgment within the purview of the individual or a pragmatic situation or language game, without any absolute criteria through which to judge. This is not to say that one can not or does not enact judgment or ethical standards, only that to locate those standards in some absolute and universal objective viewpoint (outside the play of communication or context of language games, as it were) is deemed to be dogmatic and potentially dangerous for its failure to acknowledge other reasons.

One risk with outlining a pragmatic conception of ethics and morality is that it can and does undoubtedly raise the flag of solipsism, nihilism, relativism, etc.; the fear that if there are no absolute criteria the world will be reduced to anarchy and/or the uncontrolled “free play of desire.” As this thesis has pointed out, such fears are rife in the modern discourse of political economy. On this it can only be said that these are fears that Lyotard obviously does not share, and that his analysis nowhere suggests a road down any such irrational path. In fact, it is exactly the opposite. In Lyotard’s postmodern view

² Jere Paul Surber, *Culture and Critique: An Introduction to Critical Discourses of Cultural Studies* (Boulder: Westview P, 1998), 219.

it is the language of totality, the (modern) quest to place a denotative view of the world at the service of a prescriptive view which would justify its transformation, that summons “terror.” This is why the analysis of Lyotard’s language games above stressed the influence of Kant—a thinker through whom Lyotard finds cause to claim that an “is” should never be placed in the service of an “ought.” In Lyotard’s model this idea is extended to a view that language games be respected for the way they enact different “reasons.”

To turn this justification of a postmodern position away from the specific context of Lyotard, Stanley Fish has given an interesting justification for holding a postmodern pragmatic conception of ethics and judgment which is more than relevant to that which we have been discussing above and throughout this thesis. Fish is writing in response to attacks on postmodernism from Edward Rothstein, a *New York Times* columnist, who writes, “Postmodernists challenge assertions that truth and ethical judgment have any objective value.” This language is by now quite familiar and similar reservations were made by political economy toward postmodernism. Here is Fish’s sober reflection on these accusations, a passage that helps to belay fears over what postmodernism in fact says on the basis of its pragmatic acceptance of language games:

If you mean [by objectivity] a standard of validity and value that is independent of any historically emergent and therefore revisable system of thought and practice, then it is true that many postmodernists would deny that any such standard is or could ever be available. But if by “objective” one means a standard of validity and value backed up by tried-and-true procedures and protocols of a well-developed practice...then such standards are all around us.

On this basis, Fish continues:

It seems, then, that the unavailability of absolutely objective standards—the thesis Rothstein finds repugnant and dangerous—doesn’t take anything

away from us. If, as postmodernists assert, objective standards of a publicly verifiable kind are unavailable, they are so only in the sense that they have always been unavailable (this is not, in other words, a condition postmodernism has caused), and we have always managed to get along without them, doing a great many things despite the fact that we might be unable to shore them up in accordance with the most rigorous philosophical demands.³

In fact, as can now be seen through Lyotard, it is at those historical moments when attempts have been made to “supply reality” as proof of an objective prescription for which there can be no more debate, that the worst atrocities have been enacted on humanity. In light of this problem it is prudent to follow Fish’s thoughts for a final moment, as the writer is more than clear on the importance of understanding a pragmatic position against the context and orthodoxy of a view that supports the idea of an absolute standard. Again the context for Fish’s observations is Rothstein, who declares that because postmodernism, in his view, denies objective and universal standards it would be impossible to condemn those who perpetuated the 9/11 attacks; “one culture...cannot reliably condemn another”:

Again, it depends on what you mean by “reliably,” a word that takes us right back to “objective”...If by a “reliable condemnation” you mean a condemnation rooted in a strong set of values, priorities, goals, and a conviction of right or wrong, then such a condemnation is available to most if not all of us all of the time. But if by “a reliable condemnation” you mean a condemnation rooted in values, priorities, and a sense of right and wrong that *no one would dispute and everyone accepts*, then there is no such condemnation, for the simple reason that there are no such universally accepted values, priorities, and moral convictions. If there were, there would be no deep disputes.⁴

These passages from Fish are being highlighted here for the strong justification of a postmodern perspective they contain, rather than for the particular context in which they were written, i.e. the 9/11 attacks and the thought of Rothstein. Pronounced in them

³ Fish, 33-34.

is a very clearly articulated defense for the idea of understanding communication as language games, and respecting the diversity and indeterminacy that such a model allows. As the last line of the last passage suggests, it is only through an understanding of ethics and judgment as a continually pragmatic and evolving process that a genuine respect for difference can be asserted and, presumably, communication itself takes on a continually renewed import. Such an idea is problematic for political economy because its rules, which position communication and knowledge as subordinate to reaching a final consensus, make no room for the viability of contradictory or alternative language games whose prescriptions and/or denotatives are not reconcilable with political economy's own. This situation is ironic because there can be no doubt that the language game of political economy is only and ultimately interested in increasing the capacity for the social bond and its communication systems to articulate plurality and difference. It is therefore, as was stated at the end of the last chapter, not the cause but the argument that is misguided. To respect plurality and difference means also to respect and work through viewpoints that are markedly different from one's own. The logical conclusion to this argument, if it is to have any force, is that there can be no final consensus, or as Lyotard suggests at the end of his 1979 text: "Consensus is a horizon that is never reached." In its wake, therefore, is a very real need for communication, despite, or indeed all the more so because of the impediments (media concentration, the "performative" game of postmodern science and its rule of "efficiency") which are seen to get in the way of plurality or the heterogeneity of potential language games from the perspective of political economy.

⁴ Ibid., 34. Emphasis in original.

As such, as opposed to ushering in relativism and the potential for anarchy and nihilism, as many critics of postmodernism contend, social analysis based on the idea of language games in fact solidifies the ongoing importance of communication. This in order to resolve debates and create new ones, establish new rules and challenge old ones, and, most importantly, to live ethically under the stark realization that no one point of view is ever final or absolute, nor is any particular configuration of power, knowledge or society wholly determinate or transcendent. It is on this basis that the last chapter was able to locate in Lyotard's model a "language game of justice [which comprises] nothing other than respect for difference itself."⁵

Undoubtedly the world, postmodern or otherwise, does not always respect difference (this might be an understatement) in the way that Lyotard would like and that a model of language games would suggest. Political economy is one of the primary discourses to recognize this fact. Metanarratives are perpetually recycled even as the majority of the population can see straight through their rhetorical vacuity. But none of this is cause to undermine the conceptual and analytical model that is at the heart of *The Postmodern Condition*. "Take-it-or-leave-it," Lyotard's analytical method of language games is nothing more than a way to think through and critically examine the relationship between language, knowledge and the self at the heart of the contemporary social bond. Political economy deals with these issues as well, and the last chapter attempted to bring together the analysis of the paradigm conducted earlier in the thesis (its epistemological premises) in order to portray how these two approaches differ in kind in their conception of the categories of knowledge, language and the self that comprise communication.

⁵ Hutchings, 132.

As can now be concluded, political economy presents an analytical model for communication that can be summarized in accordance with some overriding postulates. The critical idea holds that if the means of communication are made available to the widest possible majority, with no distortion or impediment to the transmission of rational knowledge and ideas, then the conditions of democracy and the public good will follow (or at least a consensus can be reached). With this political project in mind political economy sets out to chart those material and economic factors that can be seen to impede the conditions of democracy and the social good. The beginnings of the political economic project place a lot of stock in the intellectual who is able to diagnose the particular problem to be overcome within the communicative system that the masses are not able to detect. The intellectual is ordained with the specific duty of mapping the social totality for the field of communication, and then prescribing a political mandate on the heels of that map. Such a project is fine, but it must reconcile the fact that its prescription and rules are not legitimated by anything other than the players of the language game itself. Political economy can declare, as Mosco and others have been seen to do, that its moral prescription is or should be absolute, but as Fish states of the matter from the very reasonable perspective of postmodernism, there are “no such universally accepted values, priorities, and moral convictions.” This is not a pessimistic, irresponsible, or apolitical statement. Rather, it is a statement that opens a path toward tolerance and renewed critical debate, no matter what the perceived barriers to realizing such a project appear to be.

With this idea in mind, it is possible to see clearly how postmodernism and political economy view the communicative terrain of knowledge, language, self in very

different ways. Lyotard's is a model that places faith in an individual's capacity to reason and plot strategic but pragmatic moves through which to live an ethical and self-fulfilling life along the crossings of a multiplicity of language games (it is a model strong on free-will). Political economy, on the other hand, places considerably less faith in the individual's capacity to reason, insisting instead that the ability to live freely and rationally can only come at that point when the existing structures which impede the proper use of knowledge and rationality are overturned (it is a model strong on determinism).

It has undoubtedly become clear over the course of this thesis that the analysis has been more favourable towards the former than the latter. This said, there are undoubtedly efficiencies and deficiencies in both approaches. As far as Lyotard's postmodernism is concerned it might in the final summary be seen to put too much acclaim on the capacities of individual reason or the willingness of people to act creatively. On the other hand, political economy cannot be seen for its strong faith in allowing people the capacity to act creatively in spite or irrespective of conditions that it would deem structurally unequal. There are undoubtedly many more cases to be made for or against either one of these analytical programs for understanding communication.

In the final instance I reserve judgment on deciding which discourse is absolutely "right" (a futile move that would seem to enact the very assumptions that a postmodern perspective refutes). However, this is not to say that a case can not be made in support of postmodernism in the face of the reluctance of political economy to give the latter any productive merit. This thesis, and the final consideration through Fish of the pragmatic benefits of postmodernism, is aimed at making such a case. Of course, having now made

the case that the polemic which surfaces in the language of political economy with respect to postmodernism be understood as an example of a differend between a modern and postmodern epistemology by no means do I expect all to jump on the postmodern band-wagon. This was not the specific intention of the analysis. Rather, this thesis has been aimed at identifying the major issues at hand between a modern and postmodern epistemological approach to communication studies that have surfaced in a polemical way in the language of political economy. There has also been an argument that in not being able to account for the theoretical proclivities that mark the space of the differend, political economy has the tendency to present postmodernism in a distorted light. It is a testament to the prominent position that political economy holds in the field of communication studies that I have seen fit to take issue with its image of postmodernism.

In the end, therefore, it remains to be stated why an understanding of postmodern “on its own terms,” or outside the bounds of the modernist discourse of political economy, matters. That postmodernism matters as far as concerns the writer of this thesis is more than clear. But this is not enough. If a postmodern perspective is to have any accepted relevancy within the field of Communication Studies or elsewhere further research and analysis must be conducted aimed at explaining soberly and rationally what is comprised in a postmodern approach and what the aims of its analyses are. Stanley Fish’s recent article cited above is an excellent example of such an effort (all the more so given its publication in *Harper’s* which took its explanation outside strictly academic circles). Another excellent example to be found, this time an articulation of Derrida for its sober analytical proclivities, is law professor Gary Peller’s brief but informative article, “Reason and the Mob: The Politics of Representation.” In it Peller

takes issue with the idea that the remedy to “ideological” distortions, the manipulation of language and human freedoms, or the guarantee of an equal and transparent public sphere are to be derived through the sober prescription of “reason” or some extra-linguistic consensus over what constitutes proper knowledge. Instead, Peller explains that the basis of the social bond is linguistic through and through and because of this there is political hope and freedom: “For me, the message of social construction and social contingency is one of hope. It is hopeful because it also suggests that there is no objective necessity or rational principle to justify the way things are, to legitimate the hierarchies and status quo distribution of wealth, power, prestige, and freedom.”⁶ What such analyses of postmodernism help to describe are how the purview of the template is involved in questions of political, rational and democratic import. Albeit through different arguments and with different ends in mind than those to be found in political economy.

No doubt the broad field of what can be called postmodernism has opened itself up to the sort of criticism it has received at the hands of political economists and others by being less than clear and thorough on what it is, and what the perspective can offer. This is why analyses and sober and respectful reflection like Fish’s or Peller’s is helpful. The contribution that this thesis hopes to make in the effort of establishing a worthwhile and productive place for postmodernism within Communication Studies is three-fold and can now be reflected upon. It begins in an explanatory vein similar to that offered by the two figures above.

1) In Chapter One this thesis aimed to clarify a number of different analytical approaches that fall within the realm of “postmodern theory.” Even if in the final chapter

⁶ Gary Peller, “Reason and the Mob: The Politics of Representation,” *Tikkun* 2, no. 3 (1987): 95.

this thesis did not pick up on a Foucaultian or Derridian position, the main thrust of the opening chapter was to justify the theoretical and sociohistorical basis for the work of these thinkers, as well as for Lyotard. The contribution to further scholarship that I hope to have made in that chapter is in bringing some complex postmodern positions out of obscurity and situating them within a broader context. In this way, the ideas contained therein can hopefully contribute to a re-reading of the postmodern—even if in the final instance these are refuted on academic grounds—as something more than, as Alex Callinicos charges, “merely a theoretical construct, of interest primarily as a symptom of the current mood of Western intelligentsia.”⁷ Undoubtedly Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard each lost a certain amount of faith in totalizing and revolutionary social analysis following the failed measures of the 1968 student protests. But the theoretical and analytical contributions these figures have made on the heels of that experience are no doubt of practical value for many more reasons than simply exemplifying a “mood.”

2) As such, the next contribution that this thesis has hoped to make in securing a productive place for postmodernism within communication scholarship is to have made this argument through a direct engagement with those that have been most vocal about its academic futility and redundancy, in this case political economy. This move is a risky one because in many cases it has forced this thesis and postmodernism into declaring its pragmatic premises even if these can undoubtedly be seen by political economy as containing no political relevancy or an uncritical reflexivity. The reason this thesis has chosen to jump into “the belly of the beast,” as it were, and argue the relevancy of a postmodern perspective by describing the main issues at work in the current polemic is simply to highlight the very real differences in approach between these two paradigms.

⁷ Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 9.

In other words, there is a growing rift between a postmodern and political economic perspective, this much is clear, this thesis has attempted to identify the fundamental issues which comprise this rift. To this end, Marxists like Best and Kellner are confident to be able to locate a fluid link between postmodernism and a critically modern political economic perspective. But the ability for these theorists to do this only comes through a disregard, or superficial gloss, of what is one of the foremost sentiments behind a postmodern language games perspective: the revolutionary praxis and moral absolute stance of Marxism runs contrary to a respect for the incommensurability between language games. It is not pessimistic but realistic to assert that the bulk of individuals living within Western capitalist democracies are unlikely to cede to the didactic impulse of high modernism. This is not because they suffer from false consciousness, but because they are individual, free, and rational beings!⁸ From a political economy perspective this stance is apolitical because it allows a high room for agency against the perceived inequalities and infringement of capitalism in the realm of human life.

In placing postmodernism and political economy against one another it is clear that there can be no resolve to the differend between them other than to respect and highlight the rules that inform the ends for communication, knowledge and the self within the language game of each. Perhaps there can eventually be a genuine engagement between a political economic and postmodern perspective. It is with this in mind, but moreover in the interest of preserving the integrity of postmodern postulates if such an engagement were ever proposed, that this thesis has sought to identify the major points of dispute in this polemic. Differences in approach that, as was witnessed both in Chapter

⁸ It should be noted on this point that one certainly does not require being a “postmodernist” to share in such an understanding of agency.

One and Chapter Three, are often undermined by Marxists who claim such rifts are only superficial or unimportant to the overall cause of social transformation.

3) Finally, in articulating the rules for the language game of postmodernism (a difficult statement because Lyotard's postmodernism is that which articulates language games) the final chapter chose to highlight Lyotard's 1979 text *The Postmodern Condition* and the method of language games within it. The elaboration of a postmodern perspective through Lyotard was aimed at specifically making the point that far from being a reckless nihilism, a postmodern analysis can be seen to turn on a rational and respectful acceptance of reason(s), the productive use of knowledge, and the ethical proclivities of individual agents. Far from being an 'anything goes' philosophy or a "happy relativism," as Murdock and other political economists were seen to point out in their reading of the paradigm, a postmodern model based on language games emerges as a realistic and important one for understanding the social plane within which individuals ("atoms" in Lyotard's analysis) are 'always already' (a term that I have reserved using until now) implicated. Such a model does not deny material or economic factors when measuring the social terrain. Such factors are the very ones consequential in establishing the rule of "efficiency" through which postmodern speculative knowledge is legitimated. An analytical model based in language games does, however, recognize that despite the rule of efficiency within the language game of speculative knowledge this does not exhaust the possibilities for reasons, nor does it deny a possible inventive and creative move in the speculative game itself. Lyotard's model is indeed, as Surber suggested above, "an affirmative view of postmodernity." It is through these three major

endeavours that this thesis has argued a productive and rightful place for postmodernism within Communication Studies.

Supposing, therefore, that one accepts postmodernism's relevancy and adopts the method of language games, what are the next tasks to be addressed? Well, it is clear that more work must be done to make a postmodern approach practical, i.e., to address and illustrate a practical understanding of the real impetus and usefulness behind Lyotard's conception of justice. A concept that is derived through an insistence on the lack of criteria to be found given the incommensurability between language games. On first glance, the model that Lyotard gives for justice in *The Postmodern Condition*: "We must arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus,"⁹ is bound to be a hard sell, especially for those schooled in the modern political culture of the West. As such, if the concept is to receive acceptance it must be illustrated along more practical terms than Lyotard himself has been able to describe it.

For example, in *Just Gaming*, where Lyotard's conception of language games is devised as a model for justice, the philosopher falls short of declaring how such a model would work in actual practice. Lyotard suggests that "there are no criteria, nothing but opinions," through which to judge. Of course what the philosopher means is that justice can only be enacted in relation to pragmatic contexts: "In every instance, one must evaluate relationship relations: of forces, of values, of quantities, and of qualities."¹⁰ At another point Lyotard enlists Kant to suggest that: "The ability to judge does not hang upon the observance of criteria. The form that it will take in the last *Critique* is that of the imagination. An imagination that is constitutive. It is not only the ability to judge; it

⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 66.

¹⁰ Lyotard and Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, 27.

is a power to invent criteria.”¹¹ Lyotard’s language in the first part of this quotation reflects the idea set out in the last chapter whereby it is not possible to objectively assert the truthfulness of a judgment (good/bad) on the basis of a denotative statement (true/false). But beyond the possibility that respecting the difference between these two kinds of statements (or between language games) would ensure that no phrase predominates over others (with violent potential), it remains to be articulated exactly how the “power to invent criteria” can be seen as a vehicle toward real democracy. This lack of clear terminology over its practical relevancy undoubtedly hinders, rather than helps, the postmodern cause.

Where both the productive value and the difficult acceptance of Lyotard’s model comes into play is in its confrontation with a guiding impulse in the Western political tradition. This impulse, alive and well along facets of the left and the right, is one which seeks to measure an actual state of affairs (an “is”) against a possible and prescriptive future or ideal state of affairs (an “ought”). This impulse can be witnessed as much in liberalism as it can in Marxism, or for the present purposes, political economy.¹² Lyotard suggests that we abandon the impulse to make reality come into conformity with the prescription, that is, that consensus should not be viewed as the best end goal for the realization of a just society: “Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value.”¹³ In abandoning this goal Lyotard asks instead that we focus on something else: Justice itself! That is, the goal of communication and knowledge should not be in working out a universal consensus over what a just society would look like (which is bound to differ). Rather, the goal itself is to be just, to “act.” This is a slippery concept, but its relevancy

¹¹ Lyotard and Thebaud, 17.

¹² Ibid., 21.

is this: how does one act in a way that is just? By respecting the ability of others to act in a similarly just way. Therefore, a model of justice that is not based on criteria/consensus is a model of justice that is based on an active respect for difference, hence the reason that Lyotard refers to the concept as “the idea and *practice* of justice.” It begins, therefore, through “A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games,” which, “obviously implies a renunciation of terror, which assumes that they are isomorphic and tries to make them so.”¹⁴ In other words, the social good, or the True and the Just, is not something to be brought about through communication, rather it is only through a genuine and healthy respect for the different ends for communication (language games) that the social bond will be just. This reversal might well appear to be trivial semantics, and no doubt there are flaws to the program and concept of justice so described. But the seminal idea here, which is postmodern in so far as it hinges on the maxim of trying to think outside or beyond the frame of modern conceptual analysis, is only beneficial to the extent that it can be further articulated, pondered and discussed. Furthering this description through clear and practical terms is the immanent task at hand if one is interested in pursuing an analysis or a politics based on language games.

Now, having declared that articulating both Lyotard’s model of justice and language games along practical terms is the first important task at hand to ensure the relevancy of the model for Communication Studies, it follows that the next thing to consider is whether there are any particular social issues which might merit the attention of the language game analyst? How would the analyst handle it? These are both important questions, especially in a thesis that has remained for the most part at a

¹³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 66.

¹⁴ Lyotard, 66.

theoretical level. The quick answer to the question here is that there would appear to be scarcely a contemporary social issue that wouldn't warrant the attention of a language games analysis. The bulk of the vexing problems today appear to revolve around issues of cultural difference, religious intolerance, problems of gender and sexuality equality, each of which would seem to pin incommensurable language games against one another. No doubt it is with this sentiment in mind that the model of language games outlined in *The Postmodern Condition* has been embraced by many in the field of cultural studies, feminism, gender studies, post-colonialism etc., as affirming a place for the "other" to speak. Homi Bhabha is representative of how the model has been interpreted in this regard:

The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundary of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices—women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities.¹⁵

But one must be careful. Before addressing the question of how language games can be applied in relation to any particular social issue one must be aware that nowhere does Lyotard's model claim nor ensure that the limits and legitimacy for language games are defined through extra-linguistic categories such as culture, sexuality, ethnicity, class, etc. On this note, Lyotard is not arguing a politics of resistance, nor pointing the way toward one. The model of language games is also not, thankfully, that of linguistic or cultural relativity. This is an important point, because to declare that culture, gender, or any other factor can be held as demarcating epistemological "limits" is indeed to embrace a model of relativism. Rather, the model of language games refers merely to the myriad of

different ways in which knowledge is used and pressed into service for realizing different ends between players. As such, a language game model might well be able to articulate how a game is played by a particular community, cultural or otherwise, according to certain rules. But nowhere except through the basis of the rules of the game itself and the “contract” between players does any particular game receive its legitimation. Again the idea here is slight, but the model of language games runs into trouble when it is held to be a basis for political struggle or as finding its legitimation through extra-linguistic imperatives like culture, gender, sexuality, etc. Lyotard’s model is aimed to ensure pluralism and individual freedom; it is not a relativistic model which says that an epistemological position is legitimate because it speaks as “other.” This is significant, because the best politics or engagement with social issues that language games provide is the simple idea that it is just that different games should be played. Beyond this Lyotard’s approach says little; its politics is that of a tolerance for freedom, not a resistance to power and authority.

Lyotard is not the champion of postmodernism; he is the diagnostician. He nowhere says that we should embrace postmodernism; he everywhere says that in a society which has lost faith in metanarratives, knowledge and its legitimation assume new forms and that from these forms we can seek the ways to establish ‘justice’. This justice indeed refers to respecting other people’s freedom to act in a just way, which is something very different from saying that one has a right and a claim to legitimacy on the grounds that one is a member of any particular cultural or gender community. Establishing legitimacy and enacting individual reasons are what the contract between

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation,” in *Cultural Diversity in the Arts: Art, Art Politics and the Facelift of*

players in language games is all about. In this the model could be very useful for individuals, groups and organizations alike to recognize how particular rules will enact and use knowledge in various ways. It will also point to the inherent limitations placed upon any language game to receive universal acceptance.

Getting back to the question of whether there are any particular social issues which might merit the attention of the language game analyst, therefore, it is imperative to think of language games as a normative and applicable diagnostic model, nothing more. Given this, a particular social issue that might benefit from a language game analysis is one that requires not a prescription, but a description. In this respect a very important and contemporary social issue today is globalization. As a concept globalization means many different things to different people. To some it is the catchword for an evil and monolithic American imperialism that is out to shape the world in the West's image. To others the term refers to nothing more than a normative and complex series of multilateral trade agreements and new global infrastructures that have come about under the rise of new technologies and increasing ease of communication between states. In other respects globalization can refer to the various migrations and diasporic movement of peoples to many different regions of the world. Karim Karim has given a useful description of the many different ways the sociocultural and economic concept of globalization can be defined both from above (the trade agreements, the global infrastructure) and below (diasporic communities, non-profit organizations).¹⁶ All these factors lead to the conclusion that globalization is a *discursive formation* in the truest

Europe, ed., Lvrijsen Ria (The Netherlands: Royal Tropical Institute, 1993): 21-30.

¹⁶ Karim H. Karim, "Globalization, Communication, and Diaspora," in *Mediascapes: New Patterns in Canadian Communication*, eds., Paul Attallah and Leslie Regan Shade (Scarborough: Nelson, 2002), 272-294.

sense of the term: there is no essential character for what it is, what it does, and how it might be defined.

Globalization is, therefore, an interesting social issue to consider from the perspective of language games because it is held by many, for example Naomi Klein, to be the totalitarian threat of the day. As such, there is a rush to try and devise equally totalizing measures and consensus to circumvent this threat: a “citizen-centered alternative,” “to build a resistance—both high-tech and grassroots, both focused and fragmented—that is global, and as capable of coordinated action, as the multinational corporations it seeks to subvert.”¹⁷ Klein’s prescription for “resistance” in the interest of realizing a more humane world than that which she is able to diagnose under present day global capitalism is well presented. Her prescription follows the rules of the language game for political economy witnessed throughout this thesis. The author presents a more than thorough and well founded reading of the social totality laden with enough examples of repressive work conditions, economic inequalities and off the cuff remarks by corporate CEO’s to make even the least socially-minded want to raise arms. This is a tactical move because a revolutionary politics, or some kind of phenomenological social transformation is exactly what Klein is after. However, one can agree emphatically with Klein’s denotative claims, but remain skeptical that her prescription (the “ought”) is the best course of action.

Understanding globalization through a language games model allows one to resist or be wary of the move from the denotative to the prescriptive. In this much it asks not for an impulsive judgment but a sober and critical reflection in the face of such an

¹⁷ Klein, *No Logo*, 446.

encompassing and multifaceted entity. A language games model would force one to trace how the discursive formation of globalization has been taken up as a referent in many different games, the contracts for which position its senders and addressees in certain ways (globalization is, after all, a series of human decisions and actions, albeit under the auspices of larger or smaller institutional arrangements). One can only imagine that there are games which are productive, and others that are repressive, perhaps many more result in failure or others that fail to find fruition. But if the model is language games, premised as it is on an critical engagement with rules and contracts between players, it can not be the case that “globalization” emerges as one language game, following a monolithic set of rules which position the entire global populous in the same way and can be judged accordingly on this merit.

Given the expansive, contradictory, and indeterminate breadth of globalization and its effects, for the very way that its various games and rules implicate people in many different ways, it is academically prudent to consider that there is perhaps no one universal and objective standpoint through which to understand it. A language games perspective can evade the impulse or rush to conceive of globalization as a monolithic and all-encompassing evil. As apolitical or complacent as such a move might sound it is also that which could usher in a meaningful, expansive critical engagement with globalization as both a reality and an issue. In effect, a model based on language games might allow one to really trace a dynamic and pluralistic model of the social totality. Its dynamism being the very product of its requirement not to subordinate the denotative to the prescription, but rather limiting the analysis and the prescription to each individual game and the series of moves and forces that are witnessed to take place within it.

Undoubtedly many aspects of the practical example above for effectuating a language games perspective will fall on deaf ears to those who have already made a resolute prescriptive judgment on the concept under consideration. There is neither the space nor the impulse here to further articulate the potential for a language games analysis. Engaging in this practical pursuit has not been the overall goal of this thesis, but the main point to make for both the practical example above, as throughout, is that a postmodern perspective is one that is leery of grand narratives and prescriptions that would claim to speak on behalf of the potential heterogeneity of possible perspectives and language games. This is not to say that globalization, like capitalism itself, as well as the multitude of different communication and media technologies that have proliferated over the last fifty years do not and have not lead to rules and games aimed at satisfying what can be perceived as less than humane conditions. If this is one's claim then there is undoubtedly more than enough examples available to support it, and Lyotard himself is well aware of "efficiency" as a guiding and anti-humanist principle. The question is, however, what to do in the face of such a claim or the "reality and issue" of technocracy? What argument to put into place in light of the cause? It is here that a postmodern and political economic model can be seen to differ most. As has hopefully become clear over the course of the last chapter and this one, the former does not deny or belittle human potential in the face of present conditions. Political economy does. The choice of the differend is therefore to place one's faith in a metanarrative of emancipation, or rely upon the self—one's "own linguistic practice and communicational interaction," to quote Lyotard from the top of the last chapter. Lyotard's model of justice asks that faith be placed emphatically in the latter, and that we continually act on a basis of judgment for

which there are no criteria. Such a position is not brought about by ethics, but is at the heart of the very meaning of ethical behaviour. Through postmodernism so conceived lies a promise very close to what it means to be modern: what it means to be enlightened in the truest sense of questioning all dogma and non-contingent truths. It is, therefore, to constantly reinvent and imagine possibilities for the new. And this, Lyotard assures, is a state in which material and economic factors have no purchase. It is to speak of individual imagination and the possible: “not modernism at its end but in its nascent state, and this state is constant.”¹⁸ One would caution to say constant, but not universal. Such is to end with a statement close to the heart of incredulity.

¹⁸ Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?” 79.

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