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**THE ECLIPSE OF SOCIAL THEORY:  
The Influence of Nietzsche on Postmodern Thought**

by

**RON BROWN**

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1988

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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in the Department  
of  
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## ABSTRACT

Among the diverse trends of postmodernism, one common theme is the questioning of all so-called *metanarratives*, including the conception of reason which has provided social science with its basic premises. The idea that genuine knowledge about the social world is both possible and beneficial to the human condition is seen as mere justification for modernism's tendency to control all aspects of human behaviour.

Using the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, *postmodern* theorists have tried to develop an alternative to traditional social theory. The work of Michel Foucault, along with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe represents, in a significant way, an attempt to construct a new method of both understanding and changing society. Since their approach is grounded in Nietzsche's thought, it is necessary to examine his thesis: that meaning and social relations are contingent manifestations of power--in relation to his analysis of modern nihilism.

Without endorsing Nietzsche's conclusion that an aristocracy is inevitable and desirable, Foucault uses his ontological suppositions as a way of analysing and struggling against modern forms of domination. Laclau and Mouffe depart even further from Nietzsche's political views, utilizing a philosophy of contingency to look at the conditions of capitalist society with a view to revitalizing the socialist and democratic movements.

Despite many valuable insights, these theorists do not overcome the problems of Nietzsche's approach in generating a coherent analysis and a substantive critique of modern society. Their attempts to limit the effects of epistemological and ethical relativism inherent to Nietzsche's skepticism result in an idealist social theory with a political stance which, in turn, can only be dogmatically asserted.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter. . . . .	Page
INTRODUCTION. . . . .	1
1. POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIAL THEORY . . . . .	6
Modernism and Postmodernism. . . . .	6
Postmodernist Theory. . . . .	11
Evaluating the Postmodern. . . . .	14
2. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE . . . . .	18
The Political Nietzsche . . . . .	19
Genealogy and the Critique of Ideology . . . . .	22
Philosophy and Social Theory in Nietzsche . . . . .	26
Nihilism and the Critique of Modernity . . . . .	34
3. MICHEL FOUCAULT . . . . .	41
Nietzsche's Modern Disciple. . . . .	41
Reason and the Archeology of Modernism . . . . .	42
The Genealogy of Reason . . . . .	49
Genealogy and Social Theory . . . . .	52
Criticism and Critique. . . . .	63
4. ERNESTO LACLAU AND CHANTAL MOUFFE . . . . .	73
Postmodernism and Post-Marxism . . . . .	73
Hegemony and Social Theory . . . . .	75
Post-Marxism, Critique, and Socialism. . . . .	90
CONCLUSION. . . . .	99
REFERENCES . . . . .	108

## INTRODUCTION

The broad, loosely defined grouping of intellectual trends known as postmodernism displays an ambiguous attitude towards social theory. The overall scepticism in regard to truth claims which appears to be an ingredient in all flavours of postmodernist thought would seem to rule out the possibility of making general statements about the social world. At the same time, even the most extreme positions in this camp are offered as abstract observations on the state of this world.

The logic of the sceptical argument undermines the traditional foundations of social theory. The goals of the *sociological imagination* so elegantly described by C. Wright Mills [1958] as a way of understanding and acting in the world would be reduced to one form of storytelling amongst many. Postmodernist theory tends to dismiss the claims of sociology and other disciplines to provide access to a reality underneath the appearance of things and, at the same time, severs the project of social science from its traditional link to humanistic values. These two related goals, understanding society and evaluating its development have been twin pillars supporting the edifice of social science regardless of theoretical difference and political persuasion. Although its scientific pretensions have never been accepted without question, its goal has been to acquire a type of knowledge which at least parallels that achieved by the natural sciences. And, even those theorists most enamoured of the natural science model of enquiry have used the betterment of humankind to justify and defend their claims. Habermas notes, for instance, Comte's original contribution to social theory is not in the methodological procedures of positivism but in his connecting the notion of progress to the problem of knowledge [1968:73].

In their attempts to subvert these two premises of social science, postmodern thinkers tend to draw on the philosophy of Frederick Nietzsche. The view that reality can



never be more than a human perspective would deny, once and for all, the possibility of certain knowledge. All that can ever be achieved is a set of *useful fictions* which allow the human animal to cope with the world of phenomena. At the same time, Nietzsche's approach exposes the *human-all-too-human* character of all value systems. By his account, any set of values or judgements can be explained as mere preferences which have been elevated to the status of principles. In this scheme, scientific norms and the associated values of progress and emancipation have no grounds of validity other than their general acceptance in the modern era.

However, the choice of Nietzsche as an intellectual precursor is symptomatic of the uncertainty within postmodernist thought in regard to social theory. While logically, his philosophy seems to rule out the possibility of any type of knowledge, particularly the social world, his entire body of work is an attempt to come to terms with the social and political questions of the day and, his subversion of reason can also be seen as an attempt to recover reason from the prison of its Apollonian dimensions. Without entering into debates about the *authentic* Nietzsche, it is possible to see that the way he handles this apparent paradox can help to explain the type of analysis he produces and the nature of his political conclusions. By tracing the modern condition of nihilism, or the loss of meaning, to western culture's interpretation of reason as truth, he is led to speculate on the social relations which invite the destruction of all values and beliefs. For him, the only way forward from the resulting chaos is a restored community and a newly established values appropriate to the modern era. His analysis concludes a new order can only be imposed by an aristocracy of artists and philosophers.

The multiple levels and inherent tensions of Nietzsche's approach helps to account for the range of positions within the ranks of contemporary postmodernists who are inspired by his thought. The extremes of his philosophical position are taken, by some, to indicate the futility of any type of social theory. Baudrillard [1983, 1987], for example, maintains that the conditions of the contemporary world preclude the possibility

of analysis since there is no reality beneath the multiplicity of free-floating images which constitute social relations. Social theory is simply part of the overall production of these fictitious images. For those who accept this logical conclusion of Nietzsche's perspectivism, the only response is to relax and enjoy the plurality of competing truth claims [Lyotard, 1984:66].

However, such passivity in the face of uncertain knowledge is not the only conclusion which can be drawn from Nietzsche's philosophy. His own profound concerns with the problems created by the development of science and modern capitalism and his attempt to resolve the dilemmas created by his approach also generate an alternative. This is the intellectual current which tries to contain the effects of concluding that all knowledge is illusory. Theorists of this persuasion, whose work is considered here, do not abandon analysis but propose new ways of theorizing which are not constrained by a *metaphysics of truth*. At the same time, they link their analysis to a critique of modern society. Michel Foucault, for one, accepts Nietzsche's diagnosis of the modern condition but his work is largely an effort to find a cure which is different than the new aristocracy prescribed by Nietzsche. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe grant Nietzsche's premises of indeterminacy and the constraining effect of truths but try to construct from this, a non-essentialist theoretical approach which is capable of supporting socialist and democratic values.

These attempts to develop a theoretical understanding of the social based on Nietzsche's questioning of reason, though, are faced with the paradox mentioned above. Making knowledge nothing more than interpretation and seeing values as random and arbitrary does lead to the type of relativism Margolis calls *relationalism* [1991:8]. The inconsistent and self-defeating character of this hard core relativism leads, in practise, to the passivity of Baudrillard and Lyotard. In contrast, the theorists being considered here, beginning with Nietzsche, try to limit the effects of contextualizing all knowledge. While Margolis and others attempt to develop a *robust relativism* on philosophical

grounds [Marzolis, 1991], Nietzsche, Foucault, and Laclau and Mouffe try for the same results on the terrain of social theory. They labour to establish, by different routes, a means of theorizing about society and a way of elaborating a coherent critique of existing social relations which neither relies on universal truths nor surrenders to the consequences of total contextualization.

The contributions of these theorists represent an important challenge to the way in which social theory has been carried out and warrants serious investigation. In the realm of both social analysis and the critique of modern society, each of them offers significant insights and new ways of looking at the world. If, in the end, their efforts seem to create new problems and difficulties, their work must be seen as an important contribution to the overall project of understanding and changing the world.

While distinguishable from other trends within postmodernism, the positions represented by this particular group of theorists does gain its coherence as part of the broader attack on modernism. The starting point of any evaluation of their contribution, then, requires that their works be situated in relation to the overall perspective of postmodernism. A brief review of the claims made on behalf of postmodernism and their relationship to modernist thought will indicate some of the difficulties in defining and evaluating this intellectual current. Since Nietzsche's philosophy is of central concern, it will be important to examine his work and draw out those features on which postmodernist thought bases its analysis. The interpretations of this thinker are so varied that only a look at his original writings is sufficient. The secondary literature is useful and, at times, quite fascinating but, taken as a whole, tends to confuse rather than clarify. The objective is not a thorough exegesis of his work but an indication of the way in which Nietzsche poses the question of nihilism cannot help but lead his analysis in a single direction.

The work of subsequent theorists can be read as an attempt, while remaining within the parameters of Nietzsche's scheme, to resolve some of its analytical problems and

avoid its political conclusion. Foucault's acceptance of Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern nihilism leads him to develop new methods of analysis which would be freed from the constraints of reason and humanism. Looking at his work as an attempt to overcome some of the difficulties of Nietzsche's approach will shed some light on how his questioning of modern power, in the end, moves away from social critique to an individual ethic of *care for the self*. For Laclau and Mouffe, this is not an adequate solution to the problems generated by Nietzsche's premises. They try to use the philosophical premises of Nietzsche and the insights of Foucault to give substance and rationale for a revitalized socialist movement. The viability of these different projects depends on whether they can be judged to have overcome those tensions which originate in the thought of Nietzsche.

## Chapter One

### POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIAL THEORY

#### Modernism and Postmodernism

There is no single set of concepts or theoretical propositions which can be defined as *postmodern*. Rather, there is a range of perspectives similar to what Gay has called, in reference to Enlightenment thought, a *family* of ideas and common concerns [1966:x]. What unites these diverse intellectual currents is a desire to undermine many of the categories of thought seen as particular to the historical epoch of modernism. Attempts to discover universal standards of truth, beauty and goodness are now declared not only to be futile but also restrictive and even tyrannizing. In place of this quest for validity or certainty, postmodernist thinkers advocate the recognition of infinite differences and the acceptance of uncertainty in regard to all human knowledge. Rorty's advice to philosophers, to stop scratching where it does not itch [1979:6] could be taken as a postmodernist prescription for all truth-seekers.

This assault on modernism seems to permeate all aspects of contemporary cultural and intellectual life. From fashion to philosophy, there is hardly a domain of knowledge which is exempt from efforts to deconstruct the premises which define and delimit its realm of enquiry. Postmodernist works of art, for example, try to break down the barriers between high art and popular culture, performer and audience, the product and the observer. Postmodern buildings are designed to obliterate the spatial separation of interior and exterior, structure and environment, past and present. Academic disciplines are under increasing pressure to overthrow the conceptions of time and space, subject and object which have guided their enquiries. In philosophy, an array of anti-foundational

currents, from pragmatism to hermeneutics, converge to question the certainty of human knowledge. Studies of literature and history are being recast as a form of storytelling with the same textual status as the objects of their domain. Even the natural sciences have had to face a growing concern that its statements about the world have no more validity than any others.

In the midst of this protest against all forms of universal standards, the social sciences present a particularly vulnerable target. As unabashed heirs of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, social theorists from Comte to Parsons have presumed the superiority of scientific knowledge and its applicability to the affairs of human beings. As part of the social system which is its object of enquiry, social science has never been able to free itself completely from charges of distortion and subjectivity. The problem of its scientific status is nothing new to social science, but the critique by postmodernism goes further. As Rosenau puts it,

It rejects epistemological assumptions, refutes methodological conventions, resists knowledge claims, obscures all versions of truth and dismisses policy recommendations. [1992:3]

The critique goes even further, maintaining that these disciplines are inherently implicated in modern forms and processes of domination through the extension of reason. Foucault's critique of the human sciences, for instance, identifies the crucial concept of *man* as underpinning modernism's drive to construct a universal human nature and his empirical studies try to demonstrate oppressive consequences of such a totalizing category. Freedom, for him, is not achieved by way of social theory but by freedom from its effects whereby "man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" [OT:387].

The implications for social theory of this critique are not always clear since there is no single, unified postmodernist position from which the attack is launched. Postmodernists themselves do not necessarily agree on the nature of their critique and more than one commentator has noted the ambiguous and sometimes paradoxical nature

of the term [Hutcheon, 1989:15; Huyssen, 1986:183]. In pointing out that postmodernism is one of the most elusive notions of modern times, Albrecht Wellmar observes that the contemporary world is an age of *post* concepts: post- industrialism, post-capitalism, post- structuralism, post- empiricism, to name a few [1985:337]. He attributes this elusiveness to the ambivalence and lack of clarity of a new form of self-consciousness attempting to establish its boundaries.

Along with this novelty, however, there is a number of other obstacles to constructing a singular definition of postmodernism. For one thing, postmodernists are not always clear as to whether the term refers to material and social conditions or to the ways in which the world is being conceptualized. As Hutcheon notes, many commentaries seem to conflate the two levels of analysis [1989:23]. The work of Frederic Jameson shows how the recognition of postmodernism as a particular configuration in the development of capitalism is quite different from interpreting these social conditions through the lenses of postmodern eyeglasses [1984, 1988].

Another source of confusion is the diversity of the philosophical roots of postmodernist thought. Although some critics narrow it to the specific phenomena of post-structuralism [Harland, 1987:124; Sarup, 1989:118], others tend to equate postmodernism with the broad current of anti-foundational thought which is making an impact in different philosophical traditions [Simpson, 1987:2]. The linguistic turn in analytic philosophy, for instance, has led some to conclude that *conversation* is the only possible criterion of truth [Rorty, 1982:221]. Within the tradition of continental philosophy, the radicalization of hermeneutics by Gadamer effectively removes any logical barriers to the complete contextualization of all truth claims [Gadamer, 1975; 1981; Caputo, 1987:18].

What binds these divergent strands together is an uncertain and often contradictory attitude towards modernism with its intellectual ties to the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Although some postmodernist thinkers want to preserve at least some

Enlightenment values albeit shorn of their universal claims [Lyotard, 1984:79], there is a more extreme position identified by Norris:

Enlightenment is a thing of the past, a closed chapter in the history of European thought, and the only way forward is to junk such ideas and revel in the prospect of a postmodern epoch devoid of all truth claims, all standards of valid argumentation or efforts to separate a notional 'real' from the various forms of superinduced fantasy or mass-media stimulation. [Norris, 1990:30]

Baudrillard, for example, insists that modernity has lost its driving force and the values of reason and progress have become nothing more than myths which justify its stagnation [1987:72]. Foucault is less adamant, seeing instead, a need to re-examine Kant's question as to "What Is Enlightenment?". If the modernist attitude of self-conscious examination and critique is to be preserved, he says, it is necessary to transcend the limits to knowledge imposed by the "blackmail of the Enlightenment" [FR:42]. It is this ambivalence towards the Enlightenment which critics of postmodernism take to be an anti-modern posture, abandoning any hope of understanding and re-ordering human society on a more rational basis [Habermas, 1981:13; 1987:5].

While posing the question in terms of whether postmodernism is for or against the Enlightenment is not very fruitful, the development of social theory is so closely bound to the values of the Enlightenment, it is useful to examine some of the issues involved in this debate. There are two fundamental conditions of knowledge or basic premises crystallized in Enlightenment thought which inform various efforts to theorize about society. First, the social world, like the natural, is considered to have a regularity and a connectedness which is accessible to human thought. Whether presented as a form of understanding or as a means of explanation [Apel, 1984], social theory proceeds from a range of ontological and epistemological positions to search for regularities and uniformities. The discovery of laws or *law-like* behaviour is seen as both possible and fruitful. In contrast, from the postmodernist vantage point, the world is made up of an infinite array of differences which can only be related on a temporary and contingent basis. The effect of this shift is to undermine the status of knowledge claims based on the



discovery of uniformities or laws. Regularities are now seen to be nothing more than the imposition of human concepts on the phenomenal world.

The second presupposition tying social science to the Enlightenment is the connection between science, practical activity and the freedom of human beings. An increase in the amount and type of knowledge is supposed to provide the means of controlling nature and re-ordering the social world. The goal of science has never been to simply discover the laws which govern the universe but, as one student of the Enlightenment notes, "to bear the torch on the way to political and social betterment" [Cassirer, 1951:267]. Social science incorporated this mission into its own canon as a means toward "human improvement and the alleviation of human suffering" [Bernstein, 1992a:35]. Even the most positivist of social thinkers, Auguste Comte, saw the discovery of social laws as a means to social improvement [1975:97]. Social theory has become part of that general feature of the modern world which Giddens calls its reflexivity, whereby social practices are "constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices" [1990:38]. This conception of progress is placed under suspicion by the terms of postmodernist discourse. Instead of a measure of improvement in the human condition, the whole notion of progress is considered to be a myth which only serves to justify or legitimate dominant discourses.

What ties the concepts of knowledge and freedom together in the Enlightenment story and, at the same time, provides postmodernism with its critical opening is the way reason has been conceptualized. Reason is the means by which human beings unravel the mysteries of the universe and the standard by which rival perspectives are adjudicated. At the same time, reason acts as the measure of freedom and progress. The most serious indictment of modernism's intellectual development is the claim that reason can ultimately provide no more justification than any other discourse. Baudrillard, for instance, maintains that the universality and ontological privilege awarded to reason is nothing more than the Enlightenment's imposition of its own metaphysics [1987:71].

Reduced to this level of myth, reason loses its claim as a means of securing access to knowledge and severed from freedom and progress, it loses its power to justify or critique the social order. The double-edged rationale of truth and progress which lies at the heart of the social scientific project becomes open to question.

### Postmodernist Theory

Although this questioning of universal reason is common to the different tendencies, postmodernism does not supply a unitary perspective on the implications and alternatives. The most extreme consequence of contextualizing all forms of knowledge can be seen in the positions of those thinkers termed "sceptical postmodernists" by Rosenau [1992]. Since all knowledge is seen as transitory and illusory and if, as Baudrillard claims, "theory implies truth" [1986:141], any discussion of theory becomes irrelevant. With no means of adjudicating between competing claims, there is no way of deciding even the status of postmodernism's own statements. To some, this is an acceptable condition of human knowledge. Never able to penetrate the relentless onslaught of the phenomenal world, the human subject can only stand with Lyotard and "gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species" [1984:66].

However, not all postmodernists react so passively when faced with the problems generated by the extremities of relativism. There is a trend of thought, represented by "affirmative postmodernists" [Rosenau, 1992], which accepts the premise that all knowledge is interpretive but is not resigned to simply taking note of the resulting instability. Beginning with Friedrich Nietzsche, whom many postmodernists see as the original critic of the Enlightenment, there have been attempts to block the regress of relativism by grounding knowledge claims in some fashion other than universal reason. This line of thought does not designate social theory, along with all other forms of knowledge, as superfluous and ultimately incoherent. Rather, it presents a challenge in the form of a critique which tries to occupy the same ground as social theory. It offers a

different and supposedly superior way of looking at the world and, at the same time, attempts to provide a means of altering the world.

Whether Nietzsche's critique of the Enlightenment is as far-reaching as some postmodernists maintain is a matter of some debate. Habermas, for example, sees Nietzsche's philosophy as the final step in the project of positivism, one of the major currents in the philosophy of science [1987:104]. There is some merit to this argument but Bernstein is correct in his observation that there is scarcely a criticism advanced by any critic of the Enlightenment that is not anticipated by Nietzsche [1992a:38]. The significance here is the direction this critique pushes the formation of social theory. In this respect, Nietzsche's importance lies in forcing the question of knowledge onto the terrain of the social. Rather than a problem of epistemology, to be resolved by philosophy, the interpretation of the world is seen as "human, all too human". He puts forward, as an ontological principle, that relations between human beings are rooted in differential power. Knowledge, in the form of truths about the world, becomes a matter of which set of beliefs can be imposed by the actions of individuals or groups in society.

This particular conceptualization of power allows Nietzsche to forestall the arbitrariness of knowledge but in doing so creates a number of problems. For one thing, it tends to reduce his analysis of society to strength or weakness of individuals. And, while the notion of power may be useful as an analytical category, as a normative one it risks the very thing which he wishes to avoid--justification of the existing state of affairs. To escape this conclusion, he elaborates a form of naturalism to determine which beliefs *should* be dominant in any particular culture. The conclusion that reason has come to constrain human nature forms the basis of Nietzsche's critique of modern nihilism and provides the rationale for his advocacy of a new and radical aristocracy.

Nietzsche's influence can be seen in the work of some of the most important thinkers in this century. Freud's study of unconscious motivation is indebted to Nietzsche as is the recognition of the darker side of reason in the work of Weber and Adorno. The

writer who takes up Nietzsche's thought wholeheartedly, though, and whose work is extremely influential in contemporary social research, is Michel Foucault. He uses the explanatory power of Nietzsche's philosophical scheme to explain the tendency of modern societies to control more and more aspects of social life, including the construction of meaning. At the same time, he tries to avoid Nietzsche's reliance on psychological characteristics and the resulting endorsement of a natural aristocracy. Foucault introduces the category of discourse, as a socially constructed system of rules which determine the status of various types of statements. In this way, he is able to explain the intersubjective nature of belief systems and can ground his critique of modern society in forms of knowledge which have been excluded by the dominant discourse. The results are not entirely satisfactory, however, in that the Nietzschean conception of power demands a hierarchy making it difficult to avoid Nietzsche's aristocracy. Foucault does try to temper the effects of hierarchy by advocating a circulation or rotation of elites. In his later works, he avoids this dilemma altogether by retreating into an ethical stance of individual lifestyle or *care of the self*.

The notion of discourse has been suggestive to social theorists who work within the postmodernist tradition. One of the most interesting attempts to grapple with Foucault's approach in an effort to overcome the difficult choice between hierarchy and withdrawal is the proposal advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe for a revitalized socialist movement. Their link to Nietzsche is not as explicit as that of Foucault although they do see their work as a continuing an intellectual tradition of which the philosophy of Nietzsche is a manifestation [Laclau, 1992:183]. Their notion of hegemony is clearly an application of the former's perspectivism whereby the infinite possibility of meanings is proscribed by human concepts. Their critique of modern society is tied to the Nietzschean view that human freedom has been proscribed by the "*dictatorship of the Enlightenment*" [ibid.:4]. Laclau and Mouffe use the notion of discourse somewhat differently than Foucault, dissolving any distinction between the discursive and non-

discursive. In this way they do away with the need to explain a particular discourse by reference to social forces such as the economy. As well, the question of power is deontologized and, in the hands of Laclau and Mouffe, takes on the form of persuasion or rhetoric.

The efforts of this group of thinkers to explain how knowledge, although freed from correspondence to a given reality, is not random and arbitrary, sets them apart from others in the postmodernist camp. Each of them insists, in their own way, on giving a social explanation to the conditions of human thought. Nietzsche uses differentials in power and individual interests as the reasons for the dominance of particular belief systems. Foucault divests the scheme of its psychologism and allows the interests of power to stand on their own. Rather than competing individuals, he sees a multitude of conflicting and converging sites of power which have the effect of establishing a discourse. Laclau and Mouffe apply this notion to the development of capitalism as a way of grounding their call for a pluralistic and democratic socialism. These efforts at providing a social explanation of knowledge, including the claims of postmodernism, are not without difficulty but they do distinguish these thinkers from the more extreme sceptics within postmodernism.

### Evaluating the Postmodern

Because of its perspectivism which dispenses with traditional notions of reason and objective reality, there is some difficulty in finding a stance from which to evaluate its various claims. Some commentators have tried linking postmodernist thought to the social conditions from which it arises. Berman [1982] uses Marx's metaphor of everything solid melting into air to explain the ephemeral character of social relations in an economic system which continually revolutionizes its means of production. Jameson [1984] relates the emergence of new cultural forms to the information and knowledge

based production of late capitalism. Others [Taylor, 1991; Bernstein, 1992] have tied the growing appeal of postmodern theory to its ability to justify localized resistance in the face of seemingly invincible systems of domination. Bauman [1988] attributes the growing influence of postmodernist thought in the social sciences to the declining role of intellectuals as a legitimating force in "post-production" capitalist society.

At the level of philosophy, Lukacs [1981] relegates Nietzsche to the confines of a pre-capitalist form of Romantic irrationalism. Habermas [1987] makes a similar but more reasoned argument in positioning Nietzsche as an alternative to the Left and Right heirs of Hegel. From his own perspective of Critical Marxism, he makes a convincing case that the philosophy of Nietzsche and subsequently of Foucault is ultimately incoherent despite the claims by modern followers that Nietzsche overcomes the major problems of western philosophy.

The same argument is used by other Critical Marxists to demonstrate the inadequacy of Nietzsche's approach in supporting a critique of modern capitalist society [Dews, 1987; Callinicos, 1989]. McCarthy [1991] and Benhabib [1986] make the point that postmodernism, in general, is not capable of constructing a community-based vision of the future. The point about the inability of postmodernism to ground its critique is shared by some thinkers more closely aligned to interpretive social theory, such as Taylor [1986] and Bernstein [1992] although to others working in this same tradition, the writings of Foucault, in particular, provide a vision for new forms of social practice [Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982].

It should not be surprising, if the schematics of Habermas are accepted, that the most serious engagement with this current of postmodernist thought has come from Marxism. Although there has been some attempt to synthesize the ideas of Marx and Nietzsche [Warren, 1985], the verdict of Love [1986] that this is a misguided effort seems convincing. More has been done to incorporate the insights of Foucault into a revised Marxist framework [Cousins and Hussain, 1984; Poster, 1984] but this work still

leaves a number of issues unresolved, including the question of how much of Marx remains in such efforts. Marxists have not been as kind to Laclau and Mouffe which is somewhat ironic in that of all the thinkers being considered, they are most open to acknowledgement of Marxism's theoretical contributions. Calling themselves post-marxist, they take great care to point out they are as much *marxist* as *post*. Political economy Marxists, in particular, demean this claim, with a great deal of their critique being directed at the misreading of Marx by Laclau and Mouffe [Wood, 1986; Geras, 1987]. Even Woodwiss, who is open to the work of Foucault, dismisses their approach as idealist [1990:69].

The diverse interpretations of both Marx and Nietzsche as well as the radical difference over basic premises prevent a simple comparison between the two approaches. Although Nietzsche was impressed with the critique of religion developed by Marx's colleague, Bruno Bauer, he does not seem to have been aware of Marx's own writings. If he had, it is fair to assume he would have been repelled by its Rousseauian undertone. Foucault is connected to Marxism through membership in the Communist Party during his early years and from studying under the Marxist philosopher, Althusser. Despite this and his loose association with Maoist groupings in France, a major focus of his work can be seen as a critique of Marxism. Although he rarely engages Marx directly, the supposed economic reductionism of Marxism continually looms in the background as a counterpoint to his own analyses. For Laclau and Mouffe, the explicit critique of Marxism and, in particular, the writings produced by theorists of the Second and Third International, is an integral part of their overall scheme which is consciously designed to provide a non-Marxist alternative for the Left. Even so, their confrontation with Marxism has proven less than satisfactory so far. Marxists have tended to dismiss their work as idealist [Geras, 1987] or a distortion of Marx [Wood, 1981, 1986; Meiksens and Wood, 1985]. The response of Laclau and Mouffe has been equally dismissive, finding the label of *essentialism* sufficient grounds for refutation [1987].

These confrontations between postmodernist theory and the different critical perspectives have not been entirely satisfactory. The philosophical debate provides an insight into the underlying premises of postmodernism but does not spell out the theoretical and practical consequences. The theoretical debate has tended to become polarized with each side using their own assumptions to refute the other. One way of avoiding the frustration of these discussions is to consider the claims of postmodernism and the possibilities it offers for social theory on their own grounds. This can be done by uncovering the basic arguments of postmodern analysis and presenting its theoretical development as an ongoing attempt to resolve the problems and difficulties it generates at each step. This procedure should be able to indicate what type of social theory is possible within the overall Nietzschean framework. At the same time, it is possible to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses at each point in a number of different ways. First, its success or failure can be judged on its own terms. Here, it is fair to ask whether a theoretical proposition is consistent with the premises of the argument and logical in its development. Statements can also be assessed at their level of intention. Empirical generalizations, for example, can be tested empirically and theoretical propositions can be judged on their inclusiveness and usefulness. It is not possible, of course, to do this from an imaginary neutral vantage point. In this respect, the contributions of the Critical Theory current of Marxism should prove to be most helpful since it is the main contender for the same theoretical and political space and has proven to be the most willing to engage Nietzschean thought in a serious way. The objective here, however, is not to defend Marxism or prove its superiority. It simply offers the most useful insights into postmodernism from a critical standpoint.



## Chapter Two

### FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche's diagnosis of the malaise of modern society situates him amongst the ranks of the great social thinkers of the nineteenth century. As with Comte, Marx and Durkheim, he is concerned with the upheaval and disruption of social relations accompanying the overturning of established feudal order. What sets his outlook apart from these others, however, is that Nietzsche does not necessarily look to the extension of reason to compensate for the disintegration of traditional ways of life. Modernism's preoccupation with reason as the pursuit of truth is, in his view, the most significant factor in the dissolution of community values. At the root of this disagreement with Enlightenment conceptions of reason is that Nietzsche does not see reason as residing in any part of nature. Rather, he detects an opposition between the random and hostile forces of nature and the stability provided by human concepts. One of these concepts, the dispassionate and regulative power of universal reason, has come to dominate modern life.

The exact status of truth and reason in Nietzsche's thought is a complex issue. There are grounds for a reading of Nietzsche which sees him as not deconstructing reason but reconstructing it to include a Dionysian dimension. Postmodernists tend to stress the deconstructive aspect and the differences between Nietzsche and other social theorists. It is true that his ontological perspective provides Nietzsche with an analysis of modern conditions which differs significantly from that of more traditional thinkers. His writings, for instance, display little of the optimism and confidence which characterize those works informed by notions of progress and universal truth. The opposition he establishes between reason and nature provides an interesting view of the decline of

western culture and yields an alternative type of social theory. At the very least, it can be said that Nietzsche raises questions about modern society which remain to be addressed.

At the same time, these philosophical premises create a number of problems for his analysis. Trying to resolve the tension between a chaotic world of phenomena and the stabilizing force of human concepts propels his social theory in a singular direction. With no access to any reality outside the human mind, Nietzsche can only envisage the imposition of meaning through relations of power. The ways in which power acts to constitute social relations is the focus of Nietzsche's analysis and critique of modern society.

### The Political Nietzsche

The favourable reception of Nietzsche's thought in current times is somewhat ironic. While not regarded as a social theorist in the same sense as the canonized *founders* of sociology, a status he would likely view with disdain, he is credited with providing the basic tenets of a new method of enquiry. However, his stature as the foremost critic of modern society, at least amongst leftist intellectuals, is proclaimed only by emptying his critique of its political content. Nietzsche's view of an inherently hierarchal social structure, including the prescription of a new and radical aristocracy as an antidote to the nihilism of modern society would seem to contradict the egalitarian tendency of most liberal and socialist theory.

Modern Nietzscheans handle this dilemma in a number of different ways. Some admirers, Kaufmann being the most prominent, see Nietzsche as the quintessential "anti-political" philosopher [1950:412]. Others imply his political conclusions are a personal predilection since they are based on a set of unwarranted assumptions about the nature of modern society [Warren, 1985:187]. More often than not, however, the question of Nietzsche's politics and their relation to his philosophy and method of analysis are totally

ignored. Foucault, for instance, while declaring his indebtedness to the philosopher, never discusses this question in a serious way.

The common denominator of these different attitudes towards Nietzsche is that his political conclusions are not inherent to his overall perspective. In most cases, this premise is simply assumed rather than demonstrated. However, these attempts to rescue the philosophical and methodological Nietzsche from the consequences of his own conclusions are, at the very least, questionable. In many ways, he is the most political of philosophers in that his central concern is with power and its relation to all aspects of social life. His entire body of work is an attempt to understand and overcome the "restless, barbarous, chaotic whirl that now calls itself *the present*" [BT#15]. There is no reason to assume that the prescriptions of such a powerful thinker are inconsistent or superfluous. Rather, his work needs to be investigated on its own terms, from his definition of the modern condition to the means of understanding and transcending it. Such an enquiry will show that divorcing Nietzsche from his politics is not performed without some difficulty. This, in turn, raises some questions about the viability of deriving an emancipatory project from the same analysis which posits the development of a new aristocracy as the solution to the crisis of modernity.

The portrayal of Nietzsche as not being concerned with social and economic questions [Lowith, 1964:176] is at odds with the very way in which he conceptualizes the problem of modern society. Nihilism, "this most gruesome guest, waiting at the door", is understood by Nietzsche to occur when "the uppermost values devalue themselves" [WP, #21]. The loss of values or, in the case of western societies, the death of God, is not a theological crisis but a loss of those horizons which give meaning to the range of possibilities facing human beings. For Nietzsche, every society needs "habitual and undiscussable principles" which provide a "line that divides the visible and clear from the vague and the shadowy" [UM, p.63; HAH, #224]. The loss of such a line undermines the

contingent unity of culture and social structure. He predicts that the current nihilism will usher in a period of upheaval and social turmoil such as the world has never seen.

How particular values become the ties that bind the community together is, for Nietzsche, a social and political question. The "table of values" which "hangs over every people" [Z, p.84] is rooted in the needs of the community. It is the means by which the creative power of society expands and takes shape, "the table of its overcomings" [ibid.]. He considers the driving force in the creation of these values to be the will to power or the ability to order the chaos of the universe. Since power is not an immanent quality but "manifests itself only against *obstacles*" and "therefore goes in search of what resists it" [WP #656], the origin or ascendancy of values can only be explained in terms of social and political relations.

His enquiry into the specific condition of modern nihilism leads him to investigate the complex relations between religion, philosophy, art, science and politics in the history of western thought. Although he detects a logic of self-destruction in reason perceived as truth, its realization is not simply the unfolding of an idea but a consequence of the social relations which are engendered by this value. He considers that the search for objective truth which has come to dominate western culture represents the triumph of Apollonian reason over Dionysian passion and necessarily leads to an abstraction or withdrawal from the lived activities of human beings. This "ascetic ideal" denies or frustrates the will to power and acts as a constraint on the creativity of human beings and he is adamant that sickness and decay pervade all aspects of modern life.

Nietzsche's despair of contemporary political and social structures is crucial to his overall view of the potential growth and development of human beings. Detwiler [1990] presents ample textual evidence to show that this despair is not with politics in general but with the particular relations of power in modern society. Nietzsche expresses a genuine admiration for some of the great political figures in history, such as Caesar and Napoleon as well as offering a consistently critical view of modern political institutions.

Ruling out the possibility of overcoming nihilism within the confines of existing structures, his endorsement of a new aristocracy indicates the political nature of his solution. His greatest contempt is reserved for those who, in the name of abstract truth, refuse to take part in the difficult decisions of social life. In the absence of a value system legitimated by God, Nietzsche looks to the creative power of great individuals to restore social unity. The highest form of creativity is the sculpting of human nature itself, as Zarathrusa proclaims,

But again and again it drives to mankind, my ardent, creative will; thus it drives the hammer to the stone. [Z., p.111]

The only politics which Nietzsche rejects are those forms, such as the modern state, which act as a constraint on this creative power.

### Genealogy and the Critique of Ideology

The method of genealogy which Nietzsche uses to investigate the roots of modern nihilism is also a form of active engagement with the social world. Genealogy is presented as an alternative to those types of analysis which search for some type of objective truth. Such a quest, he feels, is futile and self-defeating. Modern science and Darwinism, in particular, has ruled out the possibility of discovering the meaning of human existence in some type of primordial truth.

Formerly one sought the feeling of the grandeur of man by pointing to his divine *origin*: this has now become a forbidden way, for at its portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts, grinning knowingly as if to say: no further in this direction. [D, #49]

Nor does Nietzsche hope that by looking at history he will discover the existence of transcendental goals or even unifying themes, insisting there is only the "iron hands of necessity which shake the dice-box of chance" [D, #130]. Teleologies, such as that of Hegel, which rely on historical necessity are seen merely as arguments to justify contemporary beliefs or to legitimate a particular social order [UM, p.104].

Freed from the regulative mechanisms of ultimate truth or the fixed categories of historical meaning, the genealogist is able to look at events only as they are related to other events. Bringing to light the recesses and hidden conflicts ignored by traditional history is supposed to reveal the ways in which the past imposes limitations on the creative powers of human beings. Dispensing with those categories considered to be metaphysical, Nietzsche aims to show that values are not otherworldly but produced by the worldly interests of particular groups or individuals.

Nietzsche's genealogical method is thus inherently critical by questioning the foundation of all values. It illustrates the ways in which human thought and action is constrained by values and, at the same time, clears the ground for the conscious creation of new values which are consistent with human needs.

Since he understands those values which give meaning to all human activity as socially constructed, Nietzsche's critique leads him into an analysis of the social forces which give rise to nihilism. His account of the ascendancy of objective truth or, the life-denying ascetic ideal as he calls it, can be seen as a theory of ideology. Systems of values are, for him, a set of illusions or useful fictions woven into the fabric of social life. However, since he considers all knowledge to be a form of illusion, there is no appeal to truth or reality as grounds on which to launch a critique. Instead, he sees as ideological, those forms of knowledge which become reified by claiming to have a universal validity. Although an admirer of the spirit and method of modern scientific enquiry, he is critical of its tendency to posit its findings as objective and eternal [BGE, #21]. Such reification imposes limits on the creative power of human beings. Moral codes, for example, which establish their truths as universal or fixed and rely on some form of validation outside the realm of human activity, define what types of activities are possible [BGE, #62]. By linking knowledge to power, Nietzsche establishes a criteria of functionality in terms of the will to power or creative energy. This standard provides Nietzsche with a means of both diagnosing and evaluating the contemporary condition of nihilism.

His designation of the ascetic ideal as ideological or dysfunctional involves three types of argument. First, he attempts to undermine the universal claims of reason by uncovering its origins in the particular conditions of human society. The turning point in the development of western culture is identified in the doctrine of Socrates,

..the unshakable faith that thought, using the threads of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of `correcting' it. [BT, sec.15]

This genesis of *theoretical man* represents the birth of modern science and its preoccupation with what Nietzsche considers to be the existing state of nature. He sees this notion of a fixed or eternal reality to arise out of a need for certainty in the face of the disintegration of traditional Greek society as the power of the noble families became undermined by the formation of city states. The views of Socrates, as they became popularized and systematized, served to justify the rabble's subversion of aristocratic authority [TI, p.118]. Nietzsche's intention is to demystify the concept of reason by stripping it of its transcendental claims. Meaning expressed in terms of other-worldliness, such as Christianity or the metaphysics of modern science, is seen as a way of coping with specific conditions of powerlessness.

He also proceeds in his critique by showing that truth, as conceived by the ascetic ideal, is contradictory and ultimately self-defeating. The contradiction is part of the human condition in that the need for meaning creates a demand for certainty yet the establishment of particular ideals as a foundation for knowledge diminishes the capacity of human beings to expand their power. In this sense, science is the `noblest expression' of the ascetic ideal because it leads to its own demise. "Logic bites its own tail" [BT, p.98] in that the relentless quest for truth forces science to question the rationale of even its own claims to truth. In Nietzsche's view, it is only the social constraints on science as an institution which prevent it from following its own dictates, much like the fox who escapes through its own efforts but voluntarily returns to its cage, refusing to accept the consequences of freedom [GS, #335].

The final and decisive argument he uses to prove the ideological nature of the ascetic ideal is that it is detrimental to contemporary needs. Without the universalization of knowledge as an ideal at some point, Nietzsche feels that the world may have been plunged into "continual migrations and wars of annihilation" [BT, #15]. However, modern conditions such as the increase in commerce between nations, the "mixing of the races" [BGE, #200] along with the individuating effects of the the Reformation and the French Revolution has createe a void in terms of those values which provide meaning. The ascetic ideal of objective truth can, at this time, be nothing more than a refuge for the weak who seek respite from the chaos of modern conditions. Neither science nor religion can any longer provide the stability afforded by a universal morality. Nietzsche concludes from this that the claims of transcendental reason and progress are ideological insofar as they serve to obscure or mask the need for a new system of values.

This criteria of functionality ties Nietzsche's method and analysis to the social conditions from which values arise and, in turn, leads him to a social and political solution. The path out of nihilism and decadence is the conscious creation of a new system of values and beliefs which are capable of affirming life in the light of modern conditions. The possibility for this, in Nietzsche's view depends upon the emergence of "great individuals", geniuses of philosophy and art. He is not under any illusion that all human beings will be able to reach these heights.

Great and fine things can never be common property: beauty is for the few.  
[TI, p.74]

This is the basis of Nietzsche's vision of a new and radical elite, arising from the destructive effects of nihilism. As Detwiler notes, the justification of this aristocracy is its own existence or its ability to create new values, and there is no place for popular or democratic notions [1990:118].

This advocacy of a strictly hierarchal social order is no mere afterthought to Nietzsche's analysis of the malaise of modernity. His admiration for aristocratic order is



a consistent theme throughout his work and his preoccupation with the great cultural achievements of philosophy and art are not a negation of this view but a reinforcement of it. For Nietzsche, culture is measured by the degree of its "unity of style in all the expressions of the life of a people" [UM, p.5] and his reading of historical development leads him to conclude that only a fixed and hierarchal structure can provide the conditions for unity. His complaint against Socrates and Alexandrian culture is that they undermined the myths which held the community together [BT, p.111].

### Philosophy and Social Theory in Nietzsche

To simply show that Nietzsche is consistent and committed to such a social and political order, however, does not necessarily mean that no other conclusions can be derived from his approach. The claim of modern Nietzscheans that his method and his philosophy can yield a different and liberating set of conclusions requires an examination of the philosophical and theoretical concepts which he uses in his analyses. While Nietzsche never presents and is, in fact, opposed to the notion of a *system* of thought, there is a coherent view about the nature of the world and the capacity of human beings to understand it which inform his work.

This point of view is not as easily divorced from his aristocratic perspective as some postmodern thinkers imply. A persuasive case can be made that the reverse is true: the social and political conclusions are inherent in the premises and the problems of the former are simply reproductions of unresolved problems at the level of the latter.

Nietzsche's view of reality is succinctly described as "an ontology of flux" [Grimm, 1977:2]. The world is not made of things but of quantities of power or energy, which do not relate each other according to immutable internal laws but as a grand and monumental chaos. This, for Nietzsche, is the "terror of existence" confronting every organism-- being overwhelmed by an endless array of phenomena [BT, #16]. These quantities of power are never fixed or stable but only exist as entities to the extent that a

will, the will to power, is capable of synthesizing them into a whole. This will to power is not inherent in the quantum of energy but is derived from the relations between them, manifesting itself against obstacles [WP, #656]. Western philosophy's attempts to comprehend the nature of Being, represents, for Nietzsche, a futile search for permanence in the form of epistemology and natural laws. In his view, these are nothing more than human efforts to project stability onto the uncertainty of the natural world [GS, #121].

This ontological perspective also extends to the place of the human subject. As part of nature, the subject cannot be the fixed and universal entity implied by much of western thought. To portray the human subject as Being, passively observing nature from a distance is a form of human conceit, culminating in the philosophical anthropology of Kant. Empirical individuals exist but only as particular manifestations of the will to power as it synthesizes an infinite number of competing drives into a coherent whole. The result is not a permanent, single subject identity but a multiplicity of identities constructed by the particular configurations of the will to power.

This dissolution of subject and object into an undifferentiated flux of phenomena renders philosophy's search for certain knowledge an absurdity. If there is no fixed reality and no stable vantage point from which to observe it, knowledge can never be anything but "semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error" [BT, p.23]. This perspectivism, or rejection of truth as correspondence with a fixed reality does not necessarily mean that perspectives are arbitrary or equally valid. Since they are "articles of faith" providing the stability needed to order the chaos of the universe, their utility provides a criteria of evaluation on the basis of how well they "affirm life" or prove beneficial to the expansion of will to power [GS, #121].

This perspectivism of Nietzsche has an important consequence for the way in which truth is understood. By establishing regularity or fixity as a purely conceptual category, he undermines the self-understanding of science, particularly as presented by positivist theory. Science loses its status as a form of knowledge which is privileged by

its ability to acquire an objective or accurate view of reality. This moves some of the more contentious issues within the philosophy of science into the realm of the social. Seeing science as merely one perspective with its own values or judgements turns the question of how knowledge is possible to one of why we come to see a particular set of beliefs as capable of defining truth [BGE, #11]. In this respect, Nietzsche anticipates the later debates within the philosophy of science such as those between Kuhn and Popper. On a more general level, by seeing belief systems as constituted by interests, he situates the problems of philosophy, science and theory as "human all too human", understandable and resolvable only as a function of social relations.

The philosophical framework which grounds this approach is not free of problems. Even though a philosophical critique is not the objective at this point, some of the difficulties are significant for the impact they have on Nietzsche's social and political thought. His entire scheme, for example, rests on the notion of the will to power as the force which organizes the chaotic conditions of reality. This notion of the external world as a state of disorder and turmoil is supposedly a non-metaphysical, empirical generalization. Yet, his denial of the possibility of any reference to reality as a means of validating such a generalization leaves the ontological premise as an article of faith. It is no more self-evident than competing generalizations, such as the view of nature as possessing an inherent regularity. In the same manner, the character of the power which organizes the chaos is simply asserted. Nietzsche does not make clear why this power is ultimately reducible to the individual nor does he explain why power only manifests itself against other powers. Ascribing such intrinsic characteristics to power seems to lead back to some type of essentialist or metaphysical grounding.

The explanation of values, which is central to Nietzsche's overall perspective, is affected by these ontological assumptions. The question of which values are life-affirming cannot be answered under the terms of an individualist and differential ontology. Nietzsche's own view of what affirms life--art, philosophy, religion--can be

nothing more than individual preference. It could even be argued that the affirmation of life **must** be different for each individual and **must** be in opposition to that of every other individual. Without a definition of human creativity through the addition of some other criteria--logical, empirical, normative--there seems to be no way of establishing a unified or even contingent meaning of what affirms life.

In trying to overcome the dualism of subject and object which has marked the development of western philosophy, Nietzsche actually establishes a new dualism between an unknowable, randomly ordered world and the fixed or stable consciousness of human thought. This tension in his scheme between an indeterminate nature and the fixed category of reason creates a series of problems which cannot be resolved at the philosophical level and pushes his analysis of the social world in a particular direction.

For one thing, this approach commits Nietzsche to a form of phenomenalism regarding the knowability of the world. If, as Kant maintains, human thought is unable to penetrate beyond the surface of phenomena, Nietzsche feels there are no grounds to assume that a deeper reality does, in fact, exist. This approach raises the issue which has perplexed all forms of phenomenalism, including empiricism, of how to ascertain the reliability of phenomenal knowledge. There is no way to explain, for instance, those aspects of nature which appear to be fixed or regular given the ontological assumption of randomness and discontinuity. Nietzsche attempts to escape this dilemma by insisting that the phenomenal world is not constituted by *facts* which are independent of consciousness. Reality can only be phenomena as interpreted by the perspective of the human mind so that regularity is not part of nature but a human concept imposed on it.

This argument, however, brings with it a further set of questions concerning the way in which Nietzsche understands the existence of human reason. Rational thought is portrayed as simply one drive amongst many and its development is an accident of history.

How did rationality arrive in the world? Irrationally as might be expected: by chance accident. If we want to know what that chance accident was we shall have to guess it as one guesses the answer to a riddle. [D, #123]

However, this acceptance of reason as a human faculty which *just is* threatens the juxtaposition of reason and instincts which is central to Nietzsche's understanding of creativity. If reason is nothing more than one of a variety of drives which make up the human being, its development would seem to be consistent with the will to power, not its antithesis.

More important than this contradiction is the resulting difficulty of explaining how any perspective, including reason, comes to be shared by members of a social group. If perspectives are ultimately reducible to individuals, as in Nietzsche's scheme, social knowledge or intersubjectivity becomes a problem which needs to be explained.

Logically, there could be as many perspectives as there are individuals. Since reason and truth are merely particular perspectives, they cannot be used as means of adjudication and the possibility arises of many, incommensurable perspectives. This problem of intersubjectivity has preoccupied philosophers and social thinkers working within the confines of an individualist approach from Hobbes to Parsons.

This question of how a given set of beliefs or values develops into the dominant belief system is the central concern of Nietzsche's attempt to uncover the origins of modern nihilism. His solution to this problem pushes his analysis on to the level of the social and, at the same time, leads him to his conclusions regarding the hierarchal nature of social relations. Human beings, as "herd animals" are guided by an instinct "to do what is good for the preservation of the human race" [GS, #11] and are only able to carry out their life activities under the direction of a common fiction such as the myths which held the pre-Socratic Greek community together.

This conception of values as providing the cohesion necessary for social life resembles, in many ways that trend of social theory which reaches its zenith in the work of Talcott Parsons. Unlike Parsons and other functionalists, however, Nietzsche does not

rely on a universal human nature or a reified social structure to explain the existence of commonly held beliefs. Rather, he simply extends the notion of will to power into the realm of social relations. Since there is no such thing as common interests or shared characteristics in Nietzsche's scheme, belief systems can only be the effect of particular values being imposed as universal definitions. Even consciousness develops out of the act of "commanding and obeying" [GS, #354]. As the herd develops into human society with goals and objectives,

..it was "the good" themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good. [GM, I, #23]

Since, in Nietzsche's ontology, the expansion of power is fuelled by opposition to other powers, the imposition of the moral order can only be carried out at the expense of the weaker members of society.

The subordinate in society, the powerless, accept this imposition in a form of psychological exchange whereby they are granted the advantages of community, "..protected, cared for, in peace and trustfulness" [GM II, #9]. But, even the weak have wills whose nature is to seek expansion and opposition to other wills so that the exchange cannot be understood as an agreement between equals. Uniqueness and difference are such an integral part of Nietzsche's ontology that he cannot even refer to a common set of interests or a shared perspective of the dominant group in society [Love, 1986:118]. The development of values into a belief system requires the transformation of will to power from a vague notion of creative energy to a concrete social relationship of domination and subordination. The social is, for Nietzsche, inherently hierarchal.

Outright coercion may be diminished over time, as the subordinate in society sublimate the moral code into a second nature. This self-regulation does not negate the will to power but, according to Nietzsche, turns it inward, denying its own validity and creating an opposing moral force. It is this "slave morality" which makes a virtue out of subordination [GM II, #16]. Although the division of society into "masters and slaves"

manifests itself in different forms of social organization, the difference in individual needs produces an inevitable ranking in society. This ordering, far from being divisive, is what holds society together in that the majority of humans are content to be part of the herd while only a small number have the desire and ability to command [BGE, #199]. Hierarchy is not only considered to be the unifying force of society but is also seen as the driving force of any measure of progress. The development of human beings as a species has been due, in Nietzsche's eyes, to the efforts of "great men who have had the courage and vision to create and impose values. If society can be said to have a purpose, it is the production of "its highest exemplars" [UM, p.111]. The social order in this scheme makes no pretence of universal benefits as the whole of society is subordinate to the needs and production of the few great individuals.

Just as social relations of domination and subordination provide Nietzsche with a means of explanation for the existence of commonly held beliefs, the content of values is hierarchically ordered to decide which ones produce healthy societies. As mentioned earlier, the ontological premise of individuality and difference raises the possibility of an unlimited range of perspectives. The formal criteria of functionality in terms of the will to power by itself is tautological. Understanding values as the product of will implies some sort of prior knowledge as to which end state is desired or, in Nietzsche's terms, affirms life [Callinicos, 1989:89]. Ontologically, there can be no appeal to a set of universal needs or human characteristics but without some further criteria, there can only be an endless regression of the relationship between needs and values.

Nietzsche attempts to resolve this dilemma, as Habermas points out, by identifying, in the myths of pre-Socratic Greece, a set of original values which have not been distorted by reason [1987:97]. This search for unmediated values can be questioned as a 'genetic fallacy' in simply assuming the earliest values are superior or more life-affirming. Even if the assumption is granted, however, there is more than a little difficulty determining empirically which values are more original.

Nietzsche is also faced with the logical problem of characterizing this society, or any other, as an expression of what MacDonald terms a "pre-discursive reality" [1991:60]. Since Nietzsche acknowledges that a distinguishing feature of human society is communication, particularly language, the very notion of values creating meaning prior to language appears to be an absurdity. The difficulty of attempting to describe values in purely abstract terms is illustrated by Nietzsche's own typology. There is no inherent or even obvious relationship, for example, between "strength", defined as the ability to impose one's will, and the characteristics of "bravery" and "cruelty". The connection between the terms and their meaning is dependent upon an analysis of the social context in which they are being used and observed.

The role which Nietzsche assigns to values, as an explanation for the ascent of nihilism is highly deterministic. The development of the ascetic ideal is seen as a cause in the decline of western institutions. Although he takes account of economic, political and military factors, Nietzsche reduces them to expressions of particular values. The development of Christianity, for example, is seen as the expansion of slave morality as represented by the Jewish population under Roman domination. In the same way, the death of God is attributed to the ascendancy of science as a system of values.

The critical role of values in this scheme presents the development of human society in an almost metaphysical light. Hollingdale observes that Nietzsche's portrayal of human knowledge as moving from myth to religion to science bears more than a slight resemblance to Comte's stages of knowledge [1973:179]. Granting this privileged position to belief systems actually undermines Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism. The scepticism of modern science, for example, is considered to have destroyed the possibility of a faith in God. However, since perspectivism maintains that science can only produce a more useful fiction rather than a more accurate picture of reality, there is no compelling reason to presume that God is dead and not simply taking a vacation.



At the same time, giving belief systems an explanatory power creates a difficulty in explaining the actual configurations of social change. As with most functionalist analysis, there is a problem explaining the non-maintenance of a system. Nietzsche's notion of sublimation can explain how opposing values arise but it lacks the ability to show how these values are transformed into actual resistance [Callinicos, 1989:145]. Since belief systems are created from the ability of the strongest to impose their will, the ascendancy of the weak, exemplified by modern nihilism would seem to be unexplainable.

To explain this phenomenon, Nietzsche moves to a form of naturalism which not only reduces social groups to individual members but grounds his notion of social hierarchy in a crude form of psychologism. It is true that he dispenses with the type of reductionism which posits the individual as an abstract and universal subject. But, the resulting picture of individual identity as a unique bundle of psychological and physiological needs given shape by the strength or purpose of each person's will to power as it gives shape to a multiplicity of drives is no less reductionist. Ultimately, this notion rests on a type of fatalism which sees individuals as being born with or simply possessing a particular type of will. Nietzsche's understanding of psychology is contentious in itself but the significant aspect here is the effect it has on his analysis of the social. In this respect, it forces his entire story of western decline to rest on a vague notion of character. Modern nihilism ends up being presented as a generalized weakness of constitution as manifested in "herd mentality".

### Nihilism and the Critique of Modernity

This general conception of the social world affects the way in which Nietzsche sees the actual conditions of the modern world. In particular, for all his concern with morality and power, his analysis of their institutional form--religion and the state--is seriously

flawed. The inadequacies do not stem from a lack of interest or attention but reflect the limitations imposed by his overall perspective.

Nietzsche's thesis centres on the demise of community values, in this case Christianity, in the face of relentless scientific questioning. "God is dead and we killed him", Zarathrusa proclaims. Because religion is understood only as a system of values or shared beliefs, Nietzsche concludes that, in the context of modern scepticism, Christianity can no longer provide a horizon or set of unified beliefs. What he fails to see is the institutional form of religion and its relationship to other institutions and structures of modern capitalist society. He mistakenly assumes that the process of secularization is solely an indication of Christianity's inability to articulate a set of values consistent with the needs of modern individuals. However, social theorists not restricted by the pivotal role assigned to ideas note that modernism does not mean the decline of religion but its relegation to the sphere of private life [Marx and Engels, MECW, 3:152]. Religion has not become obsolete but has been subject to a re-organization of structural arrangements. By making social structures a function of values, there is no way to explain the persistence of religion, given the exposure of its theological foundations.

Nietzsche's view of the modern capitalist state is equally superficial. Much of his invective is directed against those features of the state which undermine the traditional order of society and its role in the ascendancy of "the herd", the assault on rank which has dominated western politics since the French Revolution. By situating values as the driving force of social development, Nietzsche can only see the egalitarian aspect of the modern state. He is blinded to the ways in which the state countenances forms of domination, rank and order. His contention that the modern state limits the actions of individuals overlooks the many ways in which restraints apply differently to different social groups. Just as he is led to accept the formality of secularization, Nietzsche is forced by the limitations of his ontology, to take at face value, the egalitarian ideology of capitalism to be the substance of modernism.

These weaknesses in Nietzsche's analysis are generally overlooked in favour of the inherently critical nature of his approach [Deleuze, 1985:91]. The general approach to the problem of modern nihilism is consistent with the notion of critique contained in the tradition of the Enlightenment and as developed by thinkers such as Kant, Hegel and Marx whereby the study of past conditions is a means of overcoming the present [Benhabib, 1986:27]. All critique of this nature, whether immanent or transcendent, possesses a normative element which grounds the assessment of what ought to be or could be. Nietzsche denies recourse to some of the more traditional grounds of critique such as truth, justice, equality and progress. Instead, the functionalist criteria of "life affirming" is the normative standard which provides a basis for evaluating the present and constructing the future.

As noted earlier, Nietzsche's notion of function turns out to be a subjective category in that the only means of determining whether a value is life-affirming is by way of individual feeling. Unable to acknowledge any common needs or desires, the only means of establishing intersubjectivity is through the power of force or rhetoric. However, this method does not, in itself, indicate which values are to be preferred. In order to provide substance to his standard, Nietzsche turns to the Dionysian values of pre-Socratic Greece.

Because of the logical and empirical problems already mentioned, of attempting to discover any pre-discursive reality, Nietzsche's particular choice of the Dionysian can only be an arbitrary and dogmatic choice. By offering this one part of Greek history as representing a more natural society, he falls into the trap which awaits all references to an original state. As Hegel saw in regard to natural rights theory and Marx in political economy, such reference assumes precisely that which it is necessary to prove [Benhabib, 1986:43]. Like Hobbes, Locke and the classical economists, Nietzsche simply identifies those characteristics which he thinks are good and proclaims these to be the essence of the Dionysian.

Dogmatism aside, there is some question as to whether the chosen values are sufficient to provide an alternative to those of modern capitalist society. Nietzsche does show a concern with certain aspects of capitalist development. Like most nineteenth century thinkers, he is aware of the pressures toward individuation and the increasing domination of all facets of social life by economic relations. "The greed of the money makers" places the state, science, education and culture at its service [UM, p.164].

Yet, in many respects, his preferred values are quite compatible with the market economy. Individualism and competitiveness, by the terms of his ontology, are the basis of human society. Private property is considered a natural manifestation of the will to power's drive to acquire and control. The social relations of domination and subordination which accompany property rights are sanctioned by the dichotomy of values into strong and weak, a natural and inevitable process, according to Nietzsche.

..life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest--exploitation. [BGE, #259]

Nietzsche's concern is not with the dehumanizing effects of capitalism but with its levelling aspects. The nature of commodity production is such that the needs of the herd, in the personae of consumers, takes precedence over the creativity of individuals [D, #175]. This process undermines the material basis of cultural achievement in that the most powerful in society no longer exist as a caste above the daily workings of society but are now directly involved in the labour process. Nietzsche considers the bourgeois stricture to "work hard from early to late" as a means of social control which modern society uses to diminish the value of the individual [D, #173].

Since private property and a hierarchal division of labour are *natural* and therefore life-affirming, Nietzsche has no grounds on which to criticize capitalism as a whole. In choosing the value of creativity as measured by the achievements of artists and philosophers, his critique cannot move beyond a narrow definition of the aesthetic. Capitalism is not unjust, reactionary or dehumanizing but simply vulgar.

These concerns with certain effects of capitalism, as with his displeasure with one aspect of the modern state reveal the essential thrust of his critique to be an attack on egalitarianism. The expanded role of the state and the crass materialism of the market economy are attributed to pressures created by the demands of the herd. Demands for equal rights and improved economic conditions are a consequence of slave morality or envy [BGE #30] and Nietzsche sees nothing natural or good about them. Equality, of a rough sort, is possible but only amongst those higher types "if these men are actually similar in strength and value standards" [BGE, #250]. The mere fact of being human carries no status since the differences in needs and interests has primary ontological weight. There can be, in this scheme, no objective basis to any type of equality but only an imposed system of values. And, such beliefs, in Nietzsche's eyes, act as a constraint on human development.

Nietzsche does not specify the precise structures which would be necessary to overcome the contemporary condition of nihilism. His use of the term breeding, for example, can be read as either genetic engineering or a system of training and education [Detwiler, 1990:111]. The overall direction of his critique, though is unambiguous. His critique offers a vision of future possibilities and his philosophy demands a type of society which would afford the higher types the freedom to create.

Nietzsche's call for a new and radical aristocracy flows from his view of the development of the human species. Human achievement, for Nietzsche, depends on hierarchy.

Every enhancement of the type "man" has so far been the work of an aristocratic society--and it will be so again and again--a society that believes in the long ladder of order or rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other. [BGE, #257].

Cultural advancement, his ultimate standard, is particularly dependant upon the activities of a dominant group which is not limited by a higher authority, either

"monarchy or commonwealth" and is capable of mobilizing the rest of society to meet its needs.

The hierarchal theme of Nietzsche's philosophy, analysis and critique extends to his perception of the role of the critic. The metaphors which he consistently employs are either medical--physician or psychologist, or they are cultural--artist. Nihilism is depicted as an illness in need of a cure and social life is considered to be a work of art to be evaluated in terms of creativity. As Megill points out, despite Nietzsche's admonitions about the ascetic ideal's withdrawal from life, positing the critic as doctor or artist requires a certain distancing [1985:352]. Zarathustra ascends the mountain in order to create a vision of an improved humanity before returning to "put the hammer to the stone". Since values are ontologically prior to society in Nietzsche's terms, they must be created apart from the social relations of daily life. Thus, the social critic, as Nietzsche increasingly came to see himself, slides easily into the role of "great man".

Elitism, as social organization and as a method of intellectual work, cannot be dismissed as the personal whim of Nietzsche. His overriding concern is the disintegration of community bonds but his philosophy dictates that community can never be anything but an imposition. The individualism of needs and values rules out a sense of community based on consensus or co-operation and the view of nature as a perpetual flow of random differences works against the possibility of common interests. As McCarthy puts it, Nietzsche can only construct a community on the basis of personal needs [1991:21]. This helps to explain the structure of his most famous work, Thus Spoke Zarathustra where, as Megill notes, the prototype of the great man does not so much argue for his view as assail the reader with a series of truths [1985:62].

The inherent hierarchy in Nietzsche's approach situates it in opposition to most liberal and socialist theory. It is particularly at odds with critical thought which starts from some premise of equality in terms of rights, conditions or opportunities. The juxtaposition of a randomly fluctuating nature with fixed and stable human conceptual-

ization leads Nietzsche to conclude that order can only be a function of power. Social unity can only be the bonds of domination and subordination. Deriving a *natural* set of values from this ontology of the social pushes his critique in a single direction. One admirer of Nietzsche candidly admits that, in opposing the politics of domination in modern society, he can only propose a domination of his own [Strong, 1988:171].

This is the dilemma which contemporary left Nietzscheans have to face--how to provide an emancipatory perspective to a philosophical approach grounded in domination.

## Chapter Three

### MICHEL FOUCAULT

#### Nietzsche's Modern Disciple

Michel Foucault is considered, by some, to be the greatest of Nietzsche's modern disciples [Said, 1988:1]. Foucault sees his own discovery of the philosopher's thought as a revelation [TPS:13] which represents the threshold of a new philosophy [OT:342]. The development of Foucault's analyses of modern society can be read as a series of attempts to overcome some of the difficulties present in Nietzsche's approach. Early in his career, Foucault poses the *problem* of modernity in Nietzschean terms of a connection between the increased power of reason and modern forms of domination. Defining the problem in this way leads him to reject more traditional methods of analysis which, in his view, assume a necessary link between reason and freedom. Archeology and Genealogy, the forms of analysis developed by Foucault to overcome such assumptions, come to rely on an increasingly Nietzschean perspective. The latter's ontology of power is used to both explain the nature of modern social relations and criticize the forms they take.

The presence of Nietzsche's thought in the work of Foucault is varied and complex, however. Even in his later genealogical phase, Foucault is no simple follower. He departs from the earlier thinker's approach in a number of ways designed to overcome the difficulties contained in Nietzsche's scheme. The concept of discourse, for instance, is used to temper the relativism and ultimate subjectivism of perspectivism without resorting to Nietzsche's crude psychologism and individualism. As well, Foucault attempts to ground the value of freedom in social movements so as to distance his



critique of modern society from Nietzsche's aristocratic outlook and to give particular values more security than individual preference.

There is some question as to whether these changes are consistent with Nietzsche's overall scheme [Rose, 1984:218] but the issue here is to show how the shared conception of modern nihilism as a consequence of expanded reason guides the direction of Foucault's thought. In looking at reason as a dominant discourse, he is led to examine the unconscious rules which govern the acceptability of statements within a discourse. this method, which he sees as analagous to an archeological investigation, is supposed to reveal the conditions which give rise to particular criteria of truth.

The limitations of this method, particularly the self-referential nature of the rules of discourse, push Foucault to search for connections to non-discursive forces. This approach, which he calls genealogy, is considered by many to be his major achievement. By linking power to forms of discourse, he does provide some important insights into the complex nature of social relations in modern society and, at the same time, exposes as myths, a number of notions which justify these relations. Ultimately, though, his efforts fall under the burden of Nietzsche's legacy. Despite the claim of overcoming the need for general theoretical statements, an examination of the steps in Foucault's analysis shows it rests on a number of general propositions which are assumed or simply stated without justification. The resulting picture of modern society is often inaccurate or misleading and the supposed radical critique ends, ironically, in a form of individual withdrawl from the world with implications as elitist as Nietzsche's aristocracy.

### Reason and the Archeology of Modernism

The trajectory of Foucault's work originates in the Nietzschean formulation of the *problem* of modern society. He is concerned to discover how the development of western structures of consciousness such as reason, truth and progress have made possible an increase in the domination of human beings,

..a reason whose autonomy of structures carries with itself the history of dogmatisms and despotisms. [IGC:12]

There is an obvious similarity in this concern to the preoccupations of Weber and the attempts of the Frankfurt School to investigate the potential tyranny contained within the notion of reason inherited from the Enlightenment. As Dews notes, however, unlike these thinkers, Foucault does not see the loss of freedom to be a misappropriation or perversion of reason [1987:150]. Rather, emancipation is conditional on a reason which "succeeds in freeing itself of itself" [IGC:12].

The universalization of reason is viewed as grounding the modern structures of domination. In its constitution of the human subject as the source of knowledge, Enlightenment thought also constitutes human beings as subjects of a sovereign in the form of truth. Foucault understands the human sciences to be particularly implicated in this process since it is these disciplines, armed with the universal claims of science, which establish human beings as objects of knowledge. Even though he does not claim to present yet another theory, his work can be seen as an ongoing attempt to provide an alternative way of understanding social relations. In this respect, each of his major studies reflects a change in method or outlook designed to produce statements about the world which are not constrained by the limitations of humanistic knowledge.

Foucault's dissatisfaction with traditional analysis, including his own early work, is evidenced by the way he poses the question of his first major work. Madness and Civilization is the recasting of an earlier book, Mental Illness and Psychology. It shifts from the domain of what madness really is in his prior synthesis of "existential anthropology and social history" [AK:334], to an enquiry into the different ways in which madness has been conceptualized and treated,

...the transition from the medieval and humanist experience of madness to our own experience, which confines insanity within mental illness. [MC:xii]

The modern definition of madness as a pathological condition is shown to be constructed from changes in the cultural and material forces.

Although this work is worthy of study as an innovative historical approach and a critique of the liberal illusion of progress, its significance here is the way in which it directs Foucault to re-formulate his question and to look for new methods of analysis. Even though the work still retains some notion of finding an underlying truth through an authentic "undifferentiated experience" [MC:ix] in madness, his main question concerning the relationship between forms of consciousness and social practices links this study to his later work.

Foucault's re-formulation of the question reveals the modern *truth* of madness as a form of illness to be a contingent type of knowledge, emerging out of particular and changing historical conditions. While this new knowledge does not stand outside the social conditions of its production, Foucault is not content with the functionalist or reductionist explanation of his earlier work. He is well aware, for instance, of the economic forces which propelled paupers, as part of a general "free" population, into the circuit of production as a cheap labour force [MC:232]. At the same time, he points out that a change in outlook regarding the nature of poverty and the poor is a necessary condition of the change in practice.

...the eighteenth century constituted, around its awareness of madness and of its threatening spread, a whole new order of concepts. [MC:219]

In the case of poverty, the poor had to be regarded as a necessary part of the overall population resource of a nation before "remedies" could be proposed [MC:230].

These conceptual changes are part of a general restructuring of power relations between such forces as the medical profession, administrators, the police, judiciary, state officials and so on. These changes include the ways in which the knowledge/power nexus is supplemented by the moral order. Repression and physical cruelty, for instance, are replaced by forms of therapy which encourage and enable the mad person to assume responsibility for his or her condition. At the same time, the authority which evolves to the medical doctor is shown not to be a function of scientific expertise but of the high

moral standing of the doctor. While these new relations are formed within the field of the new bourgeois state and constitution, Foucault insists that the one cannot be reduced to the other.

Foucault's account of this epistemic change sees the conventional positivist notion of the application of scientific principles to a preexisting object of enquiry as a myth, beneath which there was a "series of operations" which reorganized not only the asylum but also the concrete experience of madness [MC:243]. These operations, a series of shifts in the realm of politics, economics and morals, required a form of knowledge which constitutes the mad as objects in terms of rights, value and agency.

In re-formulating the question of madness, Foucault creates two sets of difficulties which encourage him to search for a new method enquiry. On the one hand, this work is still committed to finding an underlying truth beneath the supposedly mystifying explanations of positivism [MC:276]. This link to a primordial truth prevents Foucault from expanding his notion of discourse to the more general structures of consciousness in society. On the other hand, this account of madness provides little evidence of how the conceptual changes are related to social forces. Phenomena such as the "economic crisis in the Western world" are invoked to explain how meanings are constructed but the relationships are simply asserted. As Dreyfus and Rabinow point out, questions he takes for granted will later become problems to be solved [1983:5].

The first of these difficulties, the question of meaning, is broached through a method which, like structuralism, eliminates the need to account for subjective states of consciousness in social analysis. His enquiry into the emergence of modern medicine as a body of knowledge and a set of social practices advances this method, called archeology, in two important respects. First, Foucault shows that medicine, as it has come to be known, could only emerge in the space created by changes in the preceding, or classical period. Eschewing any reference to an underlying reality or truth [BC:xvii], he describes the changes to the ways in which doctor, patient, hospital are related and

defined [BC:196]. This notion of an "epistemic break" shows that the ruptures or discontinuities in knowledge are at least as significant as the traditional story of progressive enlightenment. Second, he extends his investigation to the processes of subjectification. From this perspective, changes in knowledge do not result from a subjective ability to shed light on a previously obscure object but the object of knowledge has to be constituted as an object. In this case, scientific knowledge of the human body, upon which modern medicine depends, originates in the study of cadavers [BC:146].

The next step is for Foucault to extend his understanding of these processes to the human sciences, as a whole. His investigation of the conceptual foundations on which the *truths* of these sciences are grounded discovers that the conceptualization of human beings as an object of study is unique to the modern period.

Renaissance 'humanism' and Classical 'rationalism' were indeed able to allot human beings a privileged position in the order of the world, but they were not able to conceive of man. [OT:318]

The turning point, in his view, comes with Kant's linking of knowledge with human finitude when the possibility of knowledge is grounded in the very limitation of human existence. This discovery is unstable in that by making human beings the "measure of all things", human existence becomes a problem to be explained or a puzzle to be solved [OT:314]. The human sciences of biology, economics and linguistics could only emerge under a particular set of rules governing what could be said about the objects of their enquiry--life, labour and language. The corresponding classical disciplines of natural history, wealth and grammar could not conceive of *man* because human existence was accepted as a given part of a preexisting order.

This process of *humanization* is seen by Foucault to represent a loss of freedom due to the inherent tensions created when the human being is posited as both the origin and limit of knowledge. By situating *man* as a transcendental standard--a means of knowing what is beyond thought as well as the source of history--the human sciences are led to pursue a series of futile strategies of knowledge.

Foucault is not concerned to show that the knowledge produced by the human sciences is erroneous but that the theoretical systems, whether functional/organic, conflict or systems models, are constraining and self-defeating since they are rooted in human finitude. The furthest point in the development of these strategies is when language, freed from the classical restraints of representation, turns in on itself, becoming an object of enquiry [OT:300]. This last act of modernism is the point at which the modern episteme of 'man' dissolves and at the same time, opens up new ways of thinking.

If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility--without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises--were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. [OT:387]

The way in which Foucault arrives at this analysis can be seen as a critique or, even a parody, of Methodology as the application of science to the study of humans [Megill, 1985:227]. Traditional strategies of reduction (positivism), clarification (Marxism), and interpretation (hermeneutics) are rejected in favour of a "pure description of discursive events" [AK:27]. By ignoring any question of truth or meaning he hopes to show, in the relationships between discursive events, how one particular statement appears rather than another. The system of background, unconscious rules which shape the formation and transformation of statements [AK:130] is not to be understood as a theory but as the concepts of truth which make theories possible.

Foucault uses this notion of discursive rules to understand the set of ideas which characterize an entire historical period. The rules or regularities not only govern the conditions of a particular discourse but are seen to order the relations between various discourses.

In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one 'episteme' that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice. [OT:168]

Harking back to Nietzsche, Foucault sees the modern "episteme" as a series of discourses which are legitimated by an overall regime of truth. His analyses of such social sciences as psychology and criminology try to show that, as part of the general discourse of truth, these disciplines are deeply implicated in relations of domination.

There are some advantages to Foucault's archeological method of pure description. Eliminating subjective considerations does allow for the investigation of discursive rules while setting aside the question of meaning and as Gutting notes, archaeology provides the basis for a critical history of the theory and practices of the social sciences [1989:221]. These same moves on the part of Foucault, however, also create problems which push his analysis further in the direction of genealogy.

To begin, archaeology does not tackle the difficult question as to whether "pure description" is actually possible. Foucault recognizes this difficulty when he concedes the inability of archeology to provide a distance from contemporary discourse [AK:130] but does seem to assume that descriptions of other discourses can be free from distortion. Dreyfus and Rabinow also point out how the elimination of meaning raises questions about the status of archaeological investigations. If a discourse is meaningless, there would seem to be no grounds for studying it [1983:88].

The grounding of discourse in the rules of its own formation also leaves unresolved the question of agency. Ignoring the subjective meaning of a discursive act can be quite misleading. Studies of various institutions, such as those carried out by Goffman demonstrate that even the most rule-governed relationships are not free of agency. Although he is, at times, content to give these rules a purely descriptive function [AK:121], Foucault also bestows them with causal efficacy as governing statements forming the objects of discourse [AK:115]. In this case, discourse takes the form of an autonomous system and McCarthy correctly notes that the rules represent the resurrection of a universal subject in a new guise [1991:56]. Rather than some aspect of human

nature providing the rationale for agency, the rules of discourse are invested with the universal character of self-perpetuating control.

The implicit functionalism of such a self-contained system undermines one of Foucault's primary objectives in that it cannot give an adequate explanation of how rules change. Rich in description of the effects of epistemic change, the origin of the changes remain a mystery. The archaeological texts simply refer to various "mutations" in discursive formations. This distancing of the discursive from non-discursive relations also cuts Foucault's analysis off from the overall critique of humanism. Even if the argument that the subjectification associated with reason leads to subjection is granted on philosophical terms, Foucault's archeology does not provide the means of demonstrating its social manifestation. As Gutting notes, it is still necessary to show how the domination produced by reason is revealed in concrete social practices [1989:225].

### The Genealogy of Reason

Foucault seeks a solution to these problems contained in his archeological method by merging the approach with Nietzsche's genealogical understanding of history. The latter's treatment of power as the basis of social relationships is seen as the way of explaining how rules of discourse generate meaning and acquire validity through their relationship to a range of non-discursive practices. In this way, Foucault tries to connect reason, or the discourse of truth, to the power interests of social groups. In particular, he aims to expose as myth, the notion of reason as the theme which unifies and explains historical development. Reason's claim to universality is not only challenged by Foucault, as with Nietzsche, on the grounds of its "accidental" origin and its contradictory claim to provide a foundation for knowledge. As well, in its appropriation to the human sciences, the myth of objective truth implicates reason in the contemporary condition of decadence or loss of freedom. This will to truth is seen as the driving force of modern society's tendency towards total administration and since archaeology could



only explore the conditions of possibility of discourse, genealogy is intended to explain its actuality [Habermas, 1987:268].

Genealogy, as a "history of the present" [DP:31], is a careful probing of history to show how the modern subject has been constructed or, as Hoy puts it, how we have come to be what we are [1988:37]. Traditional or "historian's" history is seen to present a unified picture either revealing an essence or truth located in some original state, as the necessary movement in the direction of a perfect state, present or future or as the cumulative growth of objective knowledge. Nietzsche and Foucault object,

The historian's history finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity. This is only possible, however, because of its belief in eternal truth, the immortality of the soul and the nature of consciousness as always identical to itself. [LCP:152]

Genealogy tries to show that the concepts used to provide such meaning to history, whether it is God, reason or progress, are themselves contingent historical products.

In some respects, it may seem paradoxical to discuss genealogy in general terms. As one commentator puts it, for all his philosophical and historical insights, Foucault's work is above all iconoclastic in intent [Philp, 1985:67]. Yet, despite the fact that the ontological and epistemological grounds on which he sees all general theory as a strategy to fix or eternalize particular social relations [QM:106], Foucault's own writings offer a fair number of explicit generalizations concerning history and society as a whole. To see that "each society has its regime of truth" [PK:131] or to characterize the movement of modern society from "carceral" to "pastoral" types of discipline [SP:783] is to offer the same level of generalization as those theories which are criticized for their totalizing effects. As well, there are a number of less explicit theoretical grounds on which the coherence of his particular studies are dependent. All of Foucault's commentaries operate within a general view of historical development and an overall understanding of how society operates.

Foucault takes up Nietzsche's "problem of the nineteenth century", a history of rationality [PPC:23], agreeing with the earlier thinker's theme that the constraining force of modern rationality originates in Socratic Greece, "between Hesiod and Plato" [AK:218]. The quest for perfect knowledge, *will to truth*, is a particular manifestation of *will to power*. This path which culminates in "man" as the central category of history and the gradual ascension of human reason to its present status as the sole criteria of meaning and truth, constitutes itself as a discourse through systems of institutional support and the exclusion of different ways of thinking and acting. The compelling force and constraining capacity of the discourse of reason in Foucault's work is analogous, as Lash points out, to Nietzsche's slave morality [1990:61].

In contrast to Nietzsche, however, Foucault shows a detailed interest in the transition to modern society and a concern for the ways in which institutions actually function. The role of reason in this process is linked to the expanding authority of the human sciences in providing the means of *normalizing* society, not by an increase in rationality but an increase in the power of scientific discourse to colonize other discourses [PK:107].

Situating knowledge and power in this way is supposed to provide a non-evolutionary and non-teleological account of history [LCP:139-164] undermining the myths of progress and inevitability. His demonstration, for example, that penal reform has not been motivated by humanitarianism but is produced by particular strategies of power challenges the traditional view of progressively enlightened treatment. Instead, reforms can be seen as instituting an even more effective means of domination--all in the name of reason. This universalization of reason, by Foucault's account, necessarily involves the exclusion of certain *others* from normal discourse. The mad, sick, deviant and perverted are controlled through their expulsion from the category of the universal subject.

Interesting as Foucault's genealogies may be, to represent them as completely overcoming the linear and reductionist assumptions of traditional history [Cousins, 1984:5], is to overlook the importance of a (de)evolutionary schema to Foucault's overall project. In order to demonstrate the increasing implication of western rationality in systems of domination, Foucault, following Nietzsche, relies on a generally expanding will to truth. Simply transforming progress into decline does not go beyond the same parameters of development which confine evolutionary history. While claiming to discount notions of historical necessity, neither Foucault nor Nietzsche seem to envisage an alternative to nihilistic descent once the fruit of Socratic knowledge had been tasted.

The will to truth, as a particular manifestation of the will to power, takes on an expansionary logic of its own. As Habermas explains, the ways in which madness, sickness and criminality are understood and treated are presented, in Foucault's writings, as moments in reason's attempt to overcome heterogeneity [1987:244]. To see reason in this light is to bestow it with a unity which is highly questionable. Not only does it seem to elevate a particular type of reason, instrumental reason, to reason in general [Norris, 1990:69;] but this de-differentiated reason takes on the force of a causal agent which leads Foucault into a teleological perspective despite his intentions. He identifies such a teleology in the modernist preoccupation with defining the limits of knowledge [FR:32] but his alternative, transgressing the limits, equally relies on the uniqueness of the modern episteme. Just as Nietzsche's scheme needs the death of God for its coherence, Foucault's depends upon the the death of *man* or the demise of philosophical anthropology for its ability to understand the past and the present. Whether by way of the return of language [OT:211] or the individuating configuration of modern power, the meaning of events in relation to contemporary discourse can only be grasped from the perspective of modernism [Rajchman, 1985:25].

## Genealogy and Social Theory

Foucault's insistence that his work contains no general social theory is equally questionable. He sees the very concept of *society* as an attempt to suppress the heterogeneity of social relations and even when a theory of society is intended to provide a critique or a strategy for social change, it tends to fix social relations or hold everything in its place [PK:145]. These strictures against "global" theories notwithstanding, much of Foucault's work takes place against the backdrop of a general conception of society and social relationships. Not only does he freely make use of sociological concepts, such as class, bourgeoisie, state, institution and so on, which are laden with theoretical suppositions [Rose, 1984: 200], but his analysis and critique of modern institutions take on their particular relevance as part of a overall portrait of modern society.

He clearly relies on a Nietzschean ontology, seeing social relations as constituted through power:

..in human relations, whatever they are--whether it be a question of communication verbally, as we are doing right now, or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship--power is always present. [FF:11]

This statement on the nature of the social contains at least two important assumptions. First, since power, for Foucault is defined as the capacity to influence the actions of others [FF:13], it is reducible to the individual. While he avoids the psychologism of Nietzsche through the category of discourse, power is still, at some fundamental level, reflects selfish interest or the will to appropriate [LCP:203]. The second assumption embedded in this picture of the social is Nietzsche's *ontology of flux*. Every society produces discourse,

..whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. [AK:216]

Foucault does reject the Hobbesean solution to this problem of chaos. For him, it is not a matter of how a sovereign is constituted from diverse powers but a question of how heterogeneous wills are constituted by power into subjects [PK:98]. The processes of

"normalization" which form individuals into members of society involves an endless playing out of strategies between competing power interests. When pushed to explain the origin of strategies, he tentatively replies that power struggles are "all against all" and "we all fight each other" [PK:208].

Foucault's account of the social involves two significant moves in an attempt to alleviate some of the difficulties encountered by Nietzsche's approach. First, he tries to avoid the relativism of Nietzsche's perspectivism and the inevitable conclusion that validity can be nothing but domination. Foucault does this by placing limits on the extent to which perspectives can be dissociated from some form of reality. In regard to the natural sciences, for instance, he remains a realist [Dreyfus, 1987:x], seeing only the human sciences as implicated in relations of power. As well, Foucault sees the possibility of "counter-knowledges" which challenge the interest-based truths of the human sciences. His earlier work raised the possibility of "counter-sciences" such as ethnology or social anthropology, psychoanalysis and linguistics as undermining the philosophical conception of *man* [OT:381]. Later, he sees "counter-discourses" grounded in the struggles over truth carried out by those who have been excluded from or marginalized by the dominant discourse [PK:133].

The second move is to distance his analysis from Nietzsche's psychological reductionism. Foucault's category of discourse allows the will to power to be displayed as a social force [Game, 1991:39]. Meaning is created by social practices and succeeds through institutional and organizational support and not, as in Nietzsche, from the strongest individuals imposing their wills. The picture of the social which emerges, though, is still one in which society is seen a constraining force, a means of imposing order [Harlan, 1987:162].

Foucault is not clear whether this view of the social is meant to encompass all societies for all time [Dews, 1987:151]. In any case, there can be little doubt as to his view that the strategic objectives of modern institutions are to reproduce themselves and

to integrate or normalize individuals into the mainstream of society. Modern society is marked, for Foucault, by a series of power strategies in response to a variety of economic and political needs. Arising in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the need to accumulate capital and the need to accumulate or socialize human beings into new types of social relations. These newly developed needs give rise to new techniques of power directed towards the control of individuals and of whole populations [PK:125]. From this nexus of needs and methods of control, Foucault traces the tendency towards increasingly effective methods of domination, the result of which is modern administrative society [DP:228].

In order to avoid a reductionist form of analysis, these developments are not presented as the manifestation of a single, unifying force such as economic production or state power. Even though Foucault points out the need to see how social change is related to the profit motive [DP:89] and the specific role of the state in relation to the multiple sites of modern power [PK:122], his aim is to show how a multiplicity of power relations govern the development of modern institutions. The particular forms of the asylum, the clinic and the prison are the effect of struggles between various forces such as law, administration, judiciary, commerce, medicine. Each employs a series of tactics to achieve a strategy of control and can be seen as related but not reducible to other forms of power. The employment of strategies is directed towards what Foucault calls the problem of "governmentality", the need to control whole populations. At first, these strategies of control are modelled on the way in which a family cares for its members and gradually come to replace the family [G:99]. The problem, then becomes one of studying the techniques of power or the ways in which different institutions, including the state and the economy, exercise control or become governmentalized [ibid.:103]. The rationality for this control gradually moves away from the physical domination of "carceral" society to an increasing concern with constituting individual subjects as moral and political agents of "pastoral" society.[PTI:161].

The condition of possibility for this modern strategy of control is the discourse of truth which extends the norms and criteria of science to all spheres of knowledge. As Habermas puts it, the human sciences act as the "medium of modernity" [1987:243]. The universalization of *man* can only succeed by excluding or overcoming that which does not contribute to the overall production of rational, healthy, normal subjects. The social sciences at once participate in developing the required methods of control while also establishing the grounds of this discourse, deciding what is normal. Subsuming knowledge under the discourse of truth validates practices of domination on scientific grounds.

The advantage of this method of analysis is that by setting aside, or bracketing, questions concerning the origin and legitimacy of power, Foucault is able to analyze power as it is actually experienced [Fraser, 1989:18]. Power is treated as a set of practices with particular effects and not as a thing which is possessed [DP:26]. In his investigation of the prison, for example, the question of whose interests are being served is replaced by a detailed investigation of the techniques of power. The focus is on the ways in which positions are occupied and what they actually do, rather than on the benefits or privileges accrued to such a position [Said, 1978:710]. Operating as a "capillary", power is embedded in the social life of groups and individuals in ongoing and particular ways.

The connection of discourse to relations of power provides a way of investigating the construction of knowledge without falling into a simple reductionism. The approach goes beyond the mere exposure of how relations of domination are disguised as truth or rationality but how the very construction of such categories is the product of power--not the politics of illusion but the politics of truth [PK:133]. Foucault can show, for instance, how the modern judicial system has created a particular notion of the rational, responsible subject so that knowledge of the criminal, revealed in confession, takes on more significance than knowledge of the crime. This discourse of truth is so crucial to

distributing punishment that the system is frustrated by the act of a prisoner refusing to speak [PPC:137]. Such studies demonstrate the materiality of discourse as it acts to constrain, confine and shape activity, including at its most basic level, the human body [Said, 1978:705].

However, these same notions of subjectless power and anonymous discourse also create a number of problems which are compounded by Foucault's refusal to offer the type of theoretical propositions which could make his overall approach more coherent. Under the rubric of opposing all manner of totalizing theory, he never articulates, in a systematic way, the premises which inform his particular studies.

His characterization of modern society as administrative and totalizing rests on two questionable methodological moves. On the one hand, his view of modern society is drawn by analogy. By showing particular institutions to be infused with a discourse of totalization, Foucault implies that society, as a whole, is governed by the same power effects. Carceral methods of domination originating in the prison of the classical period, for instance, are simply transposed so as to be seen as, "operating at every level of the social body" [DP:303]. As one critic points out, the analogies are plausible but are hardly the basis for the arguments they try to support [Donnelly, 1986:25]. On the other hand, some aspects of the modern are clearly derived from Foucault's particular teleology. His observation that social movements have changed from resistance to exploitation to resistance against subjectification [SP:782], for example, is offered with no actual analysis of these movements. Instead, the argument acquires its credibility from Foucault's account of the evolution of social control.

The resulting picture of modern society which Foucault offers is often one-sided and simplistic. The strategies of domination, whether carceral or pastoral are so ubiquitous in his scheme that modern society becomes almost synonymous with totalitarian power. Such a perspective loses sight of those features of modern society which are not regulated in the manner of a prison and thus provides no basis for



differentiating between types of society or states within the context of modernism [Wolin, 1988:183].

This one-sidedness seems unavoidable once the social is understood as constituted by struggles over power. Foucault's use of military metaphors reinforces this image since the strategic goal of a battle is total victory. Having removed motivation or intentionality, the driving force of discourse can only be the anonymous, hegemonic will to power. As a form of power, discourse attempts to overcome other discourses in its struggle to provide meaning or truth at the level of society as a whole just as "the Socratics drove out the Sophists" [LCP:166]. In this way, the concept of totality becomes equated with the practice of totalitarianism [Jay, 1984:536]. While he does claim that disciplinary power can never be complete, that we will always "hear the distant roar of battle" [DP:308], Foucault bestows on the discourse of modernity, a pervasiveness of domination which he does not support with systematic analysis.

This version of modern disciplinary society actually limits the ability to distinguish between different sites or types of power. Since power comes from everywhere and is imminent to all relations [HS1:94], it has no centre or single pole which can be either analyzed or attacked. Foucault's supporters are correct to note that this anti-reductionist stance broadens the scope of social analysis [Barrett, 1991:136]. But, this dispersal of power also has the effect of blurring distinctions between types and degrees of power. The tactics of power which he attributes to the bourgeoisie, for example, "the army, colonization and prisons" [PK:16-17], could be used to describe the ruling class of any world empire [Rose, 1984:199]. This picture of a "spider's web without the spider", as Said puts it, overlooks the basic divisions which continue to characterize modern society [1978:210].

One serious consequence, in this respect, is the failure of Foucault to consider, in any systematic way, the role of the state in modern society. It is useful to note that the state is among us and not simply above us but this still leaves the question of which

aspects of modern power produce the most significant effects. In an otherwise sympathetic approach to Foucault's work, Game recognizes that the dispersal of power into an endless multiplicity of sites makes it difficult to identify the actual hierarchy of power relations [1991:46]. This levelling of all relations of domination yields a picture of the state, this "coldest of all monsters" which can only be parasitic and constraining [PK:122]. Restricted by such a one-sided view, there is no way of accounting for the complex ways in which the modern welfare state has developed [Habermas, 1987:288]. Foucault does see that configurations of modern power come increasingly under the control of the state [SP:793] but he avoids any direct engagement with those human sciences which deal explicitly with economics and politics [Wolin, 1988:190].

Foucault attempts to overcome some of these problems by conceptualizing power as a completely reciprocal relationship, "...exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" [SP:790]. In this way, the question of power is supposed to stand above such issues as violence and consent [ibid.:789]. There is a certain empowering appeal in seeing power as coming from below but the exclusion of violence or the assumption of free subjects produces a confusing picture of the actualities of power. Attributing power to the pan-opticon gaze of the prison and by analogy, the surveillance techniques of modern institutions illustrates this problem. If actions are affected by simply being constantly observed, it is not clear how they can be construed as the actions of a free subject. If, on the other hand, actions are affected by punishment, real or potential, power does not stand above violence but is reduced to it. The distinctions between free and unfree, violent and consensual seem quite arbitrary and actually stand in the way of seeing how force and violence permeate many types of social relations.

This confusion over the types and degrees of power has led to a number of criticisms which claim that Foucault is unable to account for resistance. This seems paradoxical in that he does consider resistance as integral to power [HS1:94-96]. The

problem lies in the Nietzschean metaphysics which sees power as constitutive of all subject positions. Actual resistance requires some notion of agency and, as Giddens points out, any theory of human agency must have some account of motivation and reflexivity [1987:99]. But, if these are constructed by and are, in fact, part of the pre-existing relations of power, resistance would only serve to reinforce the structure of domination. The irony of this metaphysical notion of power is that, in the name of opposition to all forms of essentialism, Foucault is led to establish a different type of reductionism. Underlying all of the processes and relations of modern society is the perpetuation of self-constituted power, an enforced tranquillity [Dews, 1987:199].

This self-referentiality tends to diminish any explanation at the level of the non-discursive. Despite the introduction of genealogy as a means of providing discourse with a link to economic and political structures, the approach persists in giving ontological priority to the discursive [Megill, 1985:252]. As Poster observes, for instance, Foucault's history of sexuality, is not so much a discussion of sexuality as it is a discussion of discourses about sex [1986:208]. The method proceeds on the basis that the practices of a social institution can be explained by way of an investigation of the programmes (documents, manuals, records) generated by administrators, politicians, medical doctors and so on. This assumption ignores the very real possibility that such documents serve to conceal or justify a set of interests outside the text [Cousins, 1984:229]. The texts by which Foucault defines a given discourse, seem to constitute the social world and as Giddens says, the texts write themselves [1987:94].

It is true that Foucault makes frequent reference to more general strategies of domination in modern society, insisting that the "anchorage of the relationships, even if they are embodied and crystallized in an institution, is to be found outside the institution" [SP:791]. He alludes to prisons as a type of class domination [DP:209] and confinement in general as a means of stabilizing a regime [MC:54] but the connections are quite

vague. As Donnelly indicates, this functionalism in Foucault's studies is evocative but there is no explanation as to who benefits and how [1986:30].

The one-sided analysis and the privileging of ideas seems to be an inevitable consequence of the crucial role given to the will to truth in the overall Nietzschean scheme. In portraying the development of rationality as an autonomous and expansionary force, all social relations become subordinated to the regime of truth. The evidence for this is supposedly demonstrated by the discursive practices of the human sciences. While Foucault's characterization of the role of these disciplines is revealing, he tends to reduce the development of reason to the human sciences and to present only one aspect--their connection to processes of domination. This view ignores or fails to account for a host of other sources of domination which may or may not be reduced to reason. While criminology, for example, may supply knowledge and techniques of domination, the application of this knowledge and its material conditions of existence cannot be attributed simply to the discipline.

To see western reason as inherently constraining also ignores that aspect of the tradition which has been critical and emancipatory. Habermas notes that the view of the human sciences which Foucault presents has not been the dominant model for some time [1987:275] and McCarthy points to the emergence of critical theory as evidence of a more complex development of reason and the disciplines than Foucault allows [1991:52]. He also seems unaware of those approaches which have, like his own efforts, tried to dispense with the knowing subject such as behaviourism, linguistics and systems theories. This over-simplified version of western thought compresses all of its ingredients into a single anthropological mould.

However, this characterization of the social sciences is crucial to Foucault's project of reducing subjectification to subjection. The notion of a generalized human nature is seen as an effect of power relations played out at the most basic level of material existence. Confinement, discipline and surveillance are the techniques of power

which produce the modern subject in its rational and autonomous form. In this important departure from Nietzsche's psychologism, subject identity is totally destabilized. The subject is now seen as completely contingent upon a complex relationship of concepts and social practices rather than resting on the strength or weakness of individuals.

This move does allow Foucault to locate and bring to light those differences which have been subjugated. Mental illness, deviance and perversion, as categories of exclusion, are integral to the process of constructing a unified subject. Making use of this theme, other writers have indicated how the discourse of humanism works to the exclusion of women in western culture [Martin, 1988:13]. The contingency of subject identities also moves Foucault away from the conceptualization of power as a purely negative or constraining force. The discourse of sexuality, for instance, not only prohibits but is also a creative force, constructing meanings and identities which allow individuals and groups to act in the world.

Despite the positivity of power incorporated into Foucault's study of the subject, his analysis remains weakened by its inability to account for agency. There is, for one thing, the logical question of the basis on which the self is constituted. As Callinicos puts it, there needs to be some goal or ideal to which the formation of self is directed [1987:89]. Even the most ardent supporters of Foucault recognize that he seems to equivocate on this question [Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982:111]. At times, even the body appears as nothing more than a creation of power, "a surface on which events are inscribed" [LCP:170]. At other moments, however, he seems to recognize some basic drive, such as pleasure, which precedes and even grounds the will to power,

For the life and time of man are not by nature labour, but pleasure, restlessness, merry-making, rest, needs, accidents, desires, violent acts, robberies, etc. [quoted in Harlan, 1987:166]

This inability to elaborate an account of human agency illustrates the extent to which Foucault continues to be trapped by the dilemma of Nietzsche's perspectivism.

Recognizing nothing beyond interpretation "but more interpretation" [NFM:3], is an

attempt to demarcate from essentialist explanations of agency. In the process, however, agency becomes trapped in the web of discourse, cut off from any form of experience outside of discourse.

The criticism of Foucault for "the imposition of a complete silence about emotions" [Barrett, 1991:152] points to the nature of this difficulty. In denying access to an unmediated experience, the categories which are developed as a means of explanation become abstracted. Poster gives an example of this problem in Foucault's discussion of sexuality in ancient Greece. This is an arena of human activity which is infused with emotions yet in his description of the love of Greek boys, Foucault employs the categories of "active" and "passive", as if these could exist in some pure form [Poster, 1986:214]. The passivity of the boys, being proscribed by the discourse within which they operate, leaves no room for their actual physical, emotional, or aesthetic experience.

### Criticism and Critique

The shortcomings in Foucault's analysis of modern society reappear when the method of genealogy is used as a means of social critique even though he is considered by supporters to be the foremost heir of Nietzsche as a "slayer of dragons" with the wisdom and serenity of a Zen master [Sheridan, 1980:222]. Somewhat more modestly, Foucault situates his work in relation to the possibilities created by major shifts in organization and culture perceived as the dying gasps of modernity.

In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.  
[OT:xxiv]

His method has been embraced by a variety of social critics and political activists as a way of giving voice to those who have been subjugated and excluded from the discourse of modernity. Diamond and Quinby, for instance, see the association of Foucault's work

with feminist concerns producing "a mode of empowerment that is at the same time infused with an awareness of the limits to human agency" [1988:xvii].

Serious critics of Foucault concede the originality of many of his insights regarding the hypocrisy and flaws of modern institutions. Concerns remain, however, as to the ability of genealogy to chart an alternative course to the forms of domination attributed to universalized reason. The dispute over the status of his critique revolves around questions of whether, in rejecting universal truths, it provides some other form of validation and whether such a form involves a normative dimension.

These questions are made more difficult because of the tension in Foucault's work and life, expressed by Habermas on first meeting Foucault,

..the almost serene scientific reserve of the scholar striving for objectification on the one hand, and, on the other, the political vitality of the vulnerable, subjectively excitable, morally sensitive intellectual. [1986:103].

While the bracketing of truth claims and normative judgements is crucial to Foucault's method, the entire body of his work is marked by passionate engagement. This tension can be read as inconsistency and contradiction, rendering his work "ultimately incoherent" [Taylor:1986:83] or, it can be understood as an attempt to develop a method of critique which dispenses with the need for normative standards [Fraser, 1989:19].

The tension can also be seen as a concerted effort to resolve some of the problems thrown up by the notions of truth and values generated by Nietzsche's perspective. If truth is "of this world", a product of power or "multiple forms of constraint" [PK:131], its disengagement from relations of domination would seem to be impossible. For instance, Foucault's tendency to equate processes of normalization with means of controlling populations and rendering individuals docile rules out social norms as a means of evaluating competing claims. It is this scepticism towards all forms of truth and values which provokes the charge of incoherence levelled at genealogy.

However, if such scepticism is taken as an ethical stance, in itself, the charge of incoherence carries far less weight [Bernstein, 1992:301]. The questioning of all

standards is posited as a form of freedom which is based on neither the autonomous subject nor the transparent knowledge common to traditional liberal conceptions. These are, in Foucault's view, deduced from "what we are and what it is impossible for us to do and to know" [FR:46]. Freedom should rather be seen as the struggle to transcend these limitations, to entertain the "possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" [ibid.]. Rather than settling for the abstract or future freedom of humanist thought, a permanent critique of what we are can supposedly bring to light the concrete and specific ways in which freedom can be developed.

This sense of freedom is then used by Foucault to validate or ground particular discourses, including his own. Forms of knowledge such as the human sciences, forms of political control such as the prison and forms of moral constraint such as the ethic of sexuality can be criticized for their role in pre-determining the limits of human freedom. On the same grounds, oppositional movements in modern society can be justified as "subjugated knowledges". These are the popular, local knowledges and the excluded knowledges

..that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. [PK:82]

The task of genealogy is to recover these subjugated knowledges in the conditions of their historical struggles and conditions of exclusion. As a form of erudite knowledge without aspirations to scientific status, genealogy joins with subjugated knowledges to develop tactics to oppose "the tyranny of totalizing discourses" [ibid.:83]. This notion of freedom as permanent criticism serves as an ethical stance from which Foucault can evaluate social relations. The presence of this standard of freedom in Foucault's work from beginning to end indicates the charge that Foucault has no standpoint from which to offer a critique falls wide of the mark.

However, the mere existence of a standard does not, in itself, nullify those concerns which inform the criticisms of Foucault's approach. There are a number of



reasons why his notion of freedom is not sufficient to ground a critique of modern society. For one thing, the metaphysical conception of power, derived from Nietzsche, makes the identification of any standard, including freedom, extremely problematic. If all knowledge, including the knowledge of what freedom is, can only be constructed by relations of power, it would seem that any notion of freedom would itself be implicated in domination. Simply transferring freedom to the expression of oppositional knowledges does not dissolve the issue. Since resistance is inherent to power, there is no way it can become anything but the *other* as defined by the dominant discourse [Callinicos, 1989:83].

Foucault does try to resolve this dilemma, in later works, by developing an ethical stance based on the "care of the self",

..an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one's self and to attain a certain mode of being. [FF:2]

The capacity to carry out this exercise without being a slave to others or to one's passions becomes the standard of liberty. However, recasting freedom as the capacity to create one's self does nothing to alleviate the earlier difficulties since freedom, in the Nietzschean framework, is still constrained by its connection to power. Creativity presupposes some type of end state which is being sought but it is not clear how such an end state could be free from the very system of domination which it is trying to overcome. As Berman puts it, "our dreams of freedom only add more links our chain" [1982:35].

In any case, there are no grounds on which this particular yardstick can be privileged over any other. Foucault does indicate that care of the self will be beneficial to others in that tyranny or abuse of power stems from the failure of those in power to control their appetites [FF:8]. However, this argument, which begins to look suspiciously like the supposed beneficence of Nietzsche's *great individual*, has no more persuasive power than the trickle-down claims of neo-conservative economics. More important, it

fails to establish the primacy of freedom over other values. The question so often asked of Foucault, "why fight?" is simply reproduced as "why fight for this particular version of freedom?".

Foucault's abstract idea of freedom is analogous to Nietzsche's *affirmation of life* and is beset with similar difficulties in providing substance to the concept. With freedom being located in care of the self, the possibility arises of an endless number of concrete manifestations of freedom. Since universal normative standards have been ruled out and social norms are seen as constraining, there is no way of evaluating different and even competing versions of what care of the self entails. Foucault refuses Nietzsche's ploy of dogmatically and arbitrarily imposing his own values on to a hypothetical strong individual in order to establish a hierarchy of standards. He is only able to decline this option, however, because the lack of social unity which is a source of despair for Nietzsche is cause for celebration on the part of Foucault. He takes delight in a plurality of freedoms, seeing that "the more open the game, the more attractive and fascinating it is" [FF:20].

While the endorsement of pluralism allows Foucault to avoid the aristocratic solution proposed by Nietzsche, it by no means does away with the general question of domination. Since power, even in the positive or creative sense is the ability to "determine the conduct of others", there will always be some who are dominated. The notion of a purely positive power, in its Nietzschean definition of opposition, is an absurdity. This is borne out by Foucault's discussion of ethics and freedom in a description of the care of the self as it appeared in Greek society:

..this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others. That is why it is important for a free man, who behaves correctly, to know how to govern his wife, his children and his home. [FF:7]

The active, creative subject, in this case, is the same adult aristocratic male whose self-creation is expressed in the sexual domination of young boys. Creativity which Foucault equates with activity and opposes to slavery and passivity [HS III:43], necessarily

implies the domination of some over others. Such a perspective surrenders any vision of society without domination, forced to settle for the minimization of its undesirable effects [FF:18]. However, it is doubtful that even this modest objective is sustainable without some further normative criteria as to which effects are undesirable

Once the inevitability of domination is accepted, the only critical response possible is pluralism, or the continual circulation of power as a means of preventing the abuses of monopoly. This is the ground on which Foucault mounts his critique against the totalizing impulse of modern society. The target of attack becomes not domination as such but total domination in the form of the fixed categories of modernist discourse. The liberating or oppositional forces are the subjugated knowledges whose status is determined not by the substance of their counter views but by the simple fact of being excluded.

Such a blanket opposition to the totality of modernism has the potential to produce political positions that would be perplexing to more traditional forms of critique. There would seem to be no grounds, for instance, on which to support demands for equality. Attempts to eliminate differences of wealth, power and conditions could even be read through Nietzschean spectacles, as instances of the homogenizing drive of modernism. Bernstein makes the converse point, that there are also countless forms of knowledge throughout the world which have been excluded or subjugated for perfectly good reasons [1992:300]. According to Foucault's criteria of subjugation, the claims of "fundamentalists, fanatics and terrorists" would be worthy of support [ibid.]. Without additional normative standards, Foucault's freedom is trapped at the same level of abstraction as Nietzsche's affirmation. Supporters of Foucault tend to evade the issue of substantive criteria, stating that such standards are yet to be worked out [Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982:264].

Actually, there may be no way of moving beyond this abstract notion of freedom since the understanding of total domination on which it depends, is rooted in an abstract

concept of reason. By identifying the totalizing force of modern society with reason in general, Foucault rules out any appeal to truth, either universal or consensual, as a means of providing substance to his critique.

As with Nietzsche, the inability to move beyond the abstract pushes Foucault on to the terrain of the aesthetic. Unlike Nietzsche, however, he extends the possibility of creativity to everyone, asking "couldn't everyone's life be a work of art?" [FR:350]. The answer to this rhetorical question demonstrates the narrowness of Foucault's brand of critique. With domination being situated in a generalized, agentless strategy, or will to truth, there is no way of indicating how the constraints on freedom have different effects on different groups and strata. What appears as a constraint in the light of totalizing reason may, in fact, be the conditions on which the freedom of a particular group to create itself depends. The constraints imposed by the penal system, for instance, provide the security and freedom for others to engage in self creative activities.

Connolly is quite right to stress the importance of Foucault's work in opening up the possibility of "listening to another claim" [1985:368]. However, without a means of determining the differential effects of constraints, the call for everyone to make one's life a work of art takes on a hollow ring. Benhabib's criticism of postmodernism could apply here.

Contemporary philosophy has discovered the cultural world, or the "conversation of mankind," once more only to neglect society. [1986:15]

As Callinicos points out, for the majority of the world's people, living in conditions of poverty and oppression, the transformation of critique into a question of aesthetics or lifestyle seems cynical, to say the least [1989:234].

One group in modern society to whom this form of critique is particularly applicable, though, is that of intellectuals. Foucault pays considerable attention to the role of intellectuals and their relationship to oppositional movements. One effect of the power accorded to scientific discourse in modern society is the right of intellectuals to

speak "in the capacity of master of truth and justice" [PK:126]. In a well-aimed critique of Leninist parties, whose possession of universal truths allow them to assume the position of universal subject, the intellectual,

..is thus taken as the clear, individual figure of a universality whose obscure, collective form is embodied in the proletariat. [ibid.]

Foucault envisages, in the place of the universal intellectual, the specific intellectual who is drawn into the everyday concerns of those excluded by the dominant discourse.

Such a laudable role for intellectuals, though, is hampered by the notion of discourse and the aestheticization of critique in Foucault's scheme. If the modern forms of domination are driven by the discourse of truth, resistance takes on the character of subjugated knowledges or alternative ways of looking at the world. There is little room in this analysis for either non-discursive experience or for resistances which merely demand inclusion in the existing regime of truth. Relegating resistance to the realm of knowledge gives a decided advantage to the intellectual. Foucault's discussion of the role of genealogy in relation to resistance, for instance, reveals a fairly specialized place for intellectuals as the bearers of erudite knowledge as distinct from the popular or local knowledges [PK:83].

At the same time, intellectuals are also uniquely placed to devote the time and attention to an ethical stance which is based on 'care of the self'. Foucault recognizes that a precondition for such an ethic to be realized is a certain degree of separation from the material world.

For centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life, and the great political and social and economic structures, there were analytical relations, and that we couldn't change anything, for instance in our sex life or our family life, without ruining our economy, our democracy, and so on. I think we have to get rid of this idea of analytical or necessary links between ethics and other social or economic or political structures. [FR:350]

As a form of critique, this prescriptive advice seems aimed at the few groups in modern society who have the luxury of creating a lifestyle which is able to divorce ethics from economic and political considerations.

This dissolution of social critique into a question of individual lifestyle is the final step in Foucault's search for an antidote to nihilism. Like the contributions he makes to understanding the modern condition, his efforts to overcome it run up against the limitations imposed by Nietzsche's definition of the problem. Once reason and rationality have been identified as inherently totalitarian, the implications are inescapable. Despite his attempt to provide a precise account of modern institutions, the vision of a totalizing reason leads Foucault into the very type of teleology and essentialism which he tries to overcome. Like all teleologies, the historical picture is textured to produce the desired result. In Foucault's case, the result is a misleading caricature of modern society. While his explanation of the *others* who have been excluded is instructive, the autonomous nature of the will to power prevents an analysis of the actual distribution of power and its differentiated effects. The portrayal of society as thoroughly governed by anonymous strategies of power is not only skewered but leads, ironically to the type of conclusions offered by traditional integrative theorists. There is more than a little similarity between this version of society as totally administered the unchanging and self-regulating totalities of Durkheim or Parsons.

Foucault's efforts to democratize the Nietzschean critique are likewise constrained by the premises contained in the ontology of power. In refusing Nietzsche's dogmatic and arbitrary choice of values, Foucault can only opt for pluralism in the form of endless criticism as an ethical stance. His attempt to ground this type of freedom in subjugated knowledges leads right back to the Nietzschean dilemma of self-referentiality. With knowledge being nothing but the effect of domination, there is no way for any discourse, including Foucault's own, to break free from the power which constitutes it. At this point, without embracing Nietzsche's faith in great individuals, the only solution open to

Foucault is to construct an individual ethic based on the quiet withdrawal from a world which cannot be changed. The irony of such a stance is the implicit hierarchy of such a practice and the tacit acceptance of existing regimes.

## Chapter Four

## ERNESTO LACLAU AND CHANTAL MOUFFE

Postmodernism and Post-Marxism

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe refuse the option, presented in the work of Nietzsche and Foucault, between a hierarchical social order and an individual withdrawal from social life. It is true, as Woodill observes, that the work of Laclau and Mouffe is an important attempt to apply Foucault's notion of discourse to traditional Marxist concerns [1990d:64]. In doing so, these writers propose a Nietzschean solution to a problem they see as inherent in Marxism and which has plagued it since being adopted by the European socialist movement.

In their own view, they are connected to the philosophical tradition which leads from Nietzsche [1990:182] and could include Heidegger, Derrida and, of course, Foucault. This connection manifests itself in a number of ways. Philosophically, they share the ontological premise of an unordered and chaotic external world as well as the epistemological consequence that stability is the product of human concepts. From this, they share with the other thinkers, a method which understands the social world as produced by conceptualization. This is joined with an understanding and critique of modernism's tendency to effect a closure through the totalization of reason. They see the roots of authoritarian politics to lie in the bestowal of scientific status to political discourse [1985:59] and freedom to be gained by liberation from the "dictatorship of the Enlightenment" [Laclau, 1990:4]. Their focus, though, is not so much the decadence of western democracies but, in common with a number of others coming out of the Marxist tradition [Elliott, 1987:279], they are concerned with *essentialism* as it manifests itself in the long march from Marx to the Stalinist Gulag.

Their work is mainly important here for the ways it attempts to overcome some of the problems faced by their predecessors. Laclau and Mouffe make a number of



innovations to the Nietzschean scheme on the level of social analysis in an attempt to make it more coherent and useful. Their development of the Gramscian notion of hegemony, for instance, seems less reliant on a metaphysical will to power as the basis of social relations. Hegemony relies, instead, on the category of discourse inherited from Foucault but modified to suit their purposes.

As critics of modern society, the concerns of Laclau and Mouffe are explicitly those of the Marxist left such as the relation between economics, politics and ideology. Consequently, their engagement with Marxism is much more direct than that of Foucault, for whom Marxism remains an ever present but shadowy backdrop. The changes they introduce do allow for a political conclusion which neither countenances domination nor advocates a self absorbed ethics. The resulting vision of social change, manifested in the new social movements leads them to a reappraisal of the values and goals of the traditional left.

The perspective offered by Laclau and Mouffe is one of the few attempts by postmodernist thinkers to elaborate a comprehensive theoretical framework although they do eschew any claim to truth and maintain their conclusions could be reached through a number of different discourses [1985:2]. At the same time, they do analyze social, political and economic relations in a general and systematic way unlike Nietzsche and Foucault, whose abstractions are brought into their analyses in the form of assumptions. The changes which Laclau and Mouffe introduce to the postmodernist theoretical approach and the political vision which flows from it warrant serious examination.

Laclau and Mouffe aim to rid Marxism of its economic reductionism by substituting Nietzschean indeterminacy for the Hegelian essentialism they see at the root of Marxist determinism. Their central concept of hegemony, they say, has been derived from the increasing incompatibility between two logics present in Marxist analysis. A logic of necessity, predicting the growth of working class unity in the face of heightened capitalist crisis became more difficult for theorists to sustain in an empirical world

governed by a logic of dispersion and fragmentation. In this case, unity becomes a contingent category, dependent on the alignment of current political forces. Marxists such as Luxemburg, Kautsky, Lenin, Bernstein, Labriola, Sorel and Gramsci attempted to close the gap between the theory of necessary unity and an actuality of fragmentation with different explanations of hegemony. In each case, the historical necessity of working class unity gets supplemented with a theory of political will. For example, the Leninist vanguard party serves as a surrogate for the unmaterialized collective will of the proletariat.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, only Gramsci's notion of hegemony was able to break, albeit incompletely, with the logic of a necessarily unified consciousness determined by economic structure. Laclau and Mouffe take the final step in the argument by situating hegemony as a purely contingent category constructed from political consciousness. In this way, hegemony becomes the *collective will* described by Gramsci but freed from the constraints imposed by his insistence on tying the concept to a *fundamental class*.

The basic premise of this logic of contingency, the non-fixity of meaning, comes from the Nietzschean ontology of flux whereby reality can only be fixed by human concepts. Laclau and Mouffe explain the creation of meaning by their interpretation of the Althusserian notion of over-determination as a symbolic category.

..the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order. The symbolic--i.e., overdetermined--character of social relations therefore implies that they lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moments of an immanent law. [Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:98]

Having established the social as a realm of non-fixed meanings or a field of differences, they deny the possibility of any necessary relationship between the differences. The question this raises, as for any theoretical model based on the differences of language, is how and at what point are these differences organized into a system [Frank, 1989:72].

For Laclau and Mouffe, the coherence or structured totality of any social formation is the

result of articulation--a relation amongst elements which has the effect of modifying each element [1985:105]. The resulting unity is an unstable, tentative unity of action and meaning called discourse. The unity of a discourse is not founded on any single principle but is governed through what they call the regularity of dispersion. Such regularity is not given but is contingent upon particular conditions under which an ensemble of differences or social positions may be signified as a totality [ibid.:106].

The logic of contingency allows Laclau and Mouffe to postulate the "impossibility of society". Society can never be anything more than a contingency made possible through the articulation of difference within and between discursive formations [ibid.:111]. This effort at closure can never be complete but does provide a limit to the logic of contingency so that social formations are never random or arbitrary [Laclau,1983:24]. Hegemony, then, is the term these theorists use to describe the processes by which discursive formations attempt to construct a stable totality. It is in the tension created between the non-fixity of identities and social formations and the ongoing efforts to create stability that Laclau and Mouffe try to provide a basis for an emancipatory political strategy.

This brief summary of Laclau and Mouffe's social ontology situates them within the Nietzschean legacy. At this level, their perspective is open to the problems encountered by the earlier thinkers. They cannot give any grounds for the premise of flux other than simply asserting its ontological priority. And, to argue along with Nietzsche and Foucault, that regularity is nothing more than a conceptual imposition runs the same risks of tautology and subjectivism. What makes their work significant is how they take a different direction than the earlier thinkers in the face of these risks.

### Hegemony and Social Theory

In order to support their thesis that hegemony is a struggle to constitute a collective will, Laclau and Mouffe elaborate the theoretical dimensions of the

Nietzschean framework in a number of innovative directions. One of their more important initiatives is an attempt to overcome the problem of the relationship between discursive and non-discursive forces. Their answer to this question which causes Foucault so much difficulty lies in making discourse primarily a linguistic category. Making use of Foucault's concept in a general sense, they reject the distinction he makes between discursive and non-discursive [1985:107]. For them, there is no need to determine and non-discursive origins since "all *experience* depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility" [ibid.:115]. Woodwiss sees this as a failure to distinguish, in Foucault's work, between discourse and discursive formation [1990:66]. Whatever the case, according to Laclau and Mouffe, the non-discursive--subject positions or structure--can only provide limits to the potential randomness of statements.

Another notable departure from the perspective of Nietzsche and Foucault is the apparent abandonment of will to power as an ontological principle, rejecting "any general principle or substratum of an anthropological nature" [1985:152]. This absolves Laclau and Mouffe of having to justify it as a premise and appears to move away from the implicit determinism which characterizes the analyses of the earlier thinkers. While subscribing to Foucault's insight that power is dispersed throughout society, they hope to treat its manifestations as empirical entities or as a facet of discourse rather than looking for origins.

These changes to the general Nietzschean framework rely on a number of theoretical categories and the particular use made of them. First, in explaining the nature of discourse, Laclau and Mouffe develop the notion of overdetermination in a way which does away with a logic of determination, even 'in the last instance'. This use of the concept leads, in turn, to a reconceptualization of subjects and subject formation. Since subjects are freed from any necessary link between position and consciousness, agency and identity are not driven by given interests. Finally, they introduce the notion of

articulation to explain how ideological formations can be constructed from diverse elements into a coherent, albeit contingent totality. These moves open up a number of possibilities for analysis but, at the same time, raise new questions and problems. The extent to which they are successful can only be evaluated by examining the substance of their revisions.

The crucial point for Laclau and Mouffe, in arguing for their version of hegemony is to separate the social and political spheres from any determination by the economy. This separation is not simply a theoretical preference but is a necessary condition of a logic of contingency. According to them, theories of economic determinism depend upon a logic of necessity which ties hegemonic practices to the rational substratum of the economy [1985:76]. To overcome this doctrine, they identify the basic tenets which need to be refuted--the neutrality of productive forces, homogenization of the working class, and the fundamental interests of the working class in socialism [ibid.:77]. The negation of these three propositions is crucial to their overall project of freeing the social from its dependency on an economic base and to this end, they bring in the concepts of discourse, interests and articulation.

The first step in their argument is to show that relations of domination and subordination are actually embedded in the labour process [Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:77; Mouffe, 1983:13]. According to their reading of Marxism, the expansion of productive forces plays the key role in the inevitable evolution towards socialism. This, they say, requires that the economy be "understood as a mechanism of society acting upon objective phenomena independently of human action" [1985:78]. To sustain this independence, Marx and subsequent theorists are supposed to have resorted to a fiction to ensure the primacy of economic factors. This fiction is the conceptualization of labour as a commodity [ibid.:78]. However, Laclau and Mouffe point out, labour is not a commodity like any other. Having purchased labour power, the capitalist needs to find

the means to extract it from the living, empirical worker since the use value of labour does not come automatically from its mere possession. Drawing on the debates initiated by Braverman's study of the labour process [1974], they conclude that the development of capitalism and the capitalist labour process cannot be analyzed as "the effect solely of the laws of competition and the exigencies of accumulation" [1985:79]. The economic has no independent logic but is part of the overall social system of domination and subordination.

If this was the extent of their argument, it would not be particularly contentious. As Wood points out, the discovery that production is a social relationship laden with power would hardly come as a shock to Marx [1986:85]. The portrayal of the economic as a natural phenomenon is the very starting point at which Marx chooses to launch his critique of bourgeois political economy. What is at stake in this debate with Marxism is not that production is a social process. Keeping in mind that for Laclau and Mouffe, the social can only be constituted symbolically, the next steps in their argument make clear that the issue revolves around how politics should be conceptualized.

These theorists need to show that the lesson to be drawn from the inherently political nature of production is different from the Marxist conclusion that the political struggles within modern social formations are rooted in the class structure of capitalism. To do this, they challenge the conception of social classes as unitary social agents. In particular, they insist that a more complex organization of society and production and a numerical decline in the working class has made any discussion of a single working class not tenable.

Apart from a generalized ontology of difference, this argument relies on two empirical generalizations. First, Laclau and Mouffe note on different occasions, the working class has not undergone the uniform pauperization which Marx apparently predicts. The second generalization is that wage earners have not become a homogenous group of unskilled manual workers as Marx supposedly anticipates [Laclau and

Mouffe,1985:81; Mouffe,1983:18]. Other writers read Marx quite differently, insisting on his awareness of the increasing complexity of the division of labour and the tendency of market relations to penetrate more and more aspects of society [Meiksens and Wood,1985:151]. Regardless, Laclau and Mouffe offer their generalizations as evidence for a logic of contingency based on this increasing differentiation.

The crux of their argument, however, does not lie in the nature of the empirical statements. Rather, the main point is the theoretical conclusion that the agency granted to a unified working class is a fiction created by Marxists to justify the inevitability of socialism by way of an ethical and universal subject. In order to demonstrate this point, it is necessary for Laclau and Mouffe to carry out two operations in the transformation of empirical evidence into theoretical propositions. First, they define the contours of a fragmented and differentiated class in terms of wage levels. These differences, provided their description of relative income distribution is accurate, is seen as more significant than any feature the class might have in common.

What allows them to set aside any question of commonality is their second, related operation. To prove that differences within the working class are, in fact, its main characteristic, they question the entire notion of *objective interests*,

.. a concept which lacks any theoretical basis whatsoever, and involves little more than an arbitrary attribution of interests by the analyst to a certain category of social agents. [1985:83]

Laclau and Mouffe do not deny that interests exist; only that they cannot be seen as intrinsic to social positions. Rather, they are constructed politically.

How can it be maintained that economic agents have interests defined at the economic level which would be represented 'a posteriori' at the political and ideological levels? In fact, since it is in ideology and through politics that interests are defined, that amounts to saying that interests can exist prior to the discourse in which they are formulated and articulated.  
[Mouffe,1983:21]

Whereas Nietzsche makes use of psychological interests and Foucault maintains a link between the discursive and non-discursive through power interests, Laclau and Mouffe

see intersects as purely a question of discourse. When they say that interests are social, they mean that interests do not exist independently of the consciousness of the agents who are their bearers [Laclau and Mouffe,1987:96]. In more concrete terms, the worker-capitalist relation is not an antagonistic one unless the worker actively resists the extraction of his or her surplus value [ibid.:103]. Or, the concrete practices of women's subordination in society is produced by an imaginary signification of a feminine gender with specific characteristics [1985:154]. Without the appropriate discourse of liberty or equality, these are simply examples of differentiated social relations [ibid.:153].

Having established the autonomy and even primacy of a political space and having dissolved the concept of class by transforming interests into conscious demands, the stage is set for Laclau and Mouffe to develop a view of hegemony which makes any connection between the economy and the realm of politics a matter of contingency. The central thesis of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy is that the notion of hegemony, as put forward by Gramsci, can be radicalized to produce a better understanding of how power operates and is distributed throughout society. Gramsci is seen as taking the most decisive step to resolve the tension between the logics of necessity and contingency within the tradition of Marxist thought. His contribution, according to Laclau and Mouffe, is the removal of hegemony from the confines of an analysis constructed around the representation of interests. He manages this by the definition of hegemony as intellectual and moral leadership.

Intellectual and moral leadership constitutes, according to Gramsci, a higher synthesis, a 'collective will' which, through ideology, becomes the organic cement unifying a 'historic bloc'. [Laclau and Mouffe,1985:67]

The only thing preventing Gramsci from reaching the conclusion of total contingency is his essentialist insistence on tying the ideologies of hegemonic blocs to fundamental classes in society.

The nature of Gramsci's work is such that a definitive interpretation is not possible. Some commentators place him squarely within the Leninist camp [Bucci-



Gluckman,1980] while others see him as providing a revolutionary alternative to Leninism within the general current of Marxism [Femia,1981]. For their part, Laclau and Mouffe take a central concern of Gramsci's--the apparent willingness of the subordinate classes in capitalist society to wear their chains--to construct a general theory of politics as the struggle for hegemony between different collective wills. With no general interests to tie various subjects together, a collective will can only be constructed by the articulation of diverse elements into a common discourse.

This conception of politics is the response of Laclau and Mouffe to the problems generated by the ontology of difference. If social formations are nothing but the infinite play of differences with no inherent logic, unity can only be a product of consciousness. To understand the dominance of a particular ideology without resorting to an underlying principle such as power, it is necessary to study the ways in which various discourses relate to each other and become articulated into a collective will.

The effort of Laclau and Mouffe to liberate social theory from all forms of determinism offers a number of possible advantages. In an otherwise critical review of their main work, Landry and MacLean recognize that Laclau and Mouffe contribute to the break up of the master narratives of capitalism [1991:59]. Eliminating the distinction between discursive and non-discursive reduces reliance on the type of tautological explanation found in functionalist theories. Social formations do not need to be presented as monolithic wholes with each part explainable on the basis of its role in reproducing the whole. Similarly, the dissociation of subjects from a direct relation with subject positions offers the possibility of a more thorough investigation of concrete situations. Kumar, for instance, finds that in questioning the origin of antagonisms at the level of the economy or civil society, it is possible to come to a better understanding of the relations between state and society [1990:151]. The concept of articulation broadens the discussion of ideology in a way which is not permitted by reductionist schemes.

There is no need to resort, for example, to concepts such as *false consciousness* to explain incongruities between social position and political stance.

Along with the theoretical openings provided by Laclau and Mouffe, however, come a number of problems and difficulties. In order to identify these, it will be useful to retrace some of the steps in the argument since the evidence and the logic employed are not as straightforward as Laclau and Mouffe seem to imply. Before considering the substance of their analysis, though, the claim to have overcome economic determinism needs to be examined. There is some ambiguity on this question throughout their work. On the one hand, their abstract arguments all lead toward a conclusion of indeterminacy. On the other hand, their concrete analyses, including an explanation of their own discourse is predicated on the development of capitalism. Grasping the purely historical and contingent nature of all being,

...is not a fortuitous discovery which could have been made at any point in time; it is rather, deeply rooted in the history of modern capitalism. [Laclau and Mouffe, 1987:97]

In one article, Laclau notes that capitalism only exists and expands by constantly revolutionizing the means of production which, in turn, dissolves the traditional social relations. This destabilizing feature of capitalism allows current theorists to see, more clearly than Marx could, a logic of contingency and difference [Laclau, 1987:32].

The arguments advanced about the impossibility of a unified subject are likewise dependent on the fragmentary impulse of capitalism. Geras notes this point in his observation that when explanations are called for, Laclau and Mouffe revert to Marxist concepts such as commodification, labour process, capitalist periphery, and so on [1987:74]. And, as will be discussed later, the interpretation of socialism as radical democracy is grounded in a logic of capitalist development.

As well as implying some type of teleological notion of progress, this way of proceeding raises an important question in regard to the objective of overcoming determinism. Traditional theories opposing structure and agency assume a degree of

fixity in social structures which define the actions of social agents. This fixity is the point at which Laclau and Mouffe try to refute deterministic theory. In common with the tendency Frank calls "neo- structuralism", they provide freedom for social agents by seeing structures as being open-ended [1989:94]. Philosophically, this raises the issue of whether multiplying the forces acting on an agent constitutes less dependence on social structure. A plausible argument could be made that the agents and identities are simply more complex and even fractured. What needs to be shown theoretically is that the openness of structures actually provides more choices.

Apart from the general issue of determinism, there are a number of difficulties with the direction of the argument. To begin, the empirical generalizations which ground their conclusions cannot be taken as given. Laclau and Mouffe do not provide a great deal of evidence to support their generalizations and they are fairly contentious. The issue of wage levels is a complex one, requiring a careful analysis of various structures and historical trends. Therborn, for one, maintains that the general tendency of wages with the capitalist world has been one of decline [1984:30]. Studies of particular capitalist countries, such as Canada, tend to support this view of a downward trend in total wealth and income levels for all but the higher strata [Gilbert,1988:43].

The fragmentation of the working class is less open to dispute but no less complex. Although not made use of by Laclau and Mouffe, there is vast literature on the division of the working class along lines of gender, ethnicity, sector, regional and so on. O'Connor, for instance, points to the structural segmentation of the working class in the United States [1973:13] although the effect on the labour process in relation to this fragmentation is less clear. There has been an ongoing debate around this question since Braverman advanced his thesis that the capitalist labour process involves an ongoing transfer of skill from workers to managers. This debate has intensified and become even more complex with the introduction of computer technology to more and more aspects of economic activity. The object here, though, is not to present an alternative empirical case

but to simply indicate that the generalizations presented by Laclau and Mouffe are not so conclusive that a mere assertion of the points is sufficient.

More significant than the merits of the empirical argument, are the theoretical conclusions drawn from their analysis of the fragmented character of the working class. In order to reach these conclusions Laclau and Mouffe end up relying on a number of questionable assumptions and dogmatic assertions. To begin, the way they dissolve the distinction between the discursive and non-discursive reveals a leap in logic which forces them to fall back on the same unfounded premises which underlie the analyses of Nietzsche and Foucault. They maintain that the relations of domination found in the capitalist labour process prove the absence of an autonomous rationality of the economic in that changes such as deskilling and specialization are not driven entirely by norms of efficiency [1985:79]. Studies of particular industries, such as Noble's investigation of the machine tool industry in the United States [1986] do show quite clearly that norm of efficiency are not paramount. However, this only shows the absence of a single logic if rationality is reduced to efficiency of production. It is entirely possible that another logic, profitability perhaps, is at work. In order to compensate for this logical gap in their analysis, Laclau and Mouffe subtly reintroduce the Nietzschean will to power. The primacy of a political logic in the labour process is explained on the basis of capital's "need" to exercise its domination over the labour force [1985:79]. Since there is no indication of how this need originates or is constructed, it appears to be constitutive of social relations.

The next step in their argument is also problematic in some respects. The view that there are no objective interests which could unite the working class relies on a very particular understanding of interests and, at the same time, raises the possibility of a contradiction with the terms of their own analysis. Fragmentation of the working class according to wage levels, skill and so on, is offered as evidence that economic class does not provide a singularity of differentiated positions on which a common interest could be

constructed. However, such a view overlooks the one feature of wage labour which displays a certain uniformity. No matter what the level of wages, capitalism is organized in such a way that the workers receive less than the full value of their labour. For purposes of analysis, it may be useful to move away from the normative connotations associated with the term *exploitation*. But, in a discussion of the empirical features of capitalist society, the persistence of what Woodwill calls the "intrinsic inequality of the wage bargain" [1990:18] must be taken into account. Further, the possibility of this particular feature becoming a unitary interest cannot be ruled out *a priori*. Given the existence of a common feature, the prioritization of fragmentation can only be affirmed by a dogmatic assertion of the ontology of difference.

The assertion of difference is more than a dispute concerning which characterization of capitalism is more accurate. As Laclau and Mouffe apply the concept to interests, it forms an integral part of their explanation of subject identities and human agency. To demonstrate this, they modify the Althusserian notion of overdetermination. For Althusser, human beings are not the constitutive subject of history but are constituted in history [1970:119]. The empirical individual is *interpellated* as a subject through ideology, an imaginary relationship with his or her conditions of existence

Laclau and Mouffe agree that ideology is the terrain on which social relations are constituted [1985:67] and that subjects are not given but are overdetermined by a multiplicity of factors. However, they modify Althusser's account in two important respects in order to arrive at their conception of hegemony. First, they interpret overdetermination to be a "plurality of meanings" [ibid.:97] whereas others, such as Resnick and Wolff, see it more in terms of the multi-faceted and mutually conditioned nature of all types of social relations [1991:14]. The particular bent given to the concept by Laclau and Mouffe leads them to conclude that the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order [1985:98; 121]. This makes room for the second innovation, freeing identity and interests from the constraints of social structure. If the structure itself is a symbolic order

constructed out of differences, it can never be successful in achieving totality. Identities and interests can therefore never be determined by social structure, in the last instance or otherwise and are not discovered as pre-existing entities but are constructed through discourse.

Structures do produce relations of subordination but these are merely sites of differentiation until they are articulated to a discourse of legitimacy [ibid.:154]. At this point, the relations may become antagonistic, a feature which serves Laclau and Mouffe as a motivational factor of human agency.

..to construct an `interest' is a slow historical process, which takes place through complex ideological, discursive and institutional practices. Only to the extent that social agents participate in collective totalities are their identities constructed in a way that makes them capable of calculating and negotiating with other forces. [1987:92]

The radical indeterminacy of these identities opens up, for Laclau and Mouffe, the possibility of constructing alternative discourses and struggling for a new hegemony.

The refusal to assign predetermined interests to social agents, as Laclau and Mouffe claim, opens the whole question of subject formation and interests to concrete investigation. At the same, this way of combatting reductionism raises a number of other issues. The idea of interests as the basis of human action, for example, cannot be simply assumed. Freeing the concept from a mythical objectivity, supposedly present in Marxism, is central to the argument of Laclau and Mouffe yet, as Heller points out, the category of *objective interest* is nowhere to be found in the major texts of Marx [1976:60]. This reflects a suspicion, on the part of Marx, toward the very notion of interests, seeing them as an historically specific explanation of motivation [ibid.:64]. In contrast, Heller shows how the category of needs and the study of how these are constructed is a more fruitful approach.

Even without claiming universality, however, the notion of interests as put forward by Laclau and Mouffe reveals some weaknesses. In stressing the symbolic aspect of subject formation, there is a tendency to make the construction of interests

dependent on language. The complex issue of the linguistic turn in the social sciences cannot be explored at this point but it should be noted that their use of a linguistic model carries with it a very definite and by no means incontrovertible theory of language. Rejecting the idea of language as simple representation does not necessarily lead to its conceptualization as an infinite play of differences in which issues of truth or validity are purely contextual. Norris notes there is a significant effort by philosophers such as Putnam and Davidson to see the play of language being limited by the referent [1990:187].

The point to be made here, though, is not to enter the debates around the nature of language but to demonstrate the ways in which it affects the analysis of Laclau and Mouffe. For one thing, their version of interests gives rise to an overly cognitive theory of agency. There are at least two types of non-cognitive factors which need to be considered if agency is to be connected to interests. First, there is a range of absolute conditions, such as hunger or pain, which limit the relational character of interests. Given the effects of war, mass starvation and ecological disaster faced by many people of the world, it seems difficult to rule out the impact of absolute conditions in mobilizing people to act. In his later works, Foucault explores the positive effects of such non-cognitive interests in his studies of sexuality and desire.

The emphasis on consciousness in regard to interests also leads Laclau and Mouffe to overlook the category of needs constructed *behind the backs* of social actors. Not the least significant of these are the needs being continually created and recreated through the processes of production, as Marx points out in The German Ideology [1964:48]. Laclau and Mouffe are quite right to insist on the social character of interests but in limiting them to products of consciousness, they oversimplify how some types of needs are produced and how their satisfaction relates to human agency.

This portrayal of interests has an effect on the notion of ideology around which Laclau and Mouffe develop their conception of hegemony. Discourse is presented as a

structured totality produced by the relationship between differentiated positions [1985:105]. Since no identity is fixed, it can only be formed by articulation, or mutually modifying practices. Since this view of discourse draws on Foucault's linguistic phase, with the unity of the discourse being located in its regularity of dispersion [ibid.:106], it is open to the same problem of self-referentiality. The non-fixity of meaning within a discourse, for instance, is prevented from being random and arbitrary by "nodal points" which cannot be determined in advance but are the result of overdetermination [Laclau,1990:91]. Yet, as pointed out earlier, for Laclau and Mouffe, overdetermination is a symbolic category. Although insisting repeatedly on the materiality of discourse, its actual portrayal is similar to Foucault's archeology in that the rules of discourse seem to govern themselves.

The practical effect of this circularity is that Laclau and Mouffe have no way of explaining how discourses, particularly oppositional ones, come into existence. Rejecting any distinction between discursive and non-discursive forces, they can only see the construction of new interests as mutations to existing discursive formations. For instance, the significance of the French Revolution for all future political struggles is presented as a "decisive mutation in the political imaginary of western societies" [1985:155]. They do not offer any reasons why the ideology of the *ancien regime* became inadequate nor how the discourse of democracy arose at this particular time and place. As in Foucault's archeology, the new discourse simply "imposes itself" [ibid.]. In an effort to overcome reductionism, they actually substitute one simplified version for another. Intellectual historians point to a variety of discourses within different constituencies prior to actual events of the French Revolution [Baker,1982:218]. The question of why these arose at this point in history and why the discourse of democracy became dominant is outside the framework of the scheme proposed by Laclau and Mouffe. While Nietzsche can fall back on the genius of individuals and Foucault can



use, however vaguely, some notion of social, economic and political forces, Laclau and Mouffe must be content to note that certain discourses exist.

This explains the way ideology becomes, as Larrain puts it, a neutral category [1991:13], in that it is not seen as a distortion of reality but a means of relating to the world. Without recourse to any type of underlying reality, the ideas can only be analyzed on their own merit. In this respect, Jay's observation on the tendency of postmodernist analysis to remain at a superficial level of surfaces, planes, frontiers and so on is applicable to Laclau and Mouffe.

Ruling out any appeal to underlying forces has the potential of de-ontologizing the Nietzschean conception of power as the driving force of social organization. This is true, however, only as long as the analysis remains at the level of pure description. When pressed for explanation, Laclau and Mouffe do resort to an underlying principle "of an anthropological nature" referring to the need of capital to dominate, mentioned earlier or that where there is power, there is resistance [1985:152]. What they do not do, in contrast to Foucault and Nietzsche, is to specify the manifestations of this underlying power. The effect of this is to transform the will to power into *will*.

Such a move does open up a field of analysis restricted by ontological fiat in the work of the earlier thinkers. The ways the dominant discourse actually works can be investigated without subordinating the analysis to over-arching principles of decay or totalization. On the other hand, making power purely a function of discourse tends to blind their analysis to the concrete practices of power in modern society. Laclau and Mouffe rightly reject notions of ideology and power which can be reduced to a single determinant but, as Thompson points out, any notion of ideology should be capable of identifying its role in the construction and maintenance of relations of domination [1984:94]. The distinction between relations of subordination and relations of oppression illustrate the problem. The category of discourse can help in understanding how the former turns into the latter but is not very useful in explaining how the differentiated

position originates. Without an explanation of how power is distributed and reinforced, its confinement to discourse makes it difficult to see any structural components at all. In this case, power is reduced to a form of persuasion based on argumentation or rhetoric.

### Post-Marxism, Critique and Socialism

The weaknesses and contradictions of the theoretical framework advanced by Laclau and Mouffe indicate they have not completely resolved the problems generated by the Nietzschean perspective. However, their main goal is not a general social theory but the elaboration of an emancipatory strategy of political action. In this respect, their modified notion of discourse and the de-ontologizing of power has a distinct advantage over the prescriptions offered by Nietzsche and Foucault. Laclau and Mouffe are not forced to choose between hierarchy and chaos nor are they faced with the inevitability of a totalizing and self-driven power from which the only escape is self-cultivation. The politics they offer is a positive vision in which social change is possible and a commitment to democratic and egalitarian values is not ruled out.

The argument for a new hegemony revolves around their interpretation of the 'unfinished democratic revolution' in western society. According to this view, the democratic principles of liberty and equality began to impose themselves as the "new matrix of the social imaginary" from the time of the French Revolution [1985:155]. The uniqueness of this mutation is that it is the first regime in human history to claim legitimacy on no other grounds than that of the people. From this point, the democratic discourse constitutes a profoundly subversive force in relation to all authoritarian powers. Struggles against domination can henceforth be justified by reference to the liberty and equality of all.

As well as its significance as a system of values or, as Laclau and Mouffe put it, "the common sense of the western world", the democratic revolution has accelerated the processes of fragmentation. Because the worker also becomes a citizen, new sites of

struggle make their presence felt throughout society and not just where capital and labour confront one another at the point of production [1985:160].

What Laclau and Mouffe conclude from this account of the French Revolution is that democracy cannot be linked to a struggle between classes or to particular stages in history. In contrast to Marxist interpretations, the revolution is not seen as a contest between the interests of a rising bourgeoisie, a declining aristocracy and a nascent proletariat but as a confrontation between the *ancien regime* and the people [ibid.:151]. The revolution marks the creation of a new political space, ending any necessary relation between the economic and the political. From this point in history, politics can only be a question of a hegemonic struggle between discourses. In this case, politics becomes a question of which values are going to provide the basis of the hegemony with Laclau and Mouffe making a passionate case for the construction of a new hegemony based on freedom and equality.

This new collective will, in its drive to become hegemonic, cannot determine in advance the forms of struggle or types of demands. There is not even a single logic of democracy with which different political conflicts can be gauged [Mouffe,1988:46]. With the exception of a few references to participation and localized decision making, Laclau and Mouffe restrict their comments to a description of a new political attitude. This attitude is likened to *verisimilitude* in that politics should resemble an open-ended argument. The traditional lines between capitalist and worker or rulers and ruled will no longer be of primary significance since the real division is between those who respect the strategy of argumentation and those who would impose their demands in an authoritarian fashion.

From their analysis of the social, Laclau and Mouffe conclude that this new type of politics is possible in the (post)modern era. The development of capitalism, particularly since the Second World War, has altered the meaning of politics:

..there is practically no domain of individual or collective life which escapes capitalist relations. [1985:161]

Unlike the earlier school of Critical Marxists, Laclau and Mouffe do not see in this phenomena an aspect of more sophisticated and intensive control over the masses. Rather, they view it as creating a "greater indeterminacy of our position" in which "we are more free to decide our movements and identity" [Laclau,1990:68]. A multiplicity of sites of potential conflict is opened which provides the terrain for an array of new social movements. These are the grounds on which a revitalized left can hopefully play a crucial role in constructing and struggling for a new hegemony.

This portrayal of a new type of politics, despite its optimistic appeal, merits a closer examination. For one thing, seeing democracy as a system of values can be quite misleading. While it is consistent with the tradition of Nietzsche and Foucault to see social structure as a function of values, there is the risk of seeing these values as something separate from the social context in which they arise. Held's investigation of democracy from the time of ancient Greece [1987] points to a wide range of meanings and Wolfe's study of modern democratic forms [1977] shows the impossibility of abstracting a single set of values. What these studies do show it that democracy is a set of social practices which generally represents the attempt of less privileged groups in society to increase their share of power and goods. Positing these struggles as a clash of values begs the question of what they are actually about and who benefits from them.

The concentration on the values of democracy steers the discussion away from the historical link between the contemporary form of liberal democracy and the development of capitalism. The empirical existence of non-democratic capitalist regimes and the variety of democratic forms rules out any type of simple reductionist argument but the connection between the two cannot be ignored completely. In this regard, the Marxist argument that the freedoms associated with western democracy are rooted in the freedom of capital and labour to meet unhindered in the marketplace must, at least be considered.

Laclau and Mouffe are able to isolate the values of democracy because, despite the statement regarding commodification, they tend to restrict their view of capitalism to the narrow confines of production. Workers, for example, participate in many struggles outside the struggles that are waged at the level of the factory floor [Laclau,1990:163]. While the observation on the diversity of struggles is indisputable, formulating the issue in this way loses sight of the way these different struggles may be connected. Seeing capitalism as a social system rather than simply a system of production could reveal related *logics* of private property and profitability which tie together many types of struggles. Even if the multiplicity of conflicts is granted, there is still a need to explain, as Laffey puts it, the fact that particular groups and individuals benefit from the continuation of capitalism as a social system [1987:93].

Narrowing the economic sphere to the realm of production in this way has an important effect on the way ideology is perceived. Denying any structural unity underlying the surfaces of discourse leaves no choice but to accept the rhetorical claims of liberal democracy as reality. This makes it possible to present western capitalist societies as sites of growing equality and increasing liberty. It is even possible to describe, in all seriousness, life in these societies as "the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure" [Mouffe,1988:33]. Current studies tend to show, however, that for the lives of increasing numbers of people who are unemployed, homeless, ghettoized and discriminated against, it is theatre of a particularly horrific nature. Without recognizing connections between different spheres of activity, there is no way of explaining how different social actors are cast in particular roles.

Not only does this approach reduce ideology to rhetoric but in the process, the concept loses much of its critical force. The comments of Larrain and Thompson, noted earlier, point to the need for a perspective that can show how a discourse serves to distort the reality of social conditions and act to legitimate relations of domination. Without

denying the real advantages of liberal democracy, it should also be possible to reveal its limitations in terms of its relation to the economic sphere.

Such a perspective could expose the ways in which the espoused values and structures of democracy can be used to obscure a reality which is quite the opposite. Looking at the debates surrounding the formation of the American Constitution, for instance, shows that many of the forms of representative democracy were consciously adopted as a means of excluding the masses from decision making processes [Willoughby,1936:99]. The apparent independence of the political realm in liberal democracies can be seen as part of an ideology, in the critical sense, which legitimates and legalizes a social system which is grounded in the inequality and exclusiveness of private property.

The idea that certain values of liberal democracy can be isolated and preserved is not new. A whole school of thought has developed around the *retrievalist* proposals of C.B. Macpherson [1973]. But, even the theorists who share this vision of extending the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries concede that the economic constraints of capitalism present an obstacle to their completion [Hunt,1981:17; Cunningham,1987:124].

The precise nature of the connections between the economic and political spheres are open to analysis and debate. Laclau and Mouffe are quite right to insist that such relationships cannot be determined in advance. However, the problems of analysis are not overcome by simply generalizing that the struggle for ideological hegemony is an over-arching feature of all social relations which establishes the political as an autonomous realm of social practices. Doing so makes it difficult to explain, for example, the role of the state and its increasing mediation of all aspects of modern life. Laclau and Mouffe begin such an analysis in the final chapter of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy but the main points of their investigation end up being fairly consistent with the development of Marxism in recent years.

One problem which does emerge is the designation of *the people* as agents of their political project. In an earlier work, Laclau makes a good case that the universal category of the working class is not sufficient to understand either the complexities of modern capitalism not the diversity of socialist objectives [1977]. However, the logic of the later analysis makes it hard to determine the precise location of any social group, including the people. Since capitalism is seen as a purely economic system exterior to politics, and power is dispersed throughout society, the people could be anyone who, as Wood puts it, "come within hailing distance of the right discourse" [1986:154].

Unlike the retrievalist theorists, Laclau and Mouffe are not able to account for the persistence of undemocratic structures and practices. On the one hand, their particular notion of interests makes it difficult to see which individuals or groups would be opposed to the values of freedom and equality. On the other hand, the ontology of difference implies a level of antagonism which would seem to undermine the construction of the people as a unified social agent [Benhabib,1984:114].

Laclau and Mouffe do try to ground the concept of the people in the new social movements which have been produced by capitalist fragmentation, political bureaucratization and cultural diffusion. The problem they face in doing this, though, is akin to Foucault's difficulty in regard to subjugated knowledges. The relativist stance of the overall approach stands in the way of distinguishing between various social groups. Laclau and Mouffe do draw a line of demarcation on the basis of allegiance to democratic principles but this exposes them to the dilemma of perspectivism inherent in the Nietzschean approach. Interpretations of what counts as democracy could be as infinite as those which are life-affirming. Without some type of standard, ontological or normative, the preference for freedom and equality can only be dogmatically asserted.

Even if the validity of these laudable values is granted, however, the viability of the democratic project is not secured. The subjectification of interests means the only way of determining which groups might be articulated in a hegemonic bloc is the terms

of their own discourse. According to Laclau and Mouffe's own analysis, the discourse of democracy has become so prevalent in western culture that it permeates almost every political formation. Even the proponents of neo-classical economic policy frame their discourse in terms of democracy whereby freedom is the freedom of the market and equality is the equality of the level playing field.

Laclau and Mouffe make a serious effort to articulate the principles of equality and liberty to the Nietzschean strand of postmodernist thought. Their perspective provides them with a forceful critique of traditional social theory, particularly Marxism. Although they fail to prove that reductionism is inherent in Marxism, the tenor of the response to their work by more traditional Marxists such as Geras [1987] and Wood [1986], indicates the relationship of economic class to other social divisions in the formation of subject identities is far from resolved.

However, the ongoing problems of postmodernist thought continue to make themselves felt in the work of Laclau and Mouffe. While they do not impose a social order in the fashion of Nietzsche nor resign themselves to individual withdrawal in the manner of Foucault, their alternative of absorbing everything into discourse does not really resolve the issues. The only justification they can provide for their preference of liberty and equality is the significance of these values in the tradition of western culture. But, this is no solution at all. As pointed out above, since the logic of contingency forbids any fixity of meaning, there is no way of deciding which parts of the tradition are worth preserving. And, like any analysis which looks to tradition as a means of validating a social order, it has the potential of being translated into a conservative political agenda. Further, by attempting to ground the values of liberty and equality in the western tradition, their perspective takes on a decidedly Eurocentric stance [Landry and MacLean, 1991:43]. Laclau and Mouffe do not really consider the implications of such a stance for struggles which are not part of this tradition.



They also make a valiant attempt to eliminate the necessity of a hierarchal order. By transforming power into a social force rather than an ontological premise, their programme opens the door to a socially constructed equality without signalling a nihilistic descent into mediocrity nor a totally administered society. The cost of the move, though, is an analytical blindness to actually existing relations of power. Inequality may not be inevitable, according to Laclau and Mouffe, but this still leaves them with a need to explain the existence of inequalities including those that may be shrouded in a discourse of democracy.

Ironically, their reduction of politics to a form of argumentation undermines their effort to construct a non-hierarchical strategy. By turning politics into rhetoric, Laclau and Mouffe fail to recognize the material forces in the production of ideology. As Larrain notes, ideology is not an arbitrary invention of consciousness [1991:11]. The ownership of and political access to skills, materials and resources has a significant impact on the capacity to produce and circulate the elements of a discourse. How these are allocated in relation to the structural differentiation of a social formation cannot be ignored.

The production of ideology in the framework of Laclau and Mouffe also provides a privileged space for intellectuals. It is true, that in contrast to the Leninist leadership, rhetoricians do not speak in a single voice for a universal subject. But, the notion of radical intellectuals articulating with other groups in the construction of new identities [1985:85; Laclau, 1990:195] relies on the differentiation of intellectual skills. Laclau and Mouffe do not seem to see that these skills, like any other resource, are distributed unevenly and that this inequality is related to other aspects of the social structure.

Finally, some mention must be made of the consequence of Laclau's and Mouffe's strategic proposals in relation to more traditional demands of the left, for they do much more than present an innovative path towards the same destination. Their strategy involves a reconceptualization of the basic categories of thought which have informed the

socialist movement for more than a hundred years. Social transformation is no longer seen as a choice between alternative economic and social systems but as the extension of a political process which has been taking place since the French revolution. The benefit of this analysis is its contribution to finally putting to rest the question of inevitability. Laclau and Mouffe give theoretical support to a sentiment that has been present on the left at least since nuclear war became a possible alternative to the crisis of international relations. Socialism cannot be seen as a guaranteed outcome of contradictions within the capitalist world. In the same vein, their contribution to the debates over the eventual shape of *actually existing socialism* and its ultimate demise is interesting and timely. The dissolution of the Soviet system in Russia and Eastern Europe is forcing Marxists and other socialists to abandon the assumption that transforming the economic system means an end to exploitation and inequalities.

These changes and the strategic initiative taken by theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe represent a challenge for socialist and democratic movements; of this there can be no doubt. What is in doubt is whether the framework elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe is sufficient to meet this challenge. In their drive to overcome the perceived reductionism of Marxism, they turn to the idealist categories of Nietzsche. In the process they undermine any materialist understanding of socialism. As a symbolically constituted discourse, socialism become nothing more than a set of values and, in the world of politics as argument, the path to socialism is merely preference. Seeing socialism in this way throws into question its relationship to capitalism as a social system. If the political realm is autonomous in relation to the economic, discussion of this relationship seems pointless. Viewed as radical democracy, socialism could theoretically be achieved without altering the economic relations of capitalism. Conversely, the neo-conservative theoreticians of post-capitalism may be correct and capitalism only continues to exist in the minds of a few eccentric Marxists.

## CONCLUSION

The specific theorists considered here are clearly part of the trend which Rosenau labels "affirmative post- modernism". While rejecting the universal claims of traditional theory and remaining within the overall Nietzschean framework, they attempt to establish grounds for the construction of a new type of social theory. On this basis, it should be useful to briefly review the plausibility of their claims. To some extent, the coherence of this approach as a form of analysis and the possibility of generating a critique of modern society rests on the confidence of having overcome the dualism of the western philosophical tradition. Yet, this confidence is clearly exaggerated. While much of postmodernism discourse seems to blend subject and object into an undifferentiated brew of meanings and practices, its forays into the realm of social theory reveal a different story. By positing the external as a hostile, unruly and random array of forces, Nietzsche and his followers are tied into a new dualism between the fluidity of this external world and the fixity or stabilizing force of human concepts.

This is the basis of the criticism that much of post- modern theory is constructed within an idealist framework. As Woodwiss observes, there are ultimately only two possibilities concerning the constitution of reality, idealism being one and realism the other [1990:69]. Of course, this charge is not, in itself, a refutation and the lines between the poles of the philosophical debate are not that clear. The effort of Putnam, for instance, to construct a "realism with a human face" [1990] reveals the subtleties involved in the differences of the two positions. But, as the foregoing discussion tries to indicate, there are a number of implications for the development of social theory which seem unavoidable once the idealist option has been taken.

Nietzschean idealism takes the form of perspectivism, a doctrine which holds that reality can never be known beyond the interpretations of the human mind. With no external constraints on the nature of interpretation, an inevitable pressure builds to relativize all claims to knowledge. This immediately creates some difficulty when establishing the status of the statements being made. Taylor makes this point in relation to Foucault [1986:98] but it could apply to any theoretical work which maintains there is nothing beyond interpretation.

The theorists considered above try to offset the consequences of relativism on their own analysis. Nietzsche justifies his discovery of the will to power on the grounds of psychological interests or desires. Foucault, despite his laughter at the possibility of many truths, grounds his analysis on the assumption of non-discursive sites of struggle, including the human body. Even Laclau and Mouffe, who claim to dissolve the distinction between discursive and non-discursive, validate their own perspective in the development of capitalism as the driving force in the fragmentation of modern life. While proclaiming the futility of historicist and teleological explanations, each of these theorists gives a unique vantage point to the epoch in which they write.

More serious than this inconsistency, however, is the recurrence of analytical problems as a result of seeing social reality as a product of beliefs. One of these problems is the need to explain how perspectives which are, by nature, individual phenomena, come to be shared throughout the social body. If truth is nothing more than interpretation, the possibility of belief systems being random, arbitrary and incommensurable is always present. Each of these theorists tries to limit this possibility and explain the intersubjectivity of ideas in the constitution of the social world. Nietzsche uses the natural force of will to power as an explanation but this forces him to rely on a crude form of psychologism to explain which perspectives come to dominate. Foucault's notion of discourse and discursive formation avoids this type of reductionism but, in the process, undermines the explanatory power of Nietzsche's analysis. His

undeveloped references to social, economic and political relations are never fully explored and it is not clear they could be without jeopardizing the logic of perspectivism. This leaves him with an anonymous and totalizing power which not only lacks explanation but yields a distorted view of modern society. Laclau and Mouffe dispense with this problem, to some extent, by subsuming power under discourse. The cost of this move, though, is a diminished capacity to explain why certain concepts become dominant. Social formations, in their scheme, are now completely a product of will but the stabilizing concepts simply appear and develop, in the manner of biological adaptation, as accidents of history.

The ontological privilege of concepts commits the theoretical enterprise to a type of phenomenalism whereby reality is nothing but its appearance. The impact of this is felt in a pressure to restrict the scope of analysis. Nietzsche, for instance, is led to see the secularization of modern society as a decline of religious values. Foucault takes discourses about crime, madness and sexuality to be the reality while Laclau and Mouffe have no choice but to accept the espousal of democratic values as indicators of actual social conditions.

The loss of reality as a reference point also limits the usefulness of the approach as a critique of modern society. Neutralizing the concept of ideology into the cement holding social formations together, robs it of its ability to expose the distorting function of particular types of knowledge. In order to provide their theoretical statements with a normative dimension, these writers carry out a series of moves which could justify some set of values. Nietzsche's dogmatic choice of hierarchical and male characteristics, barely concealed under a cloak of naturalism, illustrates the arbitrary character of his evaluation. Foucault faces the same dilemma but refuses to state a preference leaving him vacillating between support for any and all subjugated knowledges and an individualist preoccupation with lifestyle. In this respect, the effort of Laclau and Mouffe to sanctify democratic values is more credible but only if their analysis of

western democracy is accepted. But, doing so runs the risk faced by any rationale based on the tradition of justifying the existing state of affairs rather than pointing to future possibilities. If values cannot be given a stronger basis than preference or custom, postmodern critique will continue to be haunted by the question, "why fight?"

On the more specific level of modern social conditions, Nietzschean philosophy is unlike other critical perspectives in that its premises of individualism, competition and hierarchy are not incompatible with capitalism. Nietzsche can complain about its vulgarity and Foucault might warn of its connection to the totalizing impulse of reason but there is nothing inherent in their analysis which leads to the conclusion that the malaise of modernity might be cured by purging the social body of the market economy and its various effects. By portraying politics as a form of argumentation, a freemarket of ideas, Laclau and Mouffe seem to accept the self-understanding of modern capitalist society as the embodiment of pluralism and equality. Without any way of connecting the limitations placed on these ideals by the social and economic structures, this argument is forced to admit the extension of democracy is not inconsistent with the continually expanding influence of market relations. This is not only at odds with the critique offered by Marxism and other socialist trends but differs from the perspective of capitalism's own spokespersons. Huntington's report to the Trilateral Commission [1974], for example, warns that world capitalism is threatened by an excess of democracy--not at the level of values but in the erosion of possibilities for capital accumulation and labour discipline.

These tensions within the postmodernist critique highlight the ongoing difficulty which a perspective built on difference has in articulating a political position which can be reconciled with the principle of equality. For Nietzsche, this is not a problem since he considers the very idea of equality to be an indication of modern decay. For his more democratically-minded followers, however, there is a need to show how the inevitability of differences, domination, and exclusion can be appropriated to a democratic and

egalitarian project. Foucault, along with Laclau and Mouffe, take the only path open to them in this respect, that of political pluralism. Although different, in many respects, from liberal versions of pluralist theory, there is still a tendency to transform equality into equality of opportunity. Equality is measured by the ability of individuals and social groups to compete on a level playing field for the right to dominate, thus supposedly guaranteeing, in the long run, that power circulates throughout society. But, little account is taken of the limitations to the rotations of power which are imposed by regularly structured relations.

While the later developments of Nietzsche's philosophy and theory are made more coherent and palatable to modern sensibilities, they diffuse the powerful intent of his original critique. For all his objectionable conclusions, Nietzsche sees quite clearly that the modern preoccupation with individual well-being tends toward the erosion of community values. For him, this condition of nihilism is a source of despair not celebration since some type of unified belief system is taken to be the precondition of cultural achievement. McCarthy makes this point in regard to modern Nietzscheans. The elevation of differences to a level of principle cannot help but work itself out as a series of individual concerns with no way of articulating a sense of community [1991:53].

This helps to explain one of the most striking differences between Nietzsche and his followers. While he sees the need for a vision of how society should be shaped and moulded, utopian thought seems to be ruled out by the later theorists' modifications. Turning totality into totalitarianism, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe consider any attempt to identify the unifying features of society as an attempt at closure. Thus, in the face of modernism's condition of permanent flux and dissolution, these theorists see only openness and possibility, and ignore the divisiveness and schizophrenia which are part of the process.

One final point which needs to be raised is the elitism which seems to be embedded in the logic of postmodernist analysis despite the attempts to give it an egalitarian edge. Nietzsche maintains that hierarchy is not only a part of nature but is the basis of all human achievement. To deny this is to deny life itself. As the previous discussion tries to show, while his followers take great pains to distance themselves from the idea of a natural aristocracy, their efforts are not wholly successful. Foucault is more or less resigned to the permanence of domination in society. Laclau and Mouffe, despite their democratic intentions cannot help but agree.

Even in the most radical and democratic projects, social transformation thus means building a new power, not radically eliminating it. Destroying the hierarchies on which sexual or racial discrimination is based will, at some point, always require the construction of other exclusions for collective identities to be able to emerge. [Laclau,1991:33]

If such is the case, it is not unreasonable to ask who is being excluded by the discourse of postmodern Nietzscheans.

Since the conception of power in their analysis is intimately connected to the development of western culture and the critique is aimed at the European Enlightenment, the situation of non-western societies is unclear. More than one commentator has noted the Eurocentrism of many postmodern works [Barrett,1991:151; Said,1978:711]. This tendency is reinforced by Laclau's and Mouffe's grounding of libertarian and egalitarian values in the French Revolution. This position leaves no room for those forms of democracy which have developed prior to or outside the liberal tradition nor for those who are excluded or marginalized within it.

If the question of who becomes *the other* in postmodernist theory remains unclear, the identity of who is included is not so vague. Nietzsche has no qualms about assigning a leading role to those individuals who have the desire and the natural ability to create new values. Foucault is less explicit but as the discussion of his theoretical stance indicates, there are few groups in modern society with the training or opportunity to dedicate their lives to perfecting a style of living. The fact that intellectuals are uniquely



placed in this society takes on even greater political significance in the strategy advanced by Laclau and Mouffe. By giving prominence to the role of argument and rhetoric, they present an idealized picture which bears little resemblance to the interest-laden world of real politics. Seeing power as a form of persuasion cannot help but give a decisive role to those who have been trained in the skills of argumentation. Laclau and Mouffe recognize that success in building a new hegemonic bloc will depend, to some degree, on the creation of "a new commonsense for the masses" [1985:64].

The question of intellectual leadership and construction of knowledge is an important theme in postmodernist literature. Given the leading role assigned to ideas, this is not surprising. Nietzsche turns, quite naturally and without hesitation, to philosophers and artists to remake themselves and reconstruct the world. Foucault pays more than a little attention to the ways the modern form of these figures should relate to the various social movements. The same question is implied in the appropriation of Gramsci's notion of hegemony by Laclau and Mouffe. What is not clear is how these intellectuals, organic or otherwise, can help but take on a vanguardist role, especially given the ontology of power and difference.

Without doubt, there is a certain appeal in much of what these theorists have to offer. Its main analytical strength is a relentless exposure of the assumptions and hidden practices which have been perpetuated in the name of reason in modern society. The insights into the relationship between reason and new forms of oppression are valuable and, at times, irrefutable. As a critique, its appeal lies in the sense of empowerment it provides. By giving central place to human will, at least in theory, it seems to make possible that which is deemed impossible from the perspective of structuralist and historicist theories. The passivity induced by notions of inevitability is replaced with a conviction that the world can be changed.

This same call to action can also sound a more ominous note, however. Weber's differentiation between forms of authority requiring rational or legal norms and politics

based on charismatic leadership should be kept in mind. To ground politics in will is to run the risk of legitimating a type of politics which openly and blatantly achieves power through the manipulation of symbols. In current times, this characterizes the conduct of new right regimes such as Reaganism and Thatcherism, a phenomenon which Harvey sees as the "triumph of aesthetics over ethics" [1989:329]. If rhetoric is to be the means of acquiring power, there appears to be no way of distinguishing between democrats and demagogues.

The most serious consequence of this tendency to elevate will, collective or otherwise, is the *a priori* negation of reason as an arbiter of competing perspectives. Foucault's enthusiastic stance towards the Iranian revolution is an example of politics which relies exclusively on collective will [PPC:211]. Postmodernists are not alone in their hesitance toward a reason whose goal is an ideally transparent society. Habermas notes Marx's suspicion in regard to utopian socialists on this issue [1982:235]. However, to equate this particular vision to the logical imperative of reason in general assumes that the nature of reason is itself fully transparent. Yet, as Jay points out, the types and implications of reason are yet to be explored [1985:139].

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- BC The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception, 1963, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Vintage Books, 1975.
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