

Part IV

The condition of postmodernity

The new value placed on the transitory, the elusive and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present.

Jurgen Habermas

The Enlightenment is dead, Marxism is dead, the working class movement is dead ... and the author does not feel very well either.

Neil Smith

Postmodernity as a historical condition

Aesthetic and cultural practices are peculiarly susceptible to the changing experience of space and time precisely because they entail the construction of spatial representations and artefacts out of the flow of human experience. They always broker between Being and Becoming.

It is possible to write the historical geography of the experience of space and time in social life, and to understand the transformations that both have undergone, by reference to material and social conditions. Part III proposed an historical sketch of how that might be done with respect to the post-Renaissance Western world. The dimensions of space and time have there been subject to the persistent pressure of capital circulation and accumulation, culminating (particularly during the periodic crises of overaccumulation that have arisen since the mid-nineteenth century) in disconcerting and disruptive bouts of time-space compression.

The aesthetic responses to conditions of time-space compression are important and have been so ever since the eighteenth-century separation of scientific knowledge from moral judgement opened up a distinctive role for them. The confidence of an era can be assessed by the width of the gap between scientific and moral reasoning. In periods of confusion and uncertainty, the turn to aesthetics (of whatever form) becomes more pronounced. Since phases of time-space compression are disruptive, we can expect the turn to aesthetics and to the forces of culture as both explanations and *loci* of active struggle to be particularly acute at such moments. Since crises of overaccumulation typically spark the search for spatial and temporal resolutions, which in turn create an overwhelming sense of time-space compression, we can also expect crises of overaccumulation to be followed by strong aesthetic movements.

The crisis of overaccumulation that began in the late 1960s and

which came to a head in 1973 has generated exactly such a result. The experience of time and space has changed, the confidence in the association between scientific and moral judgements has collapsed, aesthetics has triumphed over ethics as a prime focus of social and intellectual concern, images dominate narratives, ephemerality and fragmentation take precedence over eternal truths and unified politics, and explanations have shifted from the realm of material and political-economic groundings towards a consideration of autonomous cultural and political practices.

The historical sketch I have here proposed suggests, however, that shifts of this sort are by no means new, and that the most recent version of it is certainly within the grasp of historical materialist enquiry, even capable of theorization by way of the meta-narrative of capitalist development that Marx proposed.

Postmodernism can be regarded, in short, as a historical-geographical condition of a certain sort. But what sort of condition is it and what should we make of it? Is it pathological or portentous of a deeper and even wider revolution in human affairs than those already wrought in the historical geography of capitalism? In this conclusion I sketch in some possible answers to those questions.

Economics with mirrors

'Voodoo economics' and 'economics with mirrors' said George Bush and John Anderson respectively of Ronald Reagan's economic programme to revive a flagging economy in the primary and presidential election campaigns of 1980. A sketch on the back of a napkin by a little-known economist called Laffer purported to show that tax cuts were bound to increase tax yields (at least up to a certain point) because they stimulated growth and, hence, the base upon which taxes were assessed. So was the economic policy of the Reagan years to be justified, a policy that indeed worked wonders with mirrors even if it brought the United States several steps closer to international bankruptcy and fiscal ruin (see figures 2.13 and 2.14). The strange and puzzling thing is that such a simplistic idea could gain the purchase it did and seem to work so well politically for so long. Even stranger, is the fact that Reagan was re-elected when all the polls showed that the majority of the US electorate (to say nothing of the majority of eligible voters, who did not vote) disagreed fundamentally with him on almost all major issues of social, political, and even foreign policy. Strangest of all is how such a President could leave office riding so high on the wave of public affection, even though more than a dozen senior members of his administration had either been accused or been found guilty of serious infringement of legal procedures and blatant disregard for ethical principles. The triumph of aesthetics over ethics could not be plainer.

Image-building in politics is nothing new. Spectacle, pomp and circumstance, demeanour, charisma, patronage, and rhetoric have long been part of the aura of political power. And the degree to which these could be bought, produced, or otherwise acquired has also long been important to the maintenance of that power. But something has changed qualitatively about that in recent times. The mediatization of politics was given a new direction in the Kennedy—

Nixon television debate, in which the latter's loss of a presidential election was attributed by many to the untrustworthy look of his five o'clock shadow. The active use of public relations firms to shape and sell a political image quickly followed (the careful imaging of Thatcherism by the now all-powerful firm of Saatchi and Saatchi is a recent example, illustrating how Americanized in this regard European politics is becoming).

The election of an ex-movie actor, Ronald Reagan, to one of the most powerful positions in the world put a new gloss on the possibilities of a mediatized politics shaped by images alone. His image, cultivated over many years of political practice, and then carefully mounted, crafted, and orchestrated with all the artifice that contemporary image production could command, as a tough but warm, avuncular, and well-meaning person who had an abiding faith in the greatness and goodness of America, built an aura of charismatic politics. Carey McWilliams, an experienced political commentator and long-time editor of the *Nation*, described it as 'the friendly face of fascism.' The 'teflon president,' as he came to be known (simply because no accusation thrown at him, however true, ever seemed to stick), could make mistake after mistake but never be called to account. His image could be deployed, unfailingly and instantaneously, to demolish any narrative of criticism that anyone cared to construct. But the image concealed a coherent politics. First, to exorcize the demon of the defeat in Vietnam by taking assertive action in support of any nominally anti-communist struggle anywhere in the world (Nicaragua, Grenada, Angola, Mozambique, Afghanistan, etc.). Second to expand the budget deficit through defence spending and force a recalcitrant Congress (and nation) to cut again and again into the social programmes that the rediscovery of poverty and of racial inequality in the United States in the 1960s had spawned.

This open programme of class aggrandizement was partially successful. Attacks upon union power (led by the Reagan onslaught upon the air traffic controllers), the effects of deindustrialization and regional shifts (encouraged by tax breaks), and of high unemployment (legitimized as proper medicine in the fight against inflation), and all the accumulated impacts of the shift from manufacturing to service employment, weakened traditional working-class institutions sufficiently to render much of the population vulnerable. A rising tide of social inequality engulfed the United States in the Reagan years, reaching a post-war high in 1986 (see figure 2.15); by then the poorest fifth of the population, which had gradually improved its share of national income to a high of point of nearly 7 per cent in the

early 1970s, found itself with only 4.6 per cent. Between 1979 and 1986, the number of poor families with children increased by 35 per cent, and in some large metropolitan areas, such as New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and New Orleans, more than half the children were living in families with incomes below the poverty line. In spite of surging unemployment (cresting at over 10 per cent by official figures in 1982) the percentage of unemployed receiving any federal benefit fell to only 32 per cent, the lowest level in the history of social insurance since its inception in the New Deal (see figure 2.9). An increase in homelessness signalled a general state of social dislocation, marked by confrontations (many of them with racist or ethnic overtones). The mentally ill were returned to their communities for care, which consisted largely of rejection and violence, the tip of an iceberg of neglect which left nearly 40 million citizens in one of the richest nations of the world with no medical insurance cover whatsoever. While jobs were indeed created during the Reagan years, many of them were low-wage and insecure service jobs, hardly sufficient to offset the 10 per cent decline in the real wage from 1972 to 1986. If family incomes rose, that simply signified that more and more women were entering the workforce (see figures 2.2 and 2.9).

Yet for the young and the rich and the educated and the privileged things could not have been better. The world of real estate, finance, and business services grew, as did the 'cultural mass' given over to the production of images, knowledge, and cultural and aesthetic forms (see above, p. 290). The political-economic base and, with it, the whole culture of cities were transformed. New York lost its traditional garment trade and turned to the production of debt and fictitious capital instead. 'In the last seven years,' ran a report by Scardino (1987) in the *New York Times*,

New York has constructed 75 new factories to house the debt production and distribution machine. These towers of granite and glass shine through the night as some of this generation's most talented professionals invent new instruments of debt to fit every imagined need: Perpetual Floating Rate Notes, Yield Curve Notes and Dual Currency Notes, to name a few, now traded as casually as the stock of the Standard Oil Company once was.

The trade is as vigorous as that which once dominated the harbour. But 'today, the telephone lines deliver the world's cash to be remixed as if in a bottling plant, squirted into different containers, capped and shipped back out.' The biggest physical export from New York

Just before Christmas 1987, the United States Government cut \$35 million from the budget for emergency help to the homeless. Meanwhile personal indebtedness continued to accelerate, and presidential candidates began to fight over who could enunciate the pledge of

A THOROUGH BREED AMONGST BANKS.

Plate 4.1 This Lloyds Bank advertisement on accumulation-speculation promotes acceptance of the world of fictitious capital formation and voodoo economics as a normal basis for daily life.

allegiance in more convincing tones. The voices of the homeless sadly went unheard in a world 'cluttered with illusion, fantasy and pretence.'

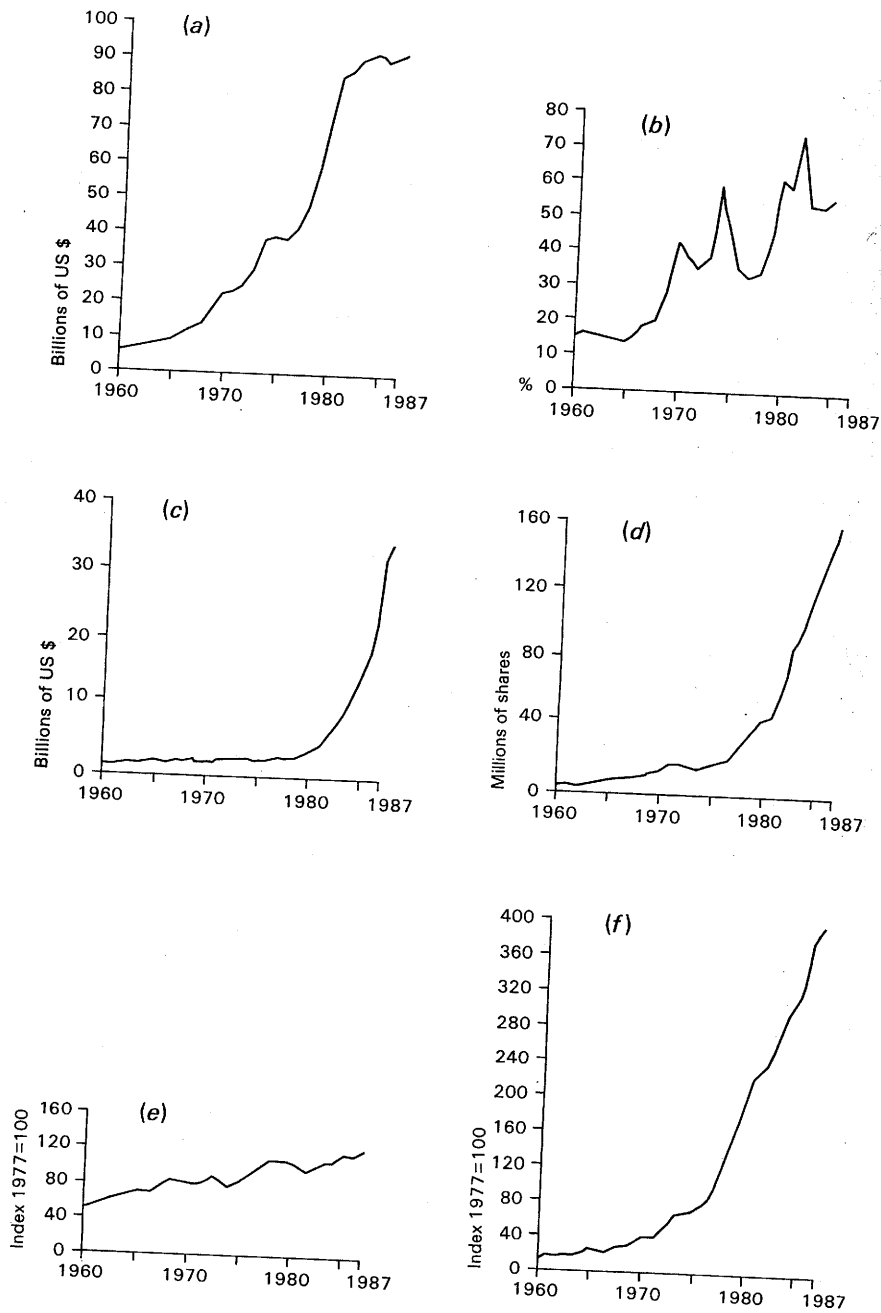


Figure 4.1 The speculative world of voodoo economics 1960–1987:

(a) nominal interest payments for US non-financial corporations

(Source: Department of Commerce)

(b) nominal interest payments as percentage of pre-tax profits in the United States

(Source: Department of Commerce)

(c) total capital of New York Stock Exchange firms

(Source: New York Times)

(d) daily trading volume on the New York Stock Exchange

(Source: New York Times)

(e) index of US manufacturing production (after Harrison and Bluestone, 1988)

(f) index of futures trading volume in New York (after Harrison and Bluestone, 1988)

Postmodernism as the mirror of mirrors

One of the prime conditions of postmodernity is that no one can or should discuss it as a historical-geographical condition. It is never easy, of course, to construct a critical assessment of a condition that is overwhelmingly present. The terms of debate, description, and representation are often so circumscribed that there seems to be no escape from evaluations that are anything other than self-referential. It is conventional these days, for example, to dismiss out of hand any suggestion that the 'economy' (however that vague word is understood) might be determinant of cultural life even in (as Engels and later Althusser suggested) 'the last instance.' The odd thing about postmodern cultural production is how much sheer profit-seeking is determinant in the first instance.

Postmodernism has come of age in the midst of this climate of voodoo economics, of political image construction and deployment, and of new social class formation. That there is some connection between this postmodernist burst and the image-making of Ronald Reagan, the attempt to deconstruct traditional institutions of working-class power (the trade unions and the political parties of the left), the masking of the social effects of the economic politics of privilege, ought to be evident enough. A rhetoric that justifies homelessness, unemployment, increasing impoverishment, disempowerment, and the like by appeal to supposedly traditional values of self-reliance and entrepreneurialism will just as freely laud the shift from ethics to aesthetics as its dominant value system. The street scenes of impoverishment, disempowerment, graffiti and decay become grist for the cultural producers' mill, not, as Deutsche and Ryan (1984) point out, in the muckraking reformist style of the late nineteenth century, but as a quaint and swirling backdrop (as in *Blade Runner*) upon which no social commentary is to be made. 'Once the poor become aestheticized, poverty itself moves out of our field of social

vision', except as a passive depiction of otherness, alienation and contingency within the human condition. When 'poverty and homelessness are served up for aesthetic pleasure', then ethics is indeed submerged by aesthetics, inviting, thereby, the bitter harvest of charismatic politics and ideological extremism.

If there is a meta-theory with which to embrace all these gyrations of postmodern thinking and cultural production, then why should we not deploy it?

Fordist modernism versus flexible postmodernism, or the interpenetration of opposed tendencies in capitalism as a whole

Collage, though pioneered by the modernists, is a technique that postmodernism has very much made its own. The juxtaposition of diverse and seemingly incongruous elements can be fun and occasionally instructive. In this spirit I have taken the oppositions provided by Ihab Hassan (table 1.1) and by Halal, Lash and Urry, and Swyngedouw (tables 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8) and jumbled up their terms (adding in a few of my own for good measure) to produce a collage of terms in table 4.1.

Down the left-hand side are ranged a series of intersecting terms to describe the condition of 'Fordist modernity,' while the right-hand column represents 'Flexible postmodernism.' The table suggests amusing associations. But it also indicates how two rather different regimes of accumulation and their associated modes of regulation (including the materializations of cultural habits, motivations, and styles of representation) might hang together, each as a distinctive and relatively coherent kind of social formation. Two reservations to that idea immediately come to mind. First, the oppositions, highlighted for didactic purposes, are never so clear-cut, and the 'structure of feeling' in any society is always a synthetic moment somewhere between the two. Second, associations are no proof of historical causation or even of necessary or integral relations. Even if the associations look plausible — and many of them do — some other way has to be found to establish that they form a meaningful configuration.

The oppositions within each profile are noteworthy. Fordist modernity is far from homogeneous. There is much here that is about relative fixity and permanence — fixed capital in mass production, stable, standardized, and homogeneous markets, a fixed configuration

of political-economic influence and power, easily identifiable authority and meta-theories, secure grounding in materiality and technical-scientific rationality, and the like. But all of this is ranged around a social and economic project of Becoming, of growth and transformation of social relations, of auratic art and originality, of renewal and avant-gardism. Postmodernist flexibility, on the other hand, is dominated by fiction, fantasy, the immaterial (particularly of money), fictitious capital, images, ephemerality, chance, and flexibility in production techniques, labour markets and consumption niches; yet it also embodies strong commitments to Being and place, a penchant for charismatic politics, concerns for ontology, and the stable institutions favoured by neo-conservatism. Habermas's judgement that the value placed on the transitory and the ephemeral 'discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present' is everywhere in evidence. It seems as if postmodernist flexibility merely reverses the dominant order to be found in Fordist modernity. The latter achieved relative stability in its political-economic apparatus in order to produce strong social and material change, whereas the former has been dogged by disruptive instability in its political-economic apparatus, but sought compensation in stable places of being and in charismatic geopolitics.

But what if the table as a whole itself constitutes a structural description of the totality of political-economic and cultural-ideological relations within capitalism? To view it this way requires that we see the oppositions across as well as within the profiles as internal relations within a structured whole. That idea, outrageous by postmodernism's own standards (because it resurrects the ghost of Marxist thinkers like Lukacs and appeals to a theory of internal relations of the sort that Bertell Ollman advances) makes more than a little sense. It helps explain how it is that Marx's *Capital* is so rich in insights into what the current status of thinking is all about. It also helps us understand how the cultural forces at work in, say, *fin de siècle* Vienna constituted such a complex mix that it is almost impossible to tell where the modernist impulse begins or ends. It helps us dissolve the categories of both modernism and postmodernism into a complex of oppositions expressive of the cultural contradictions of capitalism. We then get to see the categories of both modernism and postmodernism as static reifications imposed upon the fluid interpenetration of dynamic oppositions. Within this matrix of internal relations, there is never one fixed configuration, but a swaying back and forth between centralization and decentralization, between authority and deconstruction, between hierarchy and anarchy, between permanence and flexibility, between the detail and the

Table 4.1 *Fordist modernity versus flexible postmodernity, or the interpenetration of opposed tendencies in capitalist society as a whole*

<i>Fordist modernity</i>	<i>Flexible postmodernity</i>
economies of scale/master code/hierarchy homogeneity/detail division of labour	economies of scope/idiolect/anarchy diversity/social division of labour
paranoia/alienation/symptom public housing/monopoly capital	schizophrenia/decentering/desire homelessness/entrepreneurialism
purpose/design/mastery/determinacy production capital/universalism	play/chance/exhaustion/indeterminacy fictitious capital/localism
state power/trade unions state welfarism/metropolis	financial power/individualism neo-conservatism/counterurbanization
ethics/money commodity God the Father/materiality	aesthetics/moneys of account The Holy Ghost/immateriality
production/originality/authority blue collar/avant-gardism interest group politics/semantics	reproduction/pastiche/eclecticism white collar/commercialism charismatic politics/rhetoric
centralization/totalization synthesis/collective bargaining	decentralization/deconstruction antithesis/local contracts
operational management/master code phallic/single task/origin	strategic management/idiolect androgynous/multiple tasks/trace
metatheory/narrative/depth mass production/class politics technical-scientific rationality	language games/image/surface small-batch production/social movements/pluralistic otherness
utopia/redemptive art/concentration specialized work/collective consumption	heterotopias/spectacle/dispersal flexible worker/symbolic capital
function/representation/signified industry/protestant work ethic mechanical reproduction	fiction/self-reference/signifier services/temporary contract electronic reproduction
becoming/epistemology/regulation urban renewal/relative space	being/ontology/deregulation urban revitalization/place
state interventionism/industrialization internationalism/permanence/time	laissez-faire/deindustrialization geopolitics/ephemerality/space

social division of labour (to list but a few of the many oppositions that can be identified). The sharp categorical distinction between modernism and postmodernism disappears, to be replaced by an examination of the flux of internal relations within capitalism as a whole.

But why the flux? This brings us back to the problem of causation and historical trajectory.

The transformative and speculative logic of capital

Capital is a process and not a thing. It is a process of reproduction of social life through commodity production, in which all of us in the advanced capitalist world are heavily implicated. Its internalized rules of operation are such as to ensure that it is a dynamic and revolutionary mode of social organization, restlessly and ceaselessly transforming the society within which it is embedded. The process masks and fetishizes, achieves growth through creative destruction, creates new wants and needs, exploits the capacity for human labour and desire, transforms spaces, and speeds up the pace of life. It produces problems of overaccumulation for which there are but a limited number of possible solutions.

Through these mechanisms capitalism creates its own distinctive historical geography. Its developmental trajectory is not in any ordinary sense predictable, precisely because it has always been based on speculation — on new products, new technologies, new spaces and locations, new labour processes (family labour, factory systems, quality circles, worker participation), and the like. There are many ways to make a profit. *Post hoc* rationalizations of speculative activity depend on a positive answer to the question: 'Was it profitable?' Different entrepreneurs, whole spaces of the world economy, generate different solutions to that question, and new answers overtake the old as one speculative wave engulfs another.

There are laws of process at work under capitalism capable of generating a seemingly infinite range of outcomes out of the slightest variation in initial conditions or of human activity and imagination. In the same way that the laws of fluid dynamics are invariant in every river in the world, so the laws of capital circulation are consistent from one supermarket to another, from one labour market to another, from one commodity production system to another, from one country to another and from one household to another. Yet

New York and London are as different from each other as the Hudson is from the Thames.

Cultural life is often held to be outside rather than within the embrace of this capitalist logic. People, it is said, make their own history in these realms in very specific and quite unpredictable ways, depending upon their values and aspirations, their traditions and norms. Economic determination is irrelevant, even in the famous last instance. I hold this argument to be erroneous in two senses. First, I see no difference in principle between the vast range of speculative and equally unpredictable activities undertaken by entrepreneurs (new products, new marketing stratagems, new technologies, new locations, etc.) and the equally speculative development of cultural, political, legal, and ideological values and institutions under capitalism. Secondly, while it is indeed possible that speculative development in these latter domains would not be reinforced or discarded according to the *post hoc* rationalizations of profit-making, profitability (in either the narrow or the broader sense of generating and acquiring new wealth) has long been implicated in these activities, and with the passing of time the strength of this connection has increased rather than diminished. Precisely because capitalism is expansionary and imperialistic, cultural life in more and more areas gets brought within the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital circulation. To be sure, this has sparked reactions varying from anger and resistance to compliance and appreciation (and there is nothing predictable about that either). But the widening and deepening of capitalist social relations with time is, surely, one of the most singular and undisputable facts of recent historical geography.

The oppositional relations depicted in table 4.1 are always subject to the restless transformative activity of capital accumulation and speculative change. Exact configurations cannot be predicted in advance, even though the law-like behaviour of the transformative force can. Put more concretely, the degree of Fordism and modernism, or of flexibility and postmodernism, is bound to vary from time to time and from place to place, depending on which configuration is profitable and which is not. Behind all the ferment of modernity and postmodernity, we can discern some simple generative principles that shape an immense diversity of outcomes. Yet the latter strikingly fail (as in the case of the serially produced downtown renewals) to create unpredictable novelty, even though the seemingly infinite capacity to engender products feeds all the illusions of freedom and of open paths for personal fulfilment. Wherever capitalism goes, its illusory apparatus, its fetishisms, and its system of mirrors come not far behind.

It is here that we can invoke, once more, Bourdieu's thesis (above, p. 219) that we each of us possess powers of regulated improvisation, shaped by experience, which allow us 'an endless capacity to engender products — thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions — whose limits are set by the historically situated conditions' of their production; the 'conditioned and conditional freedom' this secures 'is as remote from the creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings.' It is, Bourdieu suggests, through mechanisms of this sort that every established order tends to produce 'the naturalization of its own arbitrariness' expressed in the 'sense of limits' and the 'sense of reality' which in turn form the basis for an 'ineradicable adherence to the established order'. The reproduction of the social and symbolic order through the exploration of difference and 'otherness' is all too evident in the climate of postmodernism.

So where, then, can real change come from? To begin with, the contradictory experiences acquired under capitalism — many of which are set out in table 4.1 — render the novelty a little less thoroughly predictable than was the case in Bourdieu's encounter with the Kabyles. Mechanical reproduction of value systems, beliefs, cultural preferences, and the like is impossible, not in spite of but precisely because of the speculative grounding of capitalism's inner logic. The exploration of contradictions always lies at the heart of original thought. But it is also evident that the expression of such contradictions in the form of objective and materialized crises plays a key role in breaking the powerful link 'between the subjective structures and the objective structures' and thereby lay the groundwork for a critique that 'brings the undiscussed into discussion and the unformulated into formulation'. While crises in the experience of space and time, in the financial system, or in the economy at large, may form a necessary condition for cultural and political changes, the sufficient conditions lie more deeply embedded in the internalized dialectics of thought and knowledge production. For it is ever the case that, as Marx (1967, 178) has it, 'we erect our structure in imagination before we erect it in reality'.

The work of art in an age of electronic reproduction and image banks

'In principle a work of art has always been reproducible,' wrote Walter Benjamin, but mechanical reproduction 'represents something new.' It made concrete the poet Paul Valéry's prediction: 'Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand.' The consequences that Benjamin foresaw have been emphasized many times over by the advances in electronic reproduction and the capacity to store images, torn out of their actual contexts in space and time, for instantaneous use and retrieval on a mass basis.

The increased role of the masses in cultural life has had both positive and negative consequences. Benjamin feared their desire to bring things closer spatially and humanly, because it inevitably led to transitoriness and reproducibility as hallmarks of a cultural production system that had hitherto explored uniqueness and permanence. The ease with which fascism could make use of that was a signal warning that the democratization of working-class culture was not necessarily an unmitigated blessing.

What is really at stake here, however, is an analysis of cultural production and the formation of aesthetic judgements through an organized system of production and consumption mediated by sophisticated divisions of labour, promotional exercises, and marketing arrangements. And these days the whole system is dominated by the circulation of capital (more often than not of a multinational sort).

As a production, marketing, and consumption system, it exhibits many peculiarities in the form its labour process takes, and in the manner of linkage between production and consumption. The one thing that cannot be said of it is that the circulation of capital is absent, and that the practitioners and agents at work within it are

unaware of the laws and rules of capital accumulation. And it is certainly not democratically controlled and organized, even though consumers are highly dispersed and have more than a little say in what is produced and what aesthetic values shall be conveyed.

This is not the place to launch into any extensive discussion of the various modes of organization of this sector of economic activity, or of the ways in which aesthetic and cultural trends get woven into the fabric of daily life. Such topics have been thoroughly investigated by others (Raymond Williams providing a host of thoughtful insights). But two important issues do stand out as directly relevant to understanding the condition of postmodernity as a whole.

First, the class relations prevailing within this system of production and consumption are of a peculiar sort. What stands out here is sheer money power as a means of domination rather than direct control over the means of production and wage labour in the classic sense. One side-effect has been to rekindle a lot of theoretical interest in the nature of money (as opposed to class) power and the asymmetries that can arise therefrom (cf. Simmel's extraordinary treatise on *The philosophy of money*). Media stars, for example, can be highly paid yet grossly exploited by their agents, the record companies, the media tycoons, and the like. Such a system of asymmetrical money relations relates to the need to mobilize cultural creativity and aesthetic ingenuity, not only in the production of a cultural artefact but also in its promotion, packaging, and transformation into some kind of successful spectacle. But asymmetrical money power does not necessarily promote class consciousness. It is conducive to demands for individual liberty and entrepreneurial freedom. The conditions prevailing within what Daniel Bell calls 'the cultural mass' of producers and consumers of cultural artefacts shape attitudes different from those that arise out of conditions of wage labour. This cultural mass adds yet another layer to that amorphous formation known as 'the middle class.'

The political identity of such a social stratum has always been notoriously shaky, varying from the white-collar workers who formed the backbone of German Nazism (see Speier, 1986) to those who played such an important role in re-shaping the cultural and political life of late nineteenth-century Paris. While it is dangerous to advance any general rules in this regard, such strata tend to lack 'the reassuring support of a moral tradition that they could call their own' (Speier). They either become 'value parasites' – drawing their consciousness from association with one or other of the dominant classes in society – or cultivate all manner of fictitious marks of their own identity. It is in these strata that the quest for symbolic

capital is most marked, and for them that movements of fashion, localism, nationalism, language, and even religion and myth can be of the greatest significance. What I am proposing here is to look carefully at the kind of circularity within the cultural mass which brings together producers held in thrall by pure money power on the one hand, and on the other hand relatively affluent consumers, themselves part of the cultural mass, who look for a certain kind of cultural output as a clear mark of their own social identity. In the same way that the new social layers provided the mass audience to which the Paris Impressionists, themselves part of that social formation, could appeal, so the new social layers that came into existence with the formation of the cultural mass and the rise of new white-collar occupations in finance, real estate, law, education, science, and business services provided a powerful source of demand for new cultural forms based on fashion, nostalgia, pastiche, and kitsch – in short, all that we associate with postmodernism.

The politics of the cultural mass are, however, important, since they are in the business of defining the symbolic order through the production of images for everyone. The more it turns in upon itself, or the more it sides with this or that dominant class in society, the more the prevailing sense of the symbolic and moral order tends to shift. I think it fair to say that the cultural mass drew heavily upon the working-class movement for its cultural identity in the 1960s, but that the attack upon, and decline of, the latter from the early 1970s onwards cut loose the cultural mass, which then shaped its own identity around its own concerns with money power, individualism, entrepreneurialism, and the like (the changing politics of a newspaper like *Libération* in France, which began as an iconoclastic but left-wing newspaper in the 1960s, and now represents an equally iconoclastic cultural entrepreneurialism, is a perfect example). The imaging of politics by the public relations agencies matched the politics of imaging in powerful ways.

Second, the development of cultural production and marketing on a global scale has itself been a primary agent in time-space compression in part because it projected a *musée imaginaire*, a jazz club, or a concert hall into everyone's living room, but also for a set of other reasons that Benjamin considered:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and

debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. With the close-up space expands, with slow motion, movement is extended Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored. (Benjamin, 1969, 236)

Responses to time-space compression

There have been various responses to the travails of time-space compression. The first line of defence is to withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blasé, or exhausted silence and to bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside any individual or even collective control everything is. Excessive information, it transpires, is one of the best inducements to forgetting. The qualities of postmodern fiction – ‘the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscape rendered in the flattest possible diction’ (above, p. 58) – are suggestive of exactly that reaction. The personal world that Wenders depicts in *Paris, Texas* does likewise. *Wings of Desire*, though more optimistic, still replies in the affirmative to the other question which Newman poses: ‘Have the velocities of recent change been so great that we do not know how to trace their lines of force, that no sensibility, least of all narrative, has been able to articulate them?’

This aspect of postmodernism has been reinforced by the activities of the deconstructionists. In their suspicion of any narrative that aspires to coherence, and in their rush to deconstruct anything that even looks like meta-theory, they challenged all basic propositions. To the degree that all the narrative accounts on offer contained hidden presuppositions and simplifications, they deserved critical scrutiny, if only to emerge the stronger for it. But in challenging all consensual standards of truth and justice, of ethics, and meaning, and in pursuing the dissolution of all narratives and meta-theories into a diffuse universe of language games, deconstructionism ended up, in spite of the best intentions of its more radical practitioners, by reducing knowledge and meaning to a rubble of signifiers. It thereby produced a condition of nihilism that prepared the ground for the re-emergence of a charismatic politics and even more simplistic propositions than those which were deconstructed.

The second reaction amounts to a free-wheeling denial of the complexity of the world, and a penchant for the representation of it in terms of highly simplified rhetorical propositions. Slogans abound, from left to right of the political spectrum, and depthless images are deployed to capture complex meanings. Travel, even imaginary and vicarious, is supposed to broaden the mind, but it just as frequently ends up confirming prejudices.

The third response has been to find an intermediate niche for political and intellectual life which spurns grand narrative but which does cultivate the possibility of limited action. This is the progressive angle to postmodernism which emphasizes community and locality, place and regional resistances, social movements, respect for otherness, and the like (above, p.113). It is an attempt to carve out at least one knowable world from the infinity of possible worlds which are daily shown to us on the television screen. At its best it produces trenchant images of possible other worlds, and even begins to shape the actual world. But it is hard to stop the slide into parochialism, myopia, and self-referentiality in the face of the universalizing force of capital circulation. At worst, it brings us back to narrow and sectarian politics in which respect for others gets mutilated in the fires of competition between the fragments. And, it should not be forgotten, this was the path that allowed Heidegger to reach his accommodation with Nazism, and which continues to inform the rhetoric of fascism (witness the rhetoric of a contemporary fascist leader like Le Pen).

The fourth response has been to try and ride the tiger of time-space compression through construction of a language and an imagery that can mirror and hopefully command it. I place the frenetic writings of Baudrillard and Virilio in this category, since they seem hell-bent on fusing with time-space compression and replicating it in their own flamboyant rhetoric. We have seen this kind of response before, most specifically in Nietzsche’s extraordinary evocations in *The will to power* (above, p.274). Compared to that, however, it seems as if Baudrillard reduces Nietzsche’s tragic sense to farce (but then postmodernism always has trouble in taking itself seriously). Jameson, for all his brilliance, likewise loses his hold on both the reality he is seeking to represent and on the language that might properly be deployed to represent it in his more protean writings.

Indeed, the hyper-rhetoric of this wing of the postmodern reaction can dissolve into the most alarming irresponsibility. In reading Jameson’s account of schizophrenia, for example, it is hard not to impute euphoric qualities to the hallucinogenic rush of intoxicating experience behind the surface appearance of anxiety and neurosis. But as Taylor (1987, 67) points out, Jameson’s selective quotations

from the autobiography of a schizophrenic girl eliminate the terror that attaches to her unreality states, making it all seem like a well-controlled LSD trip rather than a succession of states of guilt, lethargy, and helplessness coupled with anguished and sometimes tempestuous dislocation. Deleuze and Guattari, applauded by Foucault, likewise recommend that we accommodate to the fact that 'everywhere capitalism sets in motion schizo-flows that animate "our" arts and "our" sciences, just as they congeal into the production of "our own" sick, the schizophrenics.' Revolutionaries, they advise, 'should carry out their undertakings along the lines of the schizo process,' because the schizophrenic 'has become caught up in a flux of desire that threatens the social order.' If this is indeed the case, then I am left contemplating the following account from the Associated Press, 27 December 1987, as a possible epitaph on 'our' civilization:

Mr Dobben had been diagnosed as a schizophrenic.... On Thanksgiving Day, the police say, Mr Dobben took his two sons, Bartley Joel, 2 years old, and Peter David, 15 months old, to the Cannon-Muskegon Corporation foundry where he worked and put them inside a giant ladle used to carry molten metal. He then heated it to 1,300 degrees while his wife, unknowing, waited outside in the car. Now Bartley James Dobben, 26, sits under suicide surveillance.

In case this be thought a too extreme vision, I quote also Kenny Scharf (an East Village 'Day-Glo' painter) whose sequence of paintings of Estelle escaping time-space compression with a one-way ticket to outer space has her, in the final picture, 'just kind of having fun by herself, floating and watching the world blow up' (Taylor, 1987, 123). And if that is judged too imaginary, then I quote Alan Sugar, Chairman of the Amstrad Corporation: 'If there was a market in mass-produced portable nuclear weapons then we'd market them too.'

The crisis of historical materialism

The odd thing is how radical some of these diverse responses appeared, and how difficult it has been for the left, as opposed to the right, to cope with them. On reflection, the oddity disappears easily enough. A mode of thought that is anti-authoritarian and iconoclastic, that insists on the authenticity of other voices, that celebrates difference, decentralization, and democratization of taste, as well as the power of imagination over materiality, has to have a radical cutting edge even when indiscriminately used. In the hands of its more responsible practitioners, the whole baggage of ideas associated with postmodernism could be deployed to radical ends, and thereby be seen as part of a fundamental drive towards a more liberatory politics, in exactly the same way that the turn to more flexible labour processes could be seen as an opening to a new era of democratic and highly decentralized labour relations and co-operative endeavours.

From the standpoint of the traditionalist right, the excesses of the 1960s and the violence of 1968 appeared subversive in the extreme. Perhaps for that reason, Daniel Bell's description in *The cultural contradictions of capitalism*, though launched entirely from a right-wing perspective that sought the restoration of respect for authority, was probably more accurate than many of the left attempts to grasp what was happening. Other writers, like Toffler and even McLuhan, saw the significance of time-space compression and the confusions it generated in ways that the left could not see, precisely because it was so deeply embroiled in creating the confusion. Only recently has the left come to terms with some of these issues, and I think it significant that Berman's book, published in 1982, recuperates some of these themes only by treating Marx as the first great modernist writer rather than as a Marxist who could see through what modernism was all about.

The New Left was preoccupied with a struggle to liberate itself from the dual shackles of old left politics (particularly as represented

by traditional communist parties and 'orthodox' Marxism) and the repressive powers of corporate capital and bureaucratized institutions (the state, the universities, the unions, etc.). It saw itself from the very outset as a cultural as well as a political-economic force, and helped force the turn to aesthetics that postmodernism has been about.

But there were unintended consequences of such a line of action. The push into cultural politics connected better with anarchism and libertarianism than with traditional Marxism, and set the New Left against traditional working-class attitudes and institutions. The New Left embraced the new social movements which were themselves agents of fragmentation of old left politics. To the degree that the latter were at best passive, and at worst reactionary, in their treatment of race and gender issues, of difference, and of the problems of colonized peoples and repressed minorities, of ecological and aesthetic issues, some kind of political shift of the sort that the New Left proposed was surely justified. But in making its move, the New Left tended to abandon its faith both in the proletariat as an instrument of progressive change and in historical materialism as a mode of analysis. André Gorz proclaimed farewell to the working class, and Aronowitz announced the crisis of historical materialism.

The New Left thereby cut itself off from its own ability to have a critical perspective on itself or on the social processes of transformation that underlay the surge into postmodernist ways of thought. In insisting that it was culture and politics that mattered, and that it was neither reasonable nor proper to invoke economic determination even in the last instance (let alone invoke theories of capital circulation and accumulation, or of necessary class relations in production), it was unable to stop its own drift into ideological positions that were weak in contest with the new-found strength of the neo-conservatives, and which forced it to compete on the same terrain of image production, aesthetics, and ideological power when the means of communication lay in its opponents' hands. In a 1983 symposium, *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, for example, most of the authors paid far more attention to Foucault and Derrida than they did to Marx (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988). Ironically, it was an old left figure (noticeably absent from that symposium), Raymond Williams, a long-time student of working-class cultural forms and values, who crossed the tracks of the New Left and tried to re-establish the material groundings of what cultural practices might be about. Williams not only rejected modernism as a valid category but, by extension, saw postmodernism as itself a mask for the deeper transformations in the culture of capitalism which he sought to identify.

The interrogation of 'orthodox' Marxian formulations (by writers in the tradition of Fanon or Simone de Beauvoir as well as by the deconstructionists) was both necessary and positive in its implications. Important transitions were indeed afoot in political economy, in the nature of state functions, in cultural practices, and in the time-space dimension across which social relations had to be assessed (the relation between, say, apartheid in South Africa and working-class movements in Europe or North America became even more significant as a political issue than it had been at the high point of direct imperialism). It took a properly dynamic rather than static conception of both theory and historical materialism to grasp the significance of these shifts. Of the areas of greatest development I would list four:

- 1 The treatment of difference and 'otherness' not as something to be added on to more fundamental Marxist categories (like class and productive forces), but as something that should be omni-present from the very beginning in any attempt to grasp the dialectics of social change. The importance of recuperating such aspects of social organization as race, gender, religion, within the overall frame of historical materialist enquiry (with its emphasis upon the power of money and capital circulation) and class politics (with its emphasis upon the unity of the emancipatory struggle) cannot be overestimated.

- 2 A recognition that the production of images and of discourses is an important facet of activity that has to be analysed as part and parcel of the reproduction and transformation of any symbolic order. Aesthetic and cultural practices matter, and the conditions of their production deserve the closest attention

- 3 A recognition that the dimensions of space and time matter, and that there are real geographies of social action, real as well as metaphorical territories and spaces of power that become vital as organizing forces in the geopolitics of capitalism, at the same time as they are the sites of innumerable differences and othernesses that have to be understood both in their own right and within the overall logic of capitalist development. Historical materialism is finally beginning to take its geography seriously.

- 4 Historical-geographical materialism is an open-ended and dialectical mode of enquiry rather than a closed and fixed body of understandings. Meta-theory is not a statement of total truth but an attempt to come to terms with the historical and geographical truths that characterize capitalism both in general as well as in its present phase.

Cracks in the mirrors, fusions at the edges

'We feel that postmodernism is over,' a major United States developer told the architect Moshe Safdie (*New York Times*, 29 May 1988). 'For projects which are going to be ready in five years, we are now considering new architectural appointments.' He said this, reported Safdie, 'with the naturalness of a clothing manufacturer who tells you that he does not want to be stuck with a line of blue coats when red is in.' Perhaps for this very reason, Philip Johnson has put his considerable weight behind the new movement of 'deconstructivism' with all its high-brow appeal to theory. If this is where the developers are heading, can the philosophers and literary theorists be far behind?

On 19 October 1987, someone peeked behind the reflecting mirrors of US economic policy and, frightened at what they saw there, plunged the world's stock markets into such a fearful crash that nearly a third of the paper value of assets worldwide was written off within a few days (see table 2.10). The event provoked ugly memories of 1929, pushed most finance houses to draconian economies, others into hasty mergers. Fortunes made overnight by the young, the aggressive, and the ruthless traders in the hyper-space of instant financial dealing were lost even more speedily than they had been acquired. The economy of New York City and other major financial centres was threatened by the rapid fall in the volume of trading. Yet the rest of the world remained strangely unmoved. 'Different worlds' was the headline in the *Wall Street Journal*, as it compared the 'eerily detached' view from Main Street, USA, with that of Wall Street. 'The crash aftermath is the tale of two cultures – processing different information, operating on different time horizons, dreaming different dreams.... The financial community – living by the minute and trading by the computer – operates on one set of values,' while 'the rest of America – living by the decade, buying and holding – has a

different code' which might be called 'the ethic of those who have their hands on shovels.'

Main Street may feel justified in its indifference because the dire predictions in the aftermath of the crash have not as yet materialized. But the mirrors of accelerating indebtedness (personal, corporate, governmental) continue to work overtime (see figure 2.13). Fictitious capital is even more hegemonic than before in its influence. It creates its own fantastic world of booming paper wealth and assets. Asset inflation takes over where the commodity inflation of the 1970s left off until the mass of funds thrown into the markets to ward off the crash in October 1987 works its way through the economy to produce a resurgence of wage and commodity inflation two years later. Debts get re-scheduled and rolled over at ever faster rates, with the aggregate effect of re-scheduling the crisis-tendencies of capitalism into the twenty-first century. Yet cracks in the reflecting mirrors of economic performance abound. US banks write off billions of dollars of bad loans, governments default, international currency markets remain in perpetual turmoil.

On the philosophical front, deconstructionism has been put on the defensive by the controversies over the Nazi sympathies of Heidegger and Paul de Man. That Heidegger, the inspiration of deconstruction, should have had such an unrepentant attachment to Nazism, and that Paul de Man, one of deconstructionism's most accomplished practitioners, should have had such a murky past of anti-semitic writing, has proved a major embarrassment. The charge that deconstruction is neo-fascist is not in itself interesting, but the manner of defence against the charge is.

Hillis Miller (1988), for example, appeals to the 'facts' (a positivist argument), to principles of fairness and reasonableness (liberal humanist argument), and to historical context (an historical materialist argument) in his defence of de Man's 'appalling' interventions. The irony, of course, is that these are all ways of arguing that Hillis Miller had pulled apart in the work of others. Rorty, on the other hand, takes his own position to its logical conclusion, declaring that the political opinions of a great philosopher do not have to be taken any more seriously than philosophy itself (which is hardly at all), and that any relationship between ideas and reality, moral positions and philosophical writings is purely contingent. The flagrant irresponsibility of that position is almost as embarrassing as the transgressions that set the whole debate rolling.

The cracks in an intellectual edifice that opens the way to the empowerment of aesthetics over ethics are important. Deconstructionism, like any system of thought and any definition of an over-

whelming symbolic order, internalizes certain contradictions which at a certain point become more and more self-evident. When Lyotard, for example, seeks to keep his radical hopes alive by appeal to some pristine and unsullied concept of justice, he proposes a truth statement that lies above the mêlée of interest groups and their cacophony of language games. When Hillis Miller is forced to appeal to liberal and positivist values to defend his mentor Paul de Man against what he considers the calumny of false accusations, then he, too, invokes universals.

And at the edges of these trends there are all sorts of fusions of the fragments in progress. Jesse Jackson employs charismatic politics in a political campaign which nevertheless begins to fuse some of the social movements in the United States that have long been apathetic to each other. The very possibility of a genuine rainbow coalition defines a unified politics which inevitably speaks the tacit language of class, because this is precisely what defines the common experience within the differences. US trade union leaders finally begin to worry that their support for foreign dictatorships in the name of anti-communism since 1950, has promoted the unfair labour practices and low wages in many countries which now compete for jobs and investment. And when British Ford car workers struck and stopped car production in Belgium and West Germany, they suddenly realized that spatial dispersal in the division of labour is not entirely to the capitalists' advantage and international strategies are feasible as well as desirable. Signs of a new internationalism in the ecological sphere (forced by events for the bourgeoisie, sought out actively by many ecological groups) and in the fight against racism, apartheid, world hunger, uneven geographical development, are everywhere, even if much of it still lies in the realm of pure image making (like Band Aid) rather than in political organization. The geopolitical stress between East and West also undergoes a notable amelioration (again, no thanks to the ruling classes in the West, but more because of an evolution in the East).

The cracks in the mirror may not be too wide, and the fusions at the edges may not be too striking, but the fact that all are there suggests that the condition of postmodernity is undergoing a subtle evolution, perhaps reaching a point of self-dissolution into something different. But what?

Answers to that cannot be rendered in abstraction from the political-economic forces currently transforming the world of labour, finance, uneven geographical development, and the like. The lines of tension are clear enough. Geopolitics and economic nationalism, localism and the politics of place, are all fighting it out with a new internationalism in the most contradictory of ways. The fusion of

the European Economic Community as a commodity trading block takes place in 1992; takeovers and merger manias will sweep the continent; yet Thatcherism still proclaims itself as a distinctive national project resting upon the peculiarities of the British (a proposition which both left and right politics tend to accept). International control over finance capital looks inevitable, yet it seems impossible to arrive at that through the collectivity of national interests. In the intellectual and cultural spheres similar oppositions can be identified.

Wenders seems to propose a new romanticism, the exploration of global meanings and the prospects for Becoming through the release of romantic desire out of the stasis of Being. There are dangers in releasing an unknown and perhaps uncontrollable aesthetic power into an unstable situation. Brandon Taylor favours a return to realism as a means to bring cultural practices back into a realm where some kind of explicit ethical content can be expressed. Even some of the deconstructionists seem to be reverting to ethics.

Beyond that there is a renewal of historical materialism and of the Enlightenment project. Through the first we can begin to understand postmodernity as an historical-geographical condition. On that critical basis it becomes possible to launch a counter-attack of narrative against the image, of ethics against aesthetics, of a project of Becoming rather than Being, and to search for unity within difference, albeit in a context where the power of the image and of aesthetics, the problems of time-space compression, and the significance of geopolitics and otherness are clearly understood. A renewal of historical-geographical materialism can indeed promote adherence to a new version of the Enlightenment project. Poggioli (1968, 73) captures the difference thus:

In the consciousness of the classical epoch, it is not the present that brings the past into culmination, but the past that culminates in the present, and the present is in turn understood as a new triumph of ancient and eternal values, as a return to the principle of the true and the just, as a restoration or re-birth of those principles. But for the moderns, the present is valid only by virtue of the potentialities of the future, as the matrix of the future, insofar as it is the forge of history in continued metamorphosis, seen as a permanent spiritual revolution.

There are some who would have us return to classicism and others who seek to tread the path of the moderns. From the standpoint of the latter, every age is judged to attain 'the fullness of its time, not by being but by becoming.' I could not agree more.