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A New Generation's epistemological break

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Part One: A New Generation's epistemological break

«Oui, chers congénères, nous sommes une génération maudite, stérile et sèche, figue avortée que jette à terre le vent du réalisme ! Éternels jeunes, jeunes vieux qui étendent sur l'avenir le noir manteau de leur impuissance, dernière génération d'une démographie épuisée !» [1]

Although perception of political generations has been a constant theme in social thought since the Second World War, the new perspectives called "postmodernist" and the methodologies called "deconstructionist" have been somewhat silent about the importance of generational change. It is a silence that must be explained in terms of the social perceptions characteristic of the first postwar generation of social thinkers: those born during or following the Second World War and coming of age in the 1960s. It is in terms of social perceptions and how political events have structured them that recent trends in the evolution of social theory must be understood. Karl Mannheim's analysis of the formation of generations is verified in the experience of those who matured during the postwar period. [2] The rationalization of social interests and the ideological impact of unique political events structured the mentalities of this generational group.

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There is a relationship between certain critiques of prevailing conceptual systems and the life experiences of this particular generation. The postmodernists privilege the idea of an essential indeterminacy in social analysis and propagate "deconstructionism" in the effort to demonstrate that historicism and social idealism are incompatible with an accurate or useful apprehension of social and historical reality. This philosophical trend is, however, related to a concrete historical situation: the fact that many of its proponents experienced an historically unique cultural rupture with the preceding generation.

Mannheim's ideas concerning the formation of generational consciousness are confirmed by the experience of the first postwar generation of Western European and North American societies. Members of this age cohort have been the prime beneficiaries of the unprecedented "boom" of capitalist reconstruction and global hegemony following World War Two. In terms of material advantage, possibilities for social mobility, and freedom from major political catastrophe, they may be most privileged generation in the history of world (at least of the industrial world). The social and political transition represented by the evolution of this generation has been conceptualized by itself as a series of révoltes logiques that, in the eyes of those who revolt, legitimize the privileged situation of the "rising" generation by discrediting established ontological referents.

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Beginning as a intergenerational conflict produced by radically different perceptions, the first postwar generation of Western intellectuals appropriated a succession of emancipatory conceptual systems in their attempt to break free of the constraints imposed upon them by existing forms of thought, political institutions and social relationships. Varieties of revolutionary thought and doctrine performed this function throughout the 1960s and 70s, along with heightened interest in the occult and other types of utopian or visionary thought and perception. Feminism and other sex and gender-based modes of liberation emerged as liberating forms of expression in the 1970s.

Postmodernism is one of the latest developments in this series. It corresponds to a more quietistic or conservative phase in the maturation of this generation, during which a need for integration and the consolidation of personal,

individual fortunes override the pleasure of social and political disruption. The thrust of social and political theorizing changes direction, but an essential iconoclasm remains constant and justifies the ideological shift. At the same time, postmodernism finds supporters in younger intellectuals who reject the ideological posturing or moral idealism of the first postwar age cohort — the "baby-boomers" who animated the social movements of the 1960s.

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Postmodernism is an intellectual trend which focuses upon new conditions in the generation of knowledge and which questions established criteria and assumptions in the determination of factual understanding. Most essentially, it rejects the idea that unified systems of analysis are capable of apprehending the nature of reality and transforming this understanding into communicable knowledge. As Jean-François Lyotard explained in his influential analysis of this trend, *La condition postmoderne* (1979), "*Dans la société et la culture contemporaine, société post-industrielle, culture postmoderne, la question de la légitimation du savoir se pose en d'autres termes. Le grand récit a perdu sa crédibilité, quel que soit le mode d'unification qui lui est assigné : récit spéculatif, récit de l'émancipation*". [3]

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For Lyotard and others, there exists a "*crisis of scientific knowledge*" provoked by the revelation of phenomenological relativity and indeterminacy. This crisis, he says, "ne provient pas d'une prolifération fortuite des sciences qui serait elle-même l'effet du progrès des techniques et de l'expansion du capitalisme. Elle vient de l'érosion interne du principe de légitimité du savoir. Cette érosion se trouve à l'œuvre dans le jeu spéculatif, et c'est elle qui, en relâchant la trame encyclopédique dans laquelle chaque science devait trouver sa place, les laisse s'émanciper". [4] Earlier, the philosopher Jacques Derrida more specifically called into question the notion of "context" and the legitimacy of deductive demonstrations and empirically-oriented proofs in the human (or social) sciences. [5] Although Paul Ricœur implicitly defended the notion of context, explaining that Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory revealed how structures generated creative process ("la structure comme dynamisme réglé") [6], it was the possibility of systematically calling ontologies into question that allowed a reversal of conceptual fields. The need to adapt ideologically could be, thusly, justified epistemologically.

In an important sense, a postmodernist "theory" is impossible, for it is difficult to "construct" when the "end of ideology" and the "deconstruction" of social thought and mental processes dominate the universities and the communications media. At the present time, what passes for critical thought among intellectuals is often an attempt to reconcile a critical assessment of prevailing social relations and cultural trends with an avoidance of political commitment and involvement in any social movement that may compromise career or material standing. This is a social and psychological phenomenon that is best understood in terms of inter- and intra-generational relations and evolution in the social and geo-political changes of the past forty years.

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At the center of new attitudes concerning the nature of human understanding is the emergence of a notion of "crisis" which justifies the political inactivity of an intellectual elite concerned to retain social privileges. The demonstration that faith in Reason and Progress is misplaced, that popular, egalitarian movements are inevitably corrupted or co-opted by structures of power, and that Marxian or libertarian categories of analysis are simplistic and deterministic is conclusive for a significant number of intellectuals today. This condition reflects the desire to distinguish those who have recognized the new verities from those who remain attached to "holistic" thinking founded upon the idea that knowledge can be synthesized into a coherent system. One of the paradoxes of this notion is that conceptualizing the "postmodern" has resulted in "postmodernism", a coherent or semi-coherent approach to the apprehension of social reality (although it is an approach whose advocates often claim to reject a certain notion of coherence in social analysis).

Whatever the merits of what can now be seen as a new "school" of thought (with its schisms, rivalries and heresies), postmodernism is a complex phenomenon that must be taken seriously. When people whose "business" is commenting upon social and cultural reality claim that we must call into question some of our most basic

assumptions, we must listen. Either something fundamental has indeed changed in our existence, or something has caused "intellectuals" to perceive the world differently. Whatever the motivation lying behind the change in social imagination, or simply in the way it is now thought about, writing and thinking about historical change have been particularly influenced by these changes.

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The notion of postmodernism is fundamentally an attempt to periodize and, thusly, the representation of a certain perception of historical evolution. This is true at the same time that the idea historical causation can be determined, or that any sort of historical "truth" can be obtained from historical study, is rejected. The epistemological premises of the defenders of the "postmodernist" thesis are necessarily a-historical (or "anti-historical") even as their observations are based upon a perception of qualitative historical change. This is an ambiguity (if not a contradiction) within postmodernism that recalls the derision with which Marshall McLuhan castigated "linear thinking" in the late 1960s [7], even as he explained the evolution of the means of communication in terms of a linear progression. Any thought that is posited upon the relativity of thought itself can allow itself the privilege of escaping confinement within rigorous terms of analysis. From this point of view, contradiction and paradox do not detract from understanding, but rather deepen it. (Although contradiction and paradox — the "unity of opposites" and the "negation of the negation" — are not posited as terms of analysis as they are in Hegelian and Marxian thought. It is one thing to recognize the existence of contradiction as a key to understanding, and another to affirm that contradiction is the essence of knowledge that precludes understanding.)

The conceptual resolution of this apparent (or implicit) contradiction is the refusal of positivist evolution in favor of the idea of a radical shift of perception embodied in a "crisis". In effect, most conceptual work in the social sciences is necessarily oriented towards a particular conception of "crisis". From the notions of dialectical change developed by Hegel and Marx, to the more recent formulations of Thomas Kuhn, [8] explanations of qualitative changes in human life and understanding are presented in terms of some notion of "crisis" as a dramatic turning point that forces us to wrench our minds free from some habitual way of perceiving the world.

The idea of crisis as unavoidable catastrophe is central to the social and cultural preoccupations of professional intellectuals today. It is an idea with a long history, and one that presents problems of social and historical conceptualization. Visions of the Apocalypse, Armageddon, the Flood, of the Scourge and the Wrath of God abound in Judaeo-Christian culture and are derived from and related to myths and apprehensions proper to other cultures and civilizations. Mircea Eliade put much of this in perspective in his *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour. Archétypes et répétition*. [9] His study of certain "mythico-ritual motifs" revealed the psychological importance of new beginnings to the social stability of different communities. Fertility rites, planting festivals, re-creations of the Creation and all the Saturnalia and Charivari attached to them proffered the orderliness of existence during ordinary times, and radical renewal when existence seemed threatened. Much of these phenomena are data studied or searched for by anthropologists, and they provide the counterpoint needed for the definition of "modernity".

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The "linearity" characteristic of the modern conception of time was the precondition of historical thought as the Western world has known it for the past two centuries. Historical progression was imagined something like a plow cutting through the cosmic earth, leaving an indelible trace, disturbing matter, producing unique changes. Historicism emerged from this new image of qualitative transformation through time. Reason, progress, the environmental conditioning of human personality and character, the quantum acceleration of technological innovation and, consequently, the increasing separation of human existence from seasonal and climatic conditions, all of these factors testified to the advent of a unique stage in the evolution of human society, and held-out the promise of a new age having nothing in common with the endless cycles of "traditional" societies.

A theme basic to the postmodernists is a break with the linearity of this conception of historical change. The postmodernist perspective does not contradict substantive understandings of what has changed in human history; but it rejects schematic explanations of why change has occurred. Historical materialism, historical idealism and varieties of positivism, it is believed, reduce the complexity of historical evolution by forcing it to conform to preconceived developmental schemas. Since human experience cannot be "unified" by any particular theory, attempting to explain the nature of historical causation must be abandoned in favor of adequately describing how change takes place.

Striking in this regard are some of the writings of Jean Baudrillard, who adapts metaphors from contemporary astronomical physics in "explanation" of how societies are being transformed.

The social sciences have been reduced to "charabia", claims Baudrillard, because social relations have been reduced to a "masse excrémentielle" by the implosion of productive and institutional processes. In effect, "le social" no longer exists because it resists any rationalist attempt to explain it. Modern communications have been oriented not towards explanation, but rather towards mystification of social reality in order to absorb criticism of it. The result has been the reversal of social energy: instead of expanding creatively, force is turned back in an attempt to neutralize opposition. Instead of exploding outward, the system is imploding, collapsing onto itself. Society can thusly be conceived as "*un gigantesque trou noir*" in which the perception of reality is obscured by "le spectaculaire", thus replaced by the "hyperréel" or the "*réalité virtuelle*".

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Baudrillard's, sometimes suggestive, characterization of socio-historical transition is essentially a description of change that mystifies through its evocation of the process of mystification. Like other postmodernists, Baudrillard assumes the elusive position of criticizing "holisms". The only alternative explanation he offers is to say that there is no theoretical or analytical system that adds to our understanding more than it falsifies.

However, if they believe the past is relatively incomprehensible, the postmodernists nevertheless offer a concrete vision of the future. It is one in which islands of civilization will be preserved only by the rejection of social idealism. "L'implosion ne peut être, pour nous et aujourd'hui, que violente et catastrophique, parce qu'elle résulte de l'échec du système d'explosion et d'expansion dirigée qui fut le nôtre en Occident depuis quelques siècles" [10].

Bernard-Henri Lévy is even more explicit, saying "Now we know that history has no sense, that it is a tale told by an idiot and that it is for the intellectual of the future to oppose simplicity and slogans to seek complexity rather than to simplify." [11] In accordance with their rejection of rationalistic systems of philosophical and historical thought, it is understandable that they also reject programmatic approaches to the solving of outstanding social problems.

However, the representation of socio-political reality by intellectuals sharing "postmodernist" assumptions has not generally contributed to deeper or more nuanced understanding. On the contrary, their opposition to established terms of analysis has often resulted in conceptual simplification. Outstanding in this regard is the way social some intellectuals have represented "structures" in the mass communications media. Some, such as Alain Touraine, are not of the "baby boomer" generation, but have propagated the idea of a "post-industrial" society and have consistently criticized "class analysis" as a simplistic approach serving the designs of irresponsible political tendencies.

Although, in the United States, has sometimes been considered a progressive thinker, he has consistently opposed radical ideas in his ministrations to the public and to politicians. Since the 1960s, Touraine has maintained that the "class ouvrière" is disappearing (which is technically accurate) implying that the notion of "proletariat" is inappropriate to any scientific study of capitalist society (which is unfounded). By the 1970s, he moved from a sociological study of "du travail" to that of "des mouvements sociaux". [12]

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In his systematic attempts to weaken the hold of Marxian and other revolutionary conceptions over the social imagination, Alain Touraine prepared the way for intellectuals of a subsequent generation. We have discussed Jean Baudrillard's social representations in this context. Michel Maffesoli is another university intellectual who is frequently solicited by the communications media. His contribution to (what Pierre Bourdieu calls) the "lutte des classements" (classification struggles) was to develop the notion of the "tribalization" of contemporary societies. According to him, our societies must be seen as a massified whole differentiated by sub-cultural groupings formed according to selected life-styles. In recent years, he has chosen "la vie quotidienne" (everyday life) as the object of this speculation, but abstracted from the radical concerns that inspired Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s. [13]

As in the case of Touraine, what Maffesoli has done is to privilege one aspect of social identification at the expense of a particular conception of social division based upon relations of economic production. By magnifying (what can easily be considered) secondary social phenomena, they suppress consideration of sources of social contradiction that imply certain kinds of political activity (revolutionary party organization, trade unionism, ideological struggle etc.). Considered as part of a historical-generational conjuncture, Maffesoli's work is an application of that done on subcultures in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s during the period of enforced social and political consensus. At the same time, it theorizes some of the attitudes and slogans of the "counterculture" of the late 1960s and early 1970s. (In January 1967, for example, the famous "Human Be-In" in San Francisco was presented as "a gathering of the tribes".) The seeming "classlessness" of the cultural movements of those years corresponded to the focus on life-styles and the role of individual wills in their selection of life-styles.

[1] Guy Hocquenghem, *Lettre ouverte à ceux qui sont passés du col Mao au Rotary*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1986, p. 25.

[2] See Claudine Attias-Donfut, *Sociologie des générations*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1988.

[3] Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Paris, Éditions du Minuit, 1979, p. 63.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[5] See Jacques Derrida, *Signature, événement, contexte*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972.

[6] Paul Ricoeur, "La structure, le mot, l'événement" in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1969, p. 90

[7] See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, New York, Mentor, 1964.

[8] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

[9] Mircea Eliade, *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour. archétypes et répétition*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949.

[10] Jean Baudrillard, *À l'ombre des majorités silencieuses ou la fin du sociale*, Paris, Denoël/Gonthier, 1982, p. 62.

[11] Cited in Mary Blume, "The Intellectual in the Marketplace", *International Herald Tribune*, 21 janvier 1991, p. 14.

[12] See Larry Portis, "Critique et consensus dans la sociologie française hier et aujourd'hui", *L'Homme et la société*, n° 95-96, 1990, pp. 59-72.

[13] See Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus. Le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés de masses*, Paris, Méridiens Klincksieck, 1988 et Henri Lefebvre, *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968.