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After Theory

TERRY EAGLETON

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306
Ella

In memory of my mother

Rosaleen Riley

(1913-2002)

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I

The Politics of Amnesia

The golden age of cultural theory is long past. The pioneering works of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are several decades behind us. So are the path-breaking early writings of Raymond Williams, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. Not much that has been written since has matched the ambitiousness and originality of these founding mothers and fathers. Some of them have since been struck down. Fate pushed Roland Barthes under a Parisian laundry van, and afflicted Michel Foucault with Aids. It dispatched Lacan, Williams and Bourdieu, and banished Louis Althusser to a psychiatric hospital for the murder of his wife. It seemed that God was not a structuralist.

Many of the ideas of these thinkers remain of incomparable value. Some of them are still producing work of major importance. Those to whom the title of this book suggests that 'theory' is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment. There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce *delectable* or Milton a doughty spirit. It is not as though the whole project was a ghastly mistake on which some merciful soul

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has now blown the whistle, so that we can all return to whatever it was we were doing before Ferdinand de Saussure heaved over the horizon. If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever. But we are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory, in an age which, having grown rich on the insights of thinkers like Althusser, Barthes and Derrida, has also in some ways moved beyond them.

The generation which followed after these path-breaking figures did what generations which follow after usually do. They developed the original ideas, added to them, criticized them and applied them. Those who can, think up feminism or structuralism; those who can't, apply such insights to *Moby-Dick* or *The Cat in the Hat*. But the new generation came up with no comparable body of ideas of its own. The older generation had proved a hard act to follow. No doubt the new century will in time give birth to its own clunch of gurus. For the moment, however, we are still trading on the past – and this in a world which has changed dramatically since Foucault and Lacan first settled to their typewriters. What kind of fresh thinking does the new era demand? Before we can answer this question, we need to take stock of where we are. Structuralism, Marxism, post-structuralism and the like are no longer the sexy topics they were. What is sexy instead is sex. On the wilder shores of academia, an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. In some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East. Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism. Among students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it is usually the erotic body, not the famished one. There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in labouring ones. Quietly-spoken middle-class students huddle diligently in

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libraries, at work on sensationalist subjects like vampirism and eye-gouging, cyborgs and porno movies.

Nothing could be more understandable. To work on the literature of latex or the political implications of navel-piercing is to take literally the wise old adage that study should be fun. It is rather like writing your Master's thesis on the comparative flavour of malt whiskies, or on the phenomenology of lying in bed all day. It creates a seamless continuity between the intellect and everyday life. There are advantages in being able to write your Ph.D. thesis without stirring from in front of the TV set. In the old days, rock music was a distraction from your studies; now it may well be what you are studying. Intellectual matters are no longer an ivory-tower affair, but belong to the world of media and shopping malls, bedrooms and brothels. As such, they re-join everyday life – but only at the risk of losing their ability to subject it to critique.

Today, the old fogeys who work on classical allusions in Milton look askance on the Young Turks who are deep in incest and cyber-feminism. The bright young things who pen essays on foot fetishism or the history of the codpiece eye with suspicion the scrawny old scholars who dare to maintain that Jane Austen is greater than Jeffrey Archer. One zealous orthodoxy gives way to another. Whereas in the old days you could be drummed out of your student drinking club if you failed to spot a metonym in Robert Herrick, you might today be regarded as an unspeakable nerd for having heard of either metonyms or Herrick in the first place.

This trivialization of sexuality is especially ironic. For one of the towering achievements of cultural theory has been to establish gender and sexuality as legitimate objects of study, as well as markers of insistent political importance. It is remarkable how intellectual life for centuries was conducted on the tacit assumption

that human beings had no genitals. (Intellectuals also behaved as though men and women lacked stomachs. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas remarked of Martin Heidegger's rather lofty concept of *Dasein*, meaning the kind of existence peculiar to human beings: '*Dasein* does not eat.') Friedrich Nietzsche once commented that whenever anybody speaks crudely of a human being as a belly with two needs and a head with one, the lover of knowledge should listen carefully. In an historic advance, sexuality is now firmly established within academic life as one of the keystones of human culture. We have come to acknowledge that human existence is at least as much about fantasy and desire as it is about truth and reason. It is just that cultural theory is at present behaving rather like a celibate middle-aged professor who has stumbled absent-mindedly upon sex and is frenetically making up for lost time.

Another historic gain of cultural theory has been to establish that popular culture is also worth studying. With some honourable exceptions, traditional scholarship has for centuries ignored the everyday life of the common people. Indeed, it was life itself it used to ignore, not just the everyday. In some traditionalist universities not long ago, you could not research on authors who were still alive. This was a great incentive to slip a knife between their ribs one foggy evening, or a remarkable test of patience if your chosen novelist was in rude health and only thirty-four. You certainly could not research on anything you saw around you every day, which was by definition not worth studying. Most things that were deemed suitable for study in the humanities were not visible, like nail-clippings or Jack Nicholson, but invisible, like Stendhal, the concept of sovereignty or the sinuous elegance of Leibniz's notion of the monad. Today it is generally recognized that everyday life is quite as intricate, unfathomable, obscure and occasionally tedious as Wagner, and thus eminently worth

investigating. In the old days, the test of what was worth studying was quite often how futile, monotonous and esoteric it was. In some circles today, it is whether it is something you and your friends do in the evenings. Students once wrote uncritical, reverential essays on Flaubert, but all that has been transformed. Nowadays they write uncritical, reverential essays on *Friends*.

Even so, the advent of sexuality and popular culture as kosher subjects of study has put paid to one powerful myth. It has helped to demolish the puritan dogma that seriousness is one thing and pleasure another. The puritan mistakes pleasure for frivolity because he mistakes seriousness for solemnity. Pleasure falls outside the realm of knowledge, and thus is dangerously anarchic. On this view, to *study* pleasure would be like chemically analysing champagne rather than drinking the stuff. The puritan does not see that pleasure and seriousness are related in this sense: that finding out how life can become more pleasant for more people is a serious business. Traditionally, it is known as moral discourse. But 'political' discourse would do just as well.

Yet pleasure, a buzz word for contemporary culture, has its limits too. Finding out how to make life more pleasant is not always pleasant. Like all scientific inquiry, it requires patience, self-discipline and an inexhaustible capacity to be bored. In any case, the hedonist who embraces pleasure as the ultimate reality often just the puritan in full-throated rebellion. Both of them are usually obsessed with sex. Both of them equate truth with earnestness. Old-style puritanical capitalism forbade us to enjoy ourselves, since once we had acquired a taste for the stuff we could probably never see the inside of the workplace again. Sigmund Freud held that if it were not for what he called the reality principle, we would simply lie around the place all day in various mildly scandalous states of *jouissance*. A more consumerist kind of capitalism, however, persuades us

to indulge our senses and gratify ourselves as shamelessly as possible. In that way we will not only consume more goods; we will also identify our own fulfilment with the survival of the system. Anyone who fails to wallow orgasmically in sensual delight will be visited late at night by a terrifying thug known as the superego, whose penalty for such non-enjoyment is atrocious guilt. But since this ruffian also tortures us for having a good time, one might as well take the hap'pence with the kicks and enjoy oneself anyway.

So there is nothing inherently subversive about pleasure. On the contrary, as Karl Marx recognized, it is a thoroughly aristocratic creed. The traditional English gentleman was so averse to unpleasurable labour that he could not even be bothered to articulate properly. Hence the patrician slur and drawl. Aristotle believed that being human was something you had to get good at through constant practice, like learning Catalan or playing the bagpipes; whereas if the English gentleman was virtuous, as he occasionally deigned to be, his goodness was purely spontaneous. Moral effort was for merchants and clerks.

Not all students of culture are blind to the Western narcissism involved in working on the history of pubic hair while half the world's population lacks adequate sanitation and survives on less than two dollars a day. Indeed, the most flourishing sector of cultural studies today is so-called post-colonial studies, which deals with just this dire condition. Like the discourse of gender and sexuality, it has been one of the most precious achievements of cultural theory. Yet these ideas have thrived among new generations who, for no fault of their own, can remember little of world-shaking political importance. Before the advent of the so-called war on terrorism, it seemed as though there might be nothing more momentous for young Europeans to recount to their grandchildren than the advent of the euro. Over the

dreary decades of post-1970s conservatism, the historical sense had grown increasingly blunted, as it suited those in power that we should be able to imagine no alternative to the present. The future would simply be the present infinitely repeated – or, as the postmodernist remarked, 'the present plus more options'. There are now those who piously insist on 'historicizing' and who seem to believe that anything that happened before 1980 is ancient history.

To live in interesting times is not, to be sure, an unmixed blessing. It is no particular consolation to be able to recall the Holocaust, or to have lived through the Vietnam war. Innocence and amnesia have their advantages. There is no point in mourning the blissful days when you could have your skull fractured by the police every weekend in Hyde Park. To recall a world-shaking political history is also, for the political left at least, to recall what is for the most part a history of defeat. In any case, a new and ominous phase of global politics has now opened, which not even the most cloistered of academics will be able to ignore. Even so, what has proved most damaging, at least before the emergence of the anti-capitalist movement, is the absence of memories of collective, and effective, political action. It is this which has warped so many contemporary cultural ideas out of shape. There is a historical vortex at the centre of our thought which drags it out of true.

Much of the world as we know it, despite its solid, well-polstered appearance, is of recent vintage. It was thrown up by the tidal waves of revolutionary nationalism which swept the globe in the period after the Second World War, tearing one nation after another from the grip of Western colonialism. The Allies' struggle in the Second World War was itself a successful collaborative action on a scale unprecedented in human history – one which crushed a malevolent fascism at the heart of Europe,

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and in doing so laid some of the foundations of the world we know today. Much of the global community we see around us was formed, fairly recently, by collective revolutionary projects – projects which were launched often enough by the weak and hungry, but which nevertheless proved successful in dislodging their predatory foreign rulers. Indeed, the Western empires which those revolutions dismantled were themselves for the most part the product of revolutions. It is just that they were those most victorious revolutions of all – the ones which we have forgotten ever took place. And that usually means the ones which produced the likes of us. Other people's revolutions are always more eye-catching than one's own.

But it is one thing to make a revolution, and another to sustain it. Indeed, for the most eminent revolutionary leader of the twentieth century, what brought some revolutions to birth in the first place was also what was responsible for their ultimate downfall. Vladimir Lenin believed that it was the very backwardness of Tsarist Russia which had helped to make the Bolshevik revolution possible. Russia was a nation poor in the kind of civic institutions which secure the loyalty of citizens to the state, and thus help to stave off political insurrection. Its power was centralized rather than diffuse, coercive rather than consensual: it was concentrated in the state machine, so that to overthrow that was to seize sovereignty at a stroke. But this very same poverty and backwardness helped to scupper the revolution once it had been made. You could not build socialism in an economic backwater, encircled by stronger, politically hostile powers, among a mass of unskilled, illiterate workers and peasants without traditions of social organization and democratic self-government. The attempt to do so called for the strong-armed measures of Stalinism, which ended up subverting the very socialism it was trying to construct.

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Something of the same fate afflicted many of those nations who managed in the twentieth century to free themselves from Western colonial rule. In a tragic irony, socialism proved least possible where it was most necessary. Indeed, post-colonial theory first emerged in the wake of the failure of Third World nations to go it alone. It marked the end of the era of Third World revolutions, and the first glimmerings of what we now know as globalization. In the 1950s and 60s, a series of liberation movements, led by the nationalist middle classes, had thrown off their colonial masters in the name of political sovereignty and economic independence. By harnessing the demands of an impoverished people to these goals, the Third World elites could install themselves in power on the back of popular discontent. Once ensconced there, they would need to engage in an ungainly balancing act between radical pressures from below and global market forces from outside.

Marxism, an internationalist current to its core, lent its support to these movements, respecting their demand for political autonomy and seeing in them a grievous setback to world capitalism. But many Marxists harboured few illusions about the aspiring middle-class elites who spearheaded these nationalist currents. Unlike the more sentimental brands of post-colonialism, most Marxism did not assume that 'Third World' meant good and 'First World' bad. They insisted rather on a class-analysis of colonial and post-colonial politics themselves.

Isolated, poverty-stricken and poor in civic, liberal or democratic traditions, some of these regimes found themselves taking the Stalinist path into crippling isolation. Others had to acknowledge that they could not go it alone – that political sovereignty brought with it no authentic economic self-government, and could never do so in a West-dominated world. As the world socialist crisis deepened from the early 1970s onwards, and

as a number of Third World nations sank further into stagnation and corruption, the aggressive restructurings of a Western capitalism fallen upon hard times finally put paid to illusions of national-revolutionary independence. 'Third Worldism' accordingly gave way to 'post-colonialism'. Edward Said's magisterial *Orientalism*, published in 1978, marked this transition in intellectual terms, despite its author's understandable reservations about much of the post-colonial theory which was to follow in its wake. The book appeared at the turning-point of the fortunes of the international left.

Given the partial failure of national revolution in the so-called Third World, post-colonial theory was wary of all talk of nationhood. Theorists who were either too young or too obtuse to recall that nationalism had been in its time an astonishingly effective anti-colonial force could find in it nothing but a benighted chauvinism or ethnic supremacism. Instead, much post-colonial thought focused on the cosmopolitan dimensions of a world in which post-colonial states were being sucked inexorably into the orbit of global capital. In doing so, it reflected a genuine reality. But in rejecting the idea of nationhood, it also tended to jettison the notion of class, which had been so closely bound up with the revolutionary nation. Most of the new theorists were not only 'post' colonialism, but 'post' the revolutionary impetus which had given birth to the new nations in the first place. If those nation-states had partly failed, unable to get on terms with the affluent capitalist world, then to look beyond the nation seemed to mean looking beyond class as well – and this at a time when capitalism was more powerful and predatory than ever.

It is true that the revolutionary nationalists had in a sense looked beyond class themselves. By rallying the national people, they could forge a spurious unity out of conflicting class interests.

The middle classes had rather more to gain from national independence than hard-pressed workers and peasants, who would simply find themselves presented with a native rather than a foreign set of exploiters. Even so, this unity was not entirely bogus. If the idea of the nation was a displacement of class conflict, it also served to give it shape. If it fostered some dangerous illusions, it also helped to turn the world upside down. Indeed, revolutionary nationalism was by far the most successful radical tide of the twentieth century. In one sense, different groups and classes in the Third World indeed faced a common Western antagonist. The nation had become the major form which the class struggle against this antagonist had assumed. It was, to be sure, a narrow, distorting form, and in the end would prove woefully inadequate. *The Communist Manifesto* observes that the class struggle first of all takes a national form, but goes well beyond this form in its content. Even so, the nation was a way of rallying different social classes – peasants, workers, students, intellectuals – against the colonial powers which stood in the way of their independence. And it had a powerful argument in its favour: success, at least to begin with.

Some of the new theory, by contrast, saw itself as shifting attention from class to colonialism – as though colonialism and post-colonialism were not themselves matters of class! In its Eurocentric way, it identified class conflict with the West alone, or saw it only in national terms. For socialists, by contrast, anti-colonial struggle was class struggle too: it represented a strike against the power of international capital, which had not been slow to respond to that challenge with sustained military violence.

It was a battle between Western capital and the sweated labourers of the world. But because this class conflict had been framed in national terms, it helped to pave the way for the dwindling of every idea of class in later post-colonial writing. This is one

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sense in which, as we shall see later, the highpoint of radical ideas in the mid-twentieth century was also the beginning of their downward curve.

Much post-colonial theory shifted the focus from class and nation to ethnicity. This meant among other things that the distinctive problems of post-colonial culture were often falsely assimilated to the very different question of Western 'identity politics'. Since ethnicity is largely a cultural affair, this shift of focus was also one from politics to culture. In some ways, this reflected real changes in the world. But it also helped to depoliticize the question of post-colonialism, and inflate the role of culture within it, in ways which chimed with the new, post-revolutionary climate in the West itself. 'Liberation' was no longer in the air, and by the end of the 1970s 'emancipation' had a quaintly antiquated ring to it. It seemed, then, that having drawn a blank at home, the Western left was now hunting for its stomping ground abroad. In travelling abroad, however, it brought with it in its luggage the burgeoning Western obsession with culture.

Even so, Third World revolutions had testified in their own way to the power of collective action. So in a different way did the militant actions of the Western labour movements, which in the 1970s helped to bring down a British government. So, too, did the peace and student movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which played a central part in ending the Vietnam war. Much recent cultural theory, however, has little recollection of all this. From its viewpoint, collective action means launching wars against weaker nations rather than bringing such adventures to a merciful end. In a world which has witnessed the rise and fall of various brutally totalitarian regimes, the whole idea of collective life comes to seem vaguely discredited.

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For some postmodern thought, consensus is tyrannical and solidarity nothing but soulless uniformity.¹ But whereas liberals oppose this conformity with the individual, postmodernists, some of whom doubt the very reality of the individual, counter it instead with margins and minorities. It is what stands askew to society as a whole – the marginal, mad, deviant, perverse, transgressive – which is most politically fertile. There can be little value in mainstream social life. And this, ironically, is just the kind of elitist, monolithic viewpoint which postmodernists find most disagreeable in their conservative opponents.

In retrieving what orthodox culture has pushed to the margins, cultural studies has done vital work. Margins can be unspeakably painful places to be, and there are few more honourable tasks for students of culture than to help create a space in which the dumped and disregarded can find a tongue. It is no longer quite so easy to claim that there is nothing to ethnic art but pounding on oil drums or knocking a couple of bones together. Feminism has not only transformed the cultural landscape but, as we shall see later, has become the very model of morality for our time. Meanwhile, those white males who, unfortunately for themselves, are not quite dead have been metaphorically strung upside down from the lamp-posts, while the ill-gotten coins cascading from their pockets have been used to finance community arts projects.

What is under assault here is the *normative*. Majority social life in this view is a matter of norms and conventions, and therefore

¹ 'Postmodern', I mean, roughly speaking, the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what is called elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates discontinuity and heterogeneity.

inherently oppressive. Only the marginal, perverse and aberrant can escape this dreary regimenting. Norms are oppressive because they mould uniquely different individuals to the same shape. As the poet William Blake writes, 'One Law for the Lion & Ox is oppression.' Liberals accept this normalizing as necessary if everyone is to be granted the same life-chances to fulfil their unique personalities. It will, in short, lead to consequences which undercut it. Libertarians, however, are less resigned to this levelling. In this, they are ironically close to conservatives. Sanguine libertarians like Oscar Wilde dream of a future society in which everyone will be free to be their incomparable selves. For them, there can be no question of weighing and measuring individuals, any more than you could compare the concept of envy with a parrot.

By contrast, pessimistic or shamafaced libertarians like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault see that norms are inescapable as soon as we open our mouths. The word 'ketch', which as the reader will know means a two-masted fore-and-aft rigged sailing boat with a mizzen mast stepped forward of the rudder and smaller than its foremast, sounds precise enough, but it has to stretch to cover all sorts of individual crafts of this general kind, each with its own peculiarities. Language levels things down. It is normative all the way down. To say 'leaf' implies that two incomparably different bits of vegetable matter are one and the same. To say 'here' homogenizes all sorts of richly diverse places.

Thinkers like Foucault and Derrida chafe against these equivalences, even if they accept them as unavoidable. They would like a world made entirely out of differences. Indeed, like their great mentor Nietzsche, they think the world is made entirely out of differences, but that we need to fashion identities in order to get by. It is true that nobody in a world of pure differences would

be able to say anything intelligible – that there could be no poetry, road signs, love letters or log sheets, as well as no statements that everything is uniquely different from everything else. But this is simply the price one would have to pay for not being constrained by the behaviour of others, like paying that little bit extra for a first-class rail ticket.

It is a mistake, however, to believe that norms are always restrictive. In fact it is a crass Romantic delusion. It is normative in our kind of society that people do not throw themselves with a hoarse cry on total strangers and amputate their legs. It is conventional that child murderers are punished, that working men and women may withdraw their labour, and that ambulances speeding to a traffic accident should not be impeded just for the hell of it. Anyone who feels oppressed by all this must be seriously oversensitive. Only an intellectual who has overdosed on abstraction could be dim enough to imagine that whatever bends a norm is politically radical.

Those who believe that normativity is always negative are also likely to hold that authority is always suspect. In this, they differ from radicals, who respect the authority of those with long experience of fighting injustice, or of laws which safeguard people's physical integrity or working conditions. Similarly, some modern-day cultural thinkers seem to believe that minorities are always more vibrant than majorities. It is not the most popular victims among the disfigured victims of Basque separatism. Fascist groups, however, may be flattered to hear it, along with the IFO buffs and Seventh Day Adventists. It was majorities, and not minorities, which confounded imperial power in India and China, and brought down apartheid. Those who oppose norms, authority and modernity as such are abstract universalists, even though they often oppose abstract universalism as well. They are not modern prejudice against norms, unities and consensuses

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is a politically catastrophic one. It is also remarkably dim-witted. But it does not only spring from having precious few examples of political solidarity to remember. It also reflects a real social change. It is one result of the apparent disintegration of old-fashioned bourgeois society into a host of sub-cultures. One of the historic developments of our age has been the decline of the traditional middle class. As Perry Anderson has argued, the solid, civilized, morally upright bourgeoisie which managed to survive the Second World War has given way in our time to 'starlet princesses and sleazeball presidents, beds for rent in the official residence and bribes for killer ads, disneyfication of protocols and tarantinization of practices'. The 'solid (bourgeois) amphitheatre', Anderson writes with colourful contempt, has yielded to 'an aquarium of floating, evanescent forms - the projectors and managers, auditors and janitors, administrators and speculators of contemporary capital: functions of a monetary universe that knows no social fixities and stable identities'.² It is this lack of stable identities which for some cultural theory today is the last word in radicalism. Instability of identity is 'subversive' - a claim which it would be interesting to test out among the socially dumped and disregarded.

In this social order, then, you can no longer have bohemian rebels or revolutionary avant-gardes because they no longer have anything to blow up. Their top-hatted, frock-coated, easily outraged enemy has evaporated. Instead, the non-normative has become the norm. Nowadays, it is not just anarchists for whom anything goes, but starlets, newspaper editors, stockbrokers and corporation executives. The norm now is money; but since money has absolutely no principles or identity of its own, it is no kind of

2. Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, London, 1998, pp. 86 and 85.

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norm at all. It is utterly promiscuous, and will happily tag along with the highest bidder. It is infinitely adaptive to the most bizarre or extremist of situations, and like the Queen has no opinions of its own about anything.

It seems, then, as though we have moved from the high-minded hypocrisy of the old middle classes to the low-minded effrontery of the new ones. We have shifted from a national culture with a single set of rules to a motley assortment of sub-cultures, each one at an angle to the others. This, of course, is an exaggeration. The old regime was never as unified as that, nor the new one as fragmented. There are still some powerful collective norms at work in it. But it is true, by and large, that our new ruling elite consists increasingly of people who snort cocaine rather than people who look like Herbert Asquith or Marcel Proust.

The current of cultural experiment we know as modernism was fortunate in this respect. Rimbaud, Picasso and Bertolt Brecht still had a classical bourgeoisie to be rude about. But its offspring, postmodernism, has not. It is just that it seems not to have noticed the fact, perhaps because it is too embarrassed to acknowledge. Postmodernism seems at times to behave as though the classical bourgeoisie is alive and well, and thus finds itself living in the past. It spends much of its time assailing absolute truth, objectivity, timeless moral values, scientific inquiry and a belief in historical progress. It calls into question the autonomy of the individual, inflexible social and sexual norms, and the fact that there are firm foundations to the world. Since all these values belong to a bourgeois world on the wane, this is like firing off irascible letters to the press about the riding Huns or marauding Carthaginians who have taken the Home Counties.

It is not to say that these beliefs do not still have force. In the Ulster and Utrah, they are riding high. But nobody

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on Wall Street and few in Fleet Street believe in absolute truth and unimpeachable foundations. A lot of scientists are fairly sceptical about science, seeing it as much more of a hit-and-miss, rule-of-thumb affair than the gullible layperson imagines. It is people in the humanities who still naively think that scientists consider themselves the white-coated custodians of absolute truth, and so waste a lot of time trying to discredit them. Humanists have always been sniffy about scientists. It is just that they used to despise them for snobbish reasons, and now do so for sceptical ones. Few of the people who believe in absolute moral values in theory do so in practice. They are known mainly as politicians and business executives. Conversely, some of the people who might be expected to believe in absolute values believe in nothing of the kind, like moral philosophers and clap-happy clerics. And though some genetically upbeat Americans may still have faith in progress, a huge number of constitutionally downbeat Europeans do not.

But it is not only the traditional middle class which has faded from view. It is also the traditional working class. And since the working class stood for political solidarity, it is scarcely surprising that we should now have a form of radicalism which is deeply distrustful of all that. Postmodernism does not believe in individualism, since it does not believe in individuals; but it does not pin much faith in working-class community either. Instead, it puts its trust in pluralism – in a social order which is as diverse and inclusive as possible. The problem with this as a radical case is that there is not much in it with which Prince Charles would disagree. It is true that capitalism quite often creates divisions and exclusions for its own purposes. Either that, or it draws upon ones which already exist. And these exclusions can be profoundly hurtful for a great many people. Whole masses of men and women have suffered the misery and indignity of

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second-class citizenship. In principle, however, capitalism is an impeccably inclusive creed: it really doesn't care who it exploits. It is admirably egalitarian in its readiness to do down just about anyone. It is prepared to rub shoulders with any old victim, however unappetizing. Most of the time, at least, it is eager to mix together as many diverse cultures as possible, so that it can peddle its commodities to them all.

In the generously humanistic spirit of the ancient poet, this system regards nothing human as alien to it. In its hunt for profit, it will travel any distance, endure any hardship, shack up with the most obnoxious of companions, suffer the most abominable humiliations, tolerate the most tasteless wallpaper and cheerfully betray its next of kin. It is capitalism which is disinterested, not dons. When it comes to consumers who wear turbans and those who do not, those who sport flamboyant crimson waistcoats and those who wear nothing but a loincloth, it is sublimely even-handed. It has the scorn for hierarchies of a truculent adolescent, and the zeal to pick and mix of an American diner. It thrives on bursting bounds and slaying sacred cows. Its desire is unslakeable and its space infinite. Its law is the flouting of all limits, which makes law indistinguishable from criminality. In its sublime ambition and extravagant transgressions, it makes its most shaggily anarchic critics look staid and suburban.

There are other, familiar problems with the idea of inclusiveness, which need not detain us too long. Who gets to decide who gets included? Who – the Groucho Marx query – would not to be included in this set-up anyway? If marginality is as vile, subversive a place as postmodern thinkers tend to suggest, why would they want to abolish it? Anyway, what if there is no division between margins and majority? For a socialist, the scandal of the present world is that almost everyone in it is pushed to the margins. As far as the transnational corporations

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go, great masses of men and women are really neither here nor there. Whole nations are thrust to the periphery. Entire classes of people are deemed to be dysfunctional. Communities are uprooted and forced into migration.

In this world, what is central can alter overnight: nothing and nobody is permanently indispensable, least of all corporation executives. Who or what is key to the system is debatable. The destitute are obviously marginal, as so much debris and detritus thrown up by the global economy; but what of the low-paid? The low-paid are not central, but neither are they marginal. It is they whose labour keeps the system up and running. And on a global scale, the low-paid means an enormous mass of people. This, curiously, is a set-up which shuts out most of its members. And in that it is like any class-society which has ever existed. Or, for that matter, like patriarchal society, which disadvantages roughly half of its members.

As long as we think of margins as *minorities*, this extraordinary fact is conveniently obscured. Most cultural thinking these days comes from the United States, a country which houses some sizeable ethnic minorities as well as most of the world's great corporations. But because Americans are not much used to thinking in international terms, given that their governments are more interested in ruling the world than reflecting upon it, 'marginal' comes to mean Mexican or African-American, rather than, in addition, the people of Bangladesh or the former coalminers and shipbuilders of the West. Coalminers don't seem all that Other, except in the eyes of a few of D. H. Lawrence's characters.

Indeed, there are times when it does not seem to matter all that much who the Other is. It is just any group who will show you up in your dismal normativity. A murky subcurrent of masochism runs beneath this exoticizing, laced with a dash

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of good old-fashioned American puritan guilt. If you were white and Western, it was better to be more or less anyone but yourself. The felicitous unearthing of a Manx great-grandmother or serendipitous stumbling across a Cornish second cousin might go some way towards assuaging your guilt. With an arrogance thinly masked as humility, the cult of the Other assumes that there are no major conflicts or contradictions within the social majority themselves. Or, for that matter, within the minorities. There is just Them and Us, margins and majorities. Some of the people who hold this view are also deeply suspicious of binary oppositions.

There can be no falling back on ideas of collectivity which belong to a world unravelling before our eyes. Human history is now for the most part both post-collectivist and post-individualist; and if this feels like a vacuum, it may also present an opportunity. We need to imagine new forms of belonging, which in our kind of world are bound to be multiple rather than monolithic. Some of those forms will have something of the intimacy of tribal or community relations, while others will be more abstract, mediated and indirect. There is no single ideal size of society to belong to, no Cinderella's slipper of a space. The ideal size of community used to be known as the nation-state, but even some nationalists no longer see this as the only desirable terrain.

If men and women need freedom and mobility, they also need a sense of tradition and belonging. There is nothing retrograde about roots. The postmodern cult of the migrant, which sometimes succeeds in making migrants sound even more enviable than rock stars, is a good deal too supercilious in this respect. A hangover from the modernist cult of the exile, the Satanic who scorns the suburban masses and plucks an elitist out of his enforced dispossession. The problem at the

moment is that the rich have mobility while the poor have locality. Or rather, the poor have locality until the rich get their hands on it. The rich are global and the poor are local – though just as poverty is a global fact, so the rich are coming to appreciate the benefits of locality. It is not hard to imagine affluent communities of the future protected by watchtowers, searchlights and machine-guns, while the poor scavenge for food in the waste lands beyond. In the meantime, rather more encouragingly, the anti-capitalist movement is seeking to sketch out new relations between globality and locality, diversity and solidarity.

2

The Rise and Fall of Theory

Cultural ideas change with the world they reflect upon. If they insist, as they do, on the need to see things in their historical context, then this must also apply to themselves. Even the most rarefied theories have a root in historical reality. Take, for example, hermeneutics, the science or art of interpretation. It is generally agreed that the founding father of hermeneutics was the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. What is not so widely known is that Schleiermacher's interest in the art of interpretation was provoked when he was invited to translate a book entitled *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, which records the author's encounter with Australian Aboriginal peoples. Schleiermacher was concerned about how we could understand the beliefs of this people even though they seemed desperately alien to us.¹ It was from a colonial encounter that the art of interpretation was born.

Heretical theory must be able to give some account of its own social rise, flourishing and faltering. Strictly speaking, such theory goes back as far as Plato. In the forms most familiar to us, however, it is really a product of an extraordinary decade

¹ Andrew Bowie (ed.), *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Hermeneutics and* Cambridge, 1998, p. xix.