

# HABERMAS AND THE UNFINISHED PROJECT OF MODERNITY

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Critical Essays on  
*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*

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# MODERNITY: AN UNFINISHED PROJECT

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Following the painters and the film-makers, the architects have now been admitted to the Venice Biennale as well. The response to this, the first architecture Biennale, was one of disappointment. The participants who exhibited in Venice formed an avant-garde with the fronts reversed. Under the slogan of 'the presence of the past' they sacrificed the tradition of modernity in the name of a new species of historicism: 'The fact that the entire modern movement was sustained through its engagement with the past, that Frank Lloyd Wright would be inconceivable without Japan, Le Corbusier without classical antiquity and Mediterranean architecture, and Mies van der Rohe without Schinkel and Behrens, all this is passed over in silence.' With this remark W. Pehnt, the critic on the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, supports his claim, one which provides a significant diagnosis of our times over and beyond its initial occasion: 'Postmodernity decisively presents itself as a form of Antimodernity.'<sup>1</sup>

This claim holds for an affective trend which has seeped into the pores of every intellectual domain and given rise to various theories of post-Enlightenment, of postmodernity, of post-history and so forth, in short to a new kind of conservatism. Adorno and his work stand in marked contrast to this trend.

So unreservedly did Adorno subscribe to the spirit of modernity that in the very attempt to distinguish authentic modernity from mere modernism he quickly sensed the affective response to the affront of modernity itself. It may not therefore be an entirely inappropriate way of expressing my gratitude for receiving the Adorno Prize if I pursue the question concerning the current attitude with respect to modernity. Is modernity as *passé* as the postmodernists argue? Or is the widely trumpeted arrival of postmodernity itself 'phony'? Is 'postmodern' a slogan which unobtrusively inherits the affective

attitudes which cultural modernity has provoked in reaction to itself since the middle of the nineteenth century?

### The Old and the New

Anyone who, like Adorno, conceives of 'modernity' as beginning around 1850 is perceiving it through the eyes of Baudelaire and avant-garde art. Let me elucidate this concept of cultural modernity with a brief look at its long prehistory, which has already been illuminated by Hans Robert Jausse.<sup>2</sup> The word 'modern' was first employed in the late fifth century in order to distinguish the present, now officially Christian, from the pagan and Roman past. With a different content in each case, the expression 'modernity' repeatedly articulates the consciousness of an era that refers back to the past of classical antiquity precisely in order to comprehend itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new. This is not merely true for the Renaissance, with which the 'modern age' begins *for us*; people also considered themselves as 'modern' in the age of Charlemagne, in the twelfth century, and in the Enlightenment – in short, whenever the consciousness of a new era developed in Europe through a renewed relationship to classical antiquity. In the process culminating in the celebrated *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, the dispute with the protagonists of a classicistic aesthetic taste in late seventeenth-century France, it was always *antiquitas*, the classical world, which was regarded as the normative model to be imitated. It was only the French Enlightenment's ideal of perfection and the idea, inspired by modern science, of the infinite progress of knowledge and the advance towards social and moral improvement that gradually lifted the spell exercised on the spirit of these *early* moderns by the classical works of antiquity. And finally, in opposing the classical and the romantic to one another, modernity sought its own past in an idealized vision of the Middle Ages. In the course of the nineteenth century *this* Romanticism produced a radicalized consciousness of modernity that detached itself from all previous historical connection and understood itself solely in abstract opposition to tradition and history as a whole.

At this juncture, what was considered modern was what assisted the spontaneously self-renewing historical contemporaneity of the *Zeitgeist* to find its own objective expression. The characteristic feature of such works is the moment of novelty, the New, which will itself be surpassed and devalued in turn by the innovations of the next style. Yet whereas the merely modish becomes outmoded once it is displaced into the past, the modern still retains a secret connection to the classical. The 'classical' has always signified that

which endures through the ages. The emphatically 'modern' artistic product no longer derives its power from the authority of a past age, but owes it solely to the authenticity of a contemporary relevance that has now become past. This transformation of contemporary relevance into a relevance now past has both a destructive and a constructive aspect. As Jauss has observed, it is modernity itself that creates its own classical status – thus we can speak today of 'classical modernity' as if such an expression were obvious. Adorno opposes any attempted distinction between 'modernity' and 'modernism' because he believes that 'without the characteristic subjective mentality inspired by the New no objective modernity can crystallize at all.'<sup>3</sup>

### The Mentality of Aesthetic Modernity

The mentality of aesthetic modernity begins to take shape clearly with Baudelaire and with his theory of art, influenced as it was by Edgar Allan Poe. It then unfolded in the avant-garde artistic movements and finally attained its zenith with surrealism and the Dadaists of the Café Voltaire. This mentality is characterized by a set of attitudes which developed around a transformed consciousness of time. It is this consciousness that expresses itself in the spatial metaphor of the avant-garde – that is, an avant-garde that explores hitherto unknown territory, exposes itself to the risk of sudden and shocking encounters, conquers an as yet undetermined future, and must therefore find a path for itself in previously uncharted domains. But this forward orientation, this anticipation of an indefinite and contingent future, the cult of the New which accompanies it, all this actually signifies the glorification of a contemporariness that repeatedly gives birth to new and subjectively defined pasts. This new consciousness of time, which also found its way into philosophy with Bergson, expresses more than the experience of a mobilized society, of an accelerated history, of the disruption of everyday life. The new value which is now accorded to the ephemeral, the momentary and the transitory, and the concomitant celebration of dynamism, expresses precisely the yearning for a lasting and immaculate present. As a self-negating movement, modernism is a 'yearning for true presence'. This, according to Octavio Paz, 'is the secret theme of the finest modernist writers.'<sup>4</sup>

This also explains the abstract opposition of modernism to history, which thus forfeits the structure of an articulated process of cultural transmission ensuring continuity. Individual epochs lose their own distinctive features, and the present now assumes a heroic affinity either with what is most remote or what is closest to it: decadence recognizes itself immediately in the barbaric, the wild and the

primitive. The anarchistic intention of exploding the continuum of history accounts for the subversive force of an aesthetic consciousness which rebels against the norm-giving achievements of tradition, which is nourished on the experience of rebellion against everything normative, which neutralizes considerations of moral goodness or practical utility, a consciousness which continually stages a dialectic of esoteric mystery and scandalous offence, narcotically fascinated by the fright produced by its acts of profanation – and yet at the same time flees from the trivialization resulting from that very profanation. That is why for Adorno

the wounds inflicted by disruption represent the seal of authenticity for modernity, the very thing through which modernity desperately negates the closed character of the eternally invariant; the act of explosion is itself one of the invariants of modernity. The zeal directed against the tradition becomes a devouring maelstrom. In this sense modernity is myth turned against itself; the timelessness of myth becomes the catastrophe of the moment which disrupts all temporal continuity.<sup>5</sup>

The consciousness of time articulated in avant-garde art is not simply an antihistorical one, of course. For it is directed only against the false normativity of a historical understanding essentially oriented towards the imitation of past models, something which has not been entirely eliminated even in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. This time-consciousness avails itself of the objectified pasts made available by historical scholarship, but it simultaneously rebels against that neutralization of criteria practised by a historicism which relegates history to the museum. It is in the same rebellious spirit that Walter Benjamin attempted to construe the relation of modernity to history in a *posthistorical* manner. He recalls the way in which the French Revolution conceived of itself: 'It evoked ancient Rome much as fashion evokes the costumes of the past. Fashion shows a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago.' And just as for Robespierre ancient Rome represented a past charged with 'nowness', so too the historian has to grasp the constellation 'into which his or her own era has entered with a particular earlier one'. This is how Benjamin grounds his concept of 'the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with splinters of Messianic time'.<sup>6</sup>

This spirit of aesthetic modernity has aged since Benjamin's time. During the 1960s it was, of course, rehearsed once more. But with the 1970s now behind us, we have to confess that modernism finds almost no resonance today. Even during the 1960s Octavio Paz, a partisan for modernity, observed with some sadness that 'the avant-

garde of 1967 repeats the deeds and the gestures of the avant-garde of 1917. We are witnessing the end of the idea of modern art.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of Peter Bürger's work we now speak of post-avant-garde art, an expression that acknowledges the failure of the surrealist rebellion. Yet what is the significance of this failure? Does it indicate the demise of modernity? Does the post-avant-garde imply a transition to postmodernity?

In fact this is precisely how Daniel Bell, a well-known social theorist and the most brilliant of the American neoconservative thinkers, understands the situation. In an interesting book<sup>8</sup> Bell has developed the thesis that the crisis manifested in advanced Western societies can be traced back to the bifurcation between culture and society, between cultural modernity and the demands of the economic and administrative systems. Avant-garde art has supposedly penetrated the values of everyday life and thus infected the lifeworld with the modernist mentality. Modernism represents a great seductive force, promoting the dominance of the principle of unrestrained self-realization, the demand for authentic self-experience, the subjectivism of an overstimulated sensibility, and the release of hedonistic motivations quite incompatible with the discipline required by professional life, and with the moral foundations of a purposive-rational mode of life generally. Thus, like Arnold Gehlen in Germany, Bell locates the blame for the dissolution of the Protestant ethic, something which had already disturbed Max Weber, with an 'adversary culture', that is, with a culture whose modernism encourages hostility to the conventions and the values of everyday life as rationalized under economic and administrative imperatives.

Yet, on the other hand, this same reading claims that the impulse of modernity has definitely exhausted itself and that the avant-garde has run its course; although still propagated, the latter supposedly no longer represents a creative force. Thus the question which concerns neoconservatism is how to establish norms that will restrain libertinism, restore discipline and the work ethic, and promote the virtues of individual competitiveness against the levelling effects of the welfare state. The only solution envisaged by Bell is some kind of religious renewal that would link up with quasi-naturally given traditions which are immune to criticism, which allow for the emergence of clearly defined identities, and which procure some existential sense of security for the individual.

### Cultural Modernity and Social Modernization

Of course, it is not possible simply to conjure up authoritative beliefs from nowhere. That is why analyses of this kind only give rise, as the

sole practical recommendation, to the sort of postulate we have also seen in Germany: namely, an intellectual and political confrontation with the intellectual representatives of cultural modernity. And here I quote Peter Steinfels, a perceptive observer of the new style which the neoconservatives succeeded in imposing on the intellectual scene in the 1970s:

The struggle takes the form of exposing every manifestation of what could be considered an oppositionist mentality and tracing its 'logic' so as to link it to various expressions of extremism: drawing the connection between modernism and nihilism . . . between government regulation and totalitarianism, between criticism of arms expenditures and subservience to Communism, between women's liberation or homosexual rights and the destruction of the family . . . between the Left generally and terrorism, anti-Semitism, and fascism.<sup>9</sup>

Peter Steinfels is referring here only to the United States, but the parallels with our situation are very obvious. The personalizing of debate and the degree of bitterness that characterize the abuse of intellectuals stirred up by those hostile to the Enlightenment cannot adequately be explained in psychological terms, since they are grounded rather in the internal conceptual weakness of neoconservative thought itself.

Neoconservatism displaces the burdensome and unwelcome consequences of a more or less successful capitalist modernization of the economy on to cultural modernity. It obscures the connections between the processes of social modernization, which it welcomes, on the one hand, and the crisis of motivation, which it laments, on the other, and fails to reveal the sociostructural causes of transformed attitudes to work, of consumer habits, of levels of demand and of the greater emphasis given to leisure time. Thus neoconservatism can directly attribute what appear to be hedonism, a lack of social identification, an incapacity for obedience, narcissism, and the withdrawal from competition for status and achievement to a culture which actually plays only a very mediated role in these processes. In place of these unanalysed causes, it focuses on those intellectuals who still regard themselves as committed to the project of modernity. It is true that Daniel Bell does perceive a further connection between the erosion of bourgeois values and the consumerism characteristic of a society which has become orientated towards mass production. But even Bell, seemingly unimpressed by his own argument, traces the new permissiveness back first and foremost to the spread of a lifestyle which originally emerged within the elite countercultures of bohemian artists. This is obviously only another variation on a

misunderstanding to which the avant-garde itself had already fallen prey – the idea that the mission of art is to fulfill its implicit promise of happiness by introducing into society as a whole that artistic lifestyle that was defined precisely as its opposite.

Concerning the period in which aesthetic modernity emerged, Bell remarks that ‘radical in economics, the bourgeoisie became conservative in morals and cultural taste.’<sup>10</sup> If this were true, one might see neoconservatism as a return to the old reliable pattern of the bourgeois mentality. But that is far too simple: the mood to which neoconservatism can appeal *today* by no means derives from a discontent with the antinomian consequences of a culture that has transgressed its boundaries and escaped from the museum back into life. This discontent is not provoked by the modernist intellectuals, but is rooted rather in much more fundamental reactions to a process of social modernization which, under pressure from the imperatives of economic growth and state administration, intervenes further and further into the ecology of developed forms of social life, into the communicative infrastructure of the historical lifeworlds. Thus neo-populist protests are merely giving forceful expression to widespread fears concerning the possible destruction of the urban and the natural environments, and the destruction of humane forms of social life. Many different occasions for discontent and protest arise wherever a one-sided process of modernization, guided by criteria of economic and administrative rationality, invades domains of life which are centred on the task of cultural transmission, social integration, socialization and education, domains orientated towards quite *different* criteria, namely towards those of communicative rationality. But it is from just these social processes that the neoconservative doctrines distract our attention, only to project the causes which they have left shrouded in obscurity on to an intrinsically subversive culture and its representatives.

It is quite true that cultural modernity also generates its own aporias. And those intellectual positions which hasten to proclaim postmodernity, to recommend a return to premodernity, or which radically repudiate modernity altogether, all appeal to these aporias. Thus, apart from the problematic social consequences of *social* modernization, it is true that certain reasons for doubt or despair concerning the project of modernity *also* arise from the *internal perspective* of cultural development.

### The Project of Enlightenment

The idea of modernity is intimately bound up with the development of European art, but what I have called the project of modernity only



comes into clear view when we abandon the usual concentration on art. Max Weber characterized cultural modernity in terms of the separation of substantive reason, formerly expressed in religious and metaphysical world-views, into three moments, now capable of being connected only formally with one another (through the form of argumentative justification). In so far as the world-views have disintegrated and their traditional problems have been separated off under the perspectives of truth, normative rightness and authenticity or beauty, and can now be treated in each case as questions of knowledge, justice or taste respectively, there arises in the modern period a differentiation of the value spheres of science and knowledge, of morality and of art. Thus scientific discourse, moral and legal enquiry, artistic production and critical practice are now institutionalized within the corresponding cultural systems as the concern of experts. And this professionalized treatment of the cultural heritage in terms of a single abstract consideration of validity in each case serves to bring to light the autonomous structures intrinsic to the cognitive-instrumental, the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive knowledge complexes. From now on there will also be *internal* histories of science and knowledge, of moral and legal theory, and of art. And although these do not represent linear developments, they none the less constitute learning processes. That is one side of the issue.

On the other side, the distance between these expert cultures and the general public has increased. What the cultural sphere gains through specialized treatment and reflection does not *automatically* come into the possession of everyday practice without more ado. For with cultural rationalization, the lifeworld, once its traditional substance has been devalued, threatens rather to become *impoverished*. The project of modernity as it was formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century consists in the relentless development of the objectivating sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic. But at the same time it also results in releasing the cognitive potentials accumulated in the process from their esoteric high forms and attempting to apply them in the sphere of praxis, that is, to encourage the rational organization of social relations. Partisans of the Enlightenment such as Condorcet could still entertain the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would not merely promote the control of the forces of nature, but also further the understanding of self and world, the progress of morality, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness.

Little of this optimism remains to us in the twentieth century. But the problem has remained, and with it a fundamental difference of opinion as before: should we continue to hold fast to the intentions

of the Enlightenment, however fractured they may be, or should we rather relinquish the entire project of modernity? If the cognitive potentials in question do not merely result in technical progress, economic growth and rational administration, should we wish to see them checked in order to protect a life praxis still dependent on blind traditions from any unsettling disturbance?

Even among those philosophers who currently represent something of an *Enlightenment rearguard*, the project of modernity appears curiously fragmented. Each thinker puts faith in only one of the moments into which reason has become differentiated. Karl Popper, and I refer here to the theorist of the open society who has not yet allowed himself to be appropriated by the neoconservatives, holds firmly to the potentially enlightening capacity of scientific criticism when extended into the political domain. But for this he pays the price of a general moral scepticism and a largely indifferent attitude to the aesthetic dimension. Paul Lorenzen is interested in the question as to how an artificial language methodically constructed in accordance with practical reason can effectively contribute to the reform of everyday life. But his approach directs all science and knowledge along the narrow path of justification analogous to that of moral practice and he too neglects the aesthetic. In Adorno, on the other hand, the emphatic claim to reason has withdrawn into the accusatory gesture of the esoteric work of art, morality no longer appears susceptible to justification, and philosophy is left solely with the task of revealing, in an indirect fashion, the critical content sealed up within art.

The progressive differentiation of science and knowledge, morality and art, with which Max Weber characterized the rationalism of Western culture, implies *both* the specialized treatment of special domains *and* their detachment from the current of tradition, which continues to flow on in a quasi-natural fashion in the hermeneutic medium of everyday life. This detachment is the problem which is generated by the autonomous logic of the differentiated value spheres. And it is this detachment which has also provoked abortive attempts to 'sublate' the expert cultures which accompany it, a phenomenon most clearly revealed in the domain of art.

### Kant and the Autonomy of the Aesthetic

Simplifying considerably, one can trace a line of progressive autonomization in the development of modern art. It was the Renaissance which first saw the emergence of a specific domain categorized exclusively in terms of the beautiful. Then, in the course of the eighteenth century, literature, the plastic arts and music were institu-

tionalized as a specific domain of activity distinct from ecclesiastical and court life. Finally, around the middle of the nineteenth century, there also arose an aestheticist conception of art which obliged artists to produce their work in accordance with the conscious outlook of *l'art pour l'art*. The autonomy of the aesthetic was thereby explicitly constituted as a project.

In the initial phase of this process, therefore, there emerged the cognitive structures of a new domain, one quite distinct from the complex of science and knowledge and that of morality. And the task of clarifying these structures subsequently fell to philosophical aesthetics. Kant laboured energetically to define the distinctive character of the aesthetic domain. His point of departure here was the analysis of the judgement of taste, which is certainly directed towards something subjective, namely the free play of the imagination, but which manifests more than mere preference, being orientated rather towards intersubjective agreement.

Although aesthetic objects belong neither to the sphere of phenomena knowable by means of the categories of the understanding, nor to the sphere of free acts subject to the legislation of practical reason, works of art (and those of natural beauty) are accessible to *objective judgement*. The beautiful constitutes another domain of validity, alongside those of truth and morality, and it is this which grounds the *connection between art and the practice of art criticism*. For one 'speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things'.<sup>11</sup>

Beauty pertains, of course, only to the *representation* of a thing, just as the judgement of taste refers only to the relationship between the mental representation of an object and the feeling of pleasure or displeasure. It is only in the *medium of semblance* that an object can be perceived *as* an aesthetic object. And only as a fictive object can it so affect our sensibility as to succeed in presenting what evades the conceptual character of objectivating thought and moral judgement. Kant describes the state of mind which is produced through the play of the representational faculties, and which is thus activated aesthetically, as one of *disinterested* pleasure. The quality of a *work* is therefore determined quite independently of any connections it might have with our practical relations to life.

Whereas the fundamental concepts of classical aesthetics already mentioned – namely those of taste and criticism, beautiful semblance, disinterestedness and the transcendent autonomy of the work of art – serve principally to distinguish the aesthetic domain from the other spheres of value and life practice, the concept of the *genius* which is required for the production of the work of art involves positive elements. Kant describes genius as 'the exemplary originality of the natural talents of a subject in the free employment of his or her cognitive faculties'.<sup>12</sup> If we detach the concept of genius from its

romantic origins, we could freely paraphrase this thought as follows: the talented artist is capable of bestowing authentic expression on those experiences enjoyed through concentrated engagement with a decentred subjectivity which is released from the constraints of knowledge and action.

This autonomous character of the aesthetic – namely, the objectification of a self-experiencing decentred subjectivity, the exclusion of the spatio-temporal structures of everyday life, the rupturing of conventions attaching to the processes of perception and purposive activity, the dialectic of shock and revelation – could first emerge as a distinct consciousness of modernity only with the gestures of modernism, and only once two further conditions had been fulfilled. These conditions were, in the first place, the institutionalization of artistic production dependent on the market and of a non-purposive enjoyment of art mediated through the practice of art criticism; and in the second place, an aestheticist self-understanding on the part of artists, and also on the part of critics, who conceive of themselves less as representatives of the general public than as interpreters who form part of the process of artistic production itself. Now for the first time in painting and literature we discern the beginnings of a movement which some already see anticipated in the aesthetic criticism of Baudelaire: colours, lines, sounds and movements cease to be primarily for the purpose of representation; the media of representation, along with the techniques of production themselves, advance to become aesthetic objects in their own right. Thus Adorno can begin his *Aesthetic Theory* with the statement: 'It has now become self-evident, as far as art is concerned, that nothing is self-evident any more, either in art itself or in its relation to the whole, not even its right to exist.'

### The False Sublation of Culture

Of course, art's right to exist could not have been called into question by surrealism if modern art, and indeed especially modern art, did not also harbour a promise of happiness which concerned its 'relationship to the whole'. In Schiller the promise that aesthetic contemplation makes but fails to fulfil still possessed the explicit form of a utopia which points beyond art. This line of utopian aesthetic thought extends all the way to Marcuse's lament concerning the affirmative character of culture, expressed here as a critique of ideology. But even in Baudelaire, who repeats the *promesse de bonheur*, this utopia of reconciliation had turned into a critical reflection of the unreconciled nature of the social world. The more remote from life art becomes, the more it withdraws into the

inviolable seclusion of complete aesthetic autonomy, the more painfully this lack of reconciliation is brought to conscious awareness. This pain is reflected in the boundless *ennui* of the outsider who identified himself with the Parisian rag-and-bone men.

Along such pathways of sensibility all those explosive energies gather which are finally discharged in rebellion, in the violent attempt to shatter the illusory autarchy of the sphere of art and thus to enforce reconciliation through this sacrifice. Adorno sees very clearly why the surrealist programme 'renounces art, without, however, being able to shake it off'.<sup>13</sup> All attempts to bridge the disjunction between art and life, fiction and praxis, illusion and reality, and to eliminate the distinction between artistic product and objects of utility, between something produced and something found, between premeditated configuration and spontaneous impulse, the attempt to declare everything art and everyone an artist, to abolish all criteria and to equate aesthetic judgements with the expression of subjective experience: all these undertakings, well analysed as they have been, can be seen today as nonsense experiments. They only succeed, against their own intention, in illuminating even more sharply the very structures of art which they had intended to violate: the medium of semblance, the autonomous transcendence of the work, the concentrated and premeditated character of artistic production, as well as the cognitive status of the judgement of taste.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the radical attempt to sublimate art reinstates those categories with which classical aesthetics had circumscribed its own domain, although it is also true that these categories have changed their character in the process.

The failure of the surrealist rebellion sets the seal of confirmation on a double error of a false sublation. On the one hand, once the vessels of an autonomously articulated cultural sphere are shattered, their contents are lost; once meaning has been desublimated and form dismantled, nothing remains and no emancipatory effect results. But the second error is even more fraught with consequences. In the communicative praxis of everyday life, cognitive interpretations, moral expectations, expressions and evaluations must interpenetrate one another. The processes of reaching understanding which transpire in the lifeworld require the resources of an inherited culture *in its entire range*. That is why a rationalized everyday life could not possibly be redeemed from the rigidity of cultural impoverishment by violently forcing open *one* cultural domain, in this case art, and establishing some connection with *one* of the specialized complexes of knowledge. Such an approach would only substitute one form of one-sidedness and abstraction with another.

There are also parallels in the domains of theoretical knowledge and morality to this programme and its unsuccessful practice of false

sublation, although they are admittedly less clearly defined. It is certainly true that the sciences on the one hand and moral and legal theory on the other have, like art, become autonomous. But both these spheres remain closely connected with specialized forms of praxis, the former with a scientifically perfected technology, the latter with an organized practice of law and administration dependent on moral justification. And yet institutionalized scientific knowledge and the activity of moral-practical argument segregated within the legal system have become so remote from everyday life that here too the programme of *elevation* implied by the Enlightenment could be transformed into that of *sublation* instead.

The 'sublation of philosophy' is a slogan that has been current ever since the days of the Young Hegelians, and the question concerning the relationship of theory and praxis has been raised since Marx. And here the intellectuals have allied themselves with the workers' movement, of course. It was only at the margins of this social movement that sectarian groups found room to play out the programme of sublating philosophy in the way the surrealists played out the sublation of art. The consequences of dogmatism and moral rigorism here reveal the same error as before: once the praxis of everyday life, orientated as it is towards the unconstrained interplay between the cognitive, the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive dimensions, has become reified, it cannot be cured by being connected with any *one* of the cultural domains forcibly opened up. Nor should the imitation of the lifestyles of extraordinary representatives of these value spheres – in other words, by generalizing the subversive forces which Nietzsche, Bakunin or Baudelaire expressed in their own lives – be confused with the institutionalization and practical utilization of knowledge accumulated through science, morality and art.

In specific situations it is quite true that terrorist activities may be connected with the overextension of one of these cultural moments, that is, with the inclination to aestheticize politics, to replace politics with moral rigorism, or to subjugate politics to dogmatic doctrines.

But these almost intangible connections should not mislead us into denouncing the intentions of an intransigent Enlightenment as the monstrous offspring of a 'terroristic reason'. Those who link the project of modernity with the conscious attitudes and spectacular public deeds of individual terrorists are just as short-sighted as those who claim that the incomparably more persistent and pervasive bureaucratic terrorism practised in obscurity, in the cellars of the military and the secret police, in prison camps and psychiatric institutions, represents the very essence of the modern state (and its positivistically eroded form of legal domination) simply because such terrorism utilizes the coercive means of the state apparatus.

### Alternatives to the False Sublation of Culture

I believe that we should learn from the aberrations which have accompanied the project of modernity and from the mistakes of those extravagant proposals of sublation, rather than abandoning modernity and its project. Perhaps we can at least *suggest* a possible escape from the aporias of cultural modernity if we take the reception of art as an example. Since the development of art criticism during the romantic period there have arisen certain contradictory tendencies, and they became more rigidly polarized with the emergence of the avant-garde movements. On the one hand, art criticism claims the role of a productive supplement to the work of art, while on the other it claims the role of an advocate who provides the interpretation required by the public at large. Bourgeois art addressed *both* of these expectations to its audience: on the one hand laypeople who enjoy art should educate themselves to become experts, while on the other they should behave as connoisseurs who are capable of relating their aesthetic experience back to the problems of their own life. Perhaps this second, apparently more innocuous mode of reception lost its radical character because its connection with the former mode remained obscure.

Of course, artistic production will inevitably degenerate semantically if it is not pursued as the specialized treatment of its own immanent problems, as an object of expert concern without regard for exoteric needs. All those who are involved (including the critic as a professionally trained recipient) engage in the problems they treat in terms of just one abstract criterion of validity. This sharply defined separation and the exclusive concentration on a single dimension breaks down, however, as soon as aesthetic experience is incorporated into the context of an individual life history or into a collective form of life. The reception of art by the layperson, or rather the person who is an expert in the field of everyday life, takes a *different course* from the reception of art by the professional critic who focuses principally on developments which are purely internal to art. Albrecht Wellmer has pointed out to me that an aesthetic experience which is not primarily translated into judgements of taste actually changes its functional character. For when it is related to problems of life or used in an exploratory fashion to illuminate a life-historical situation, it enters a language game which is no longer that of art criticism proper. In this case aesthetic experience not only revitalizes those need interpretations in the light of which we perceive our world, but also influences our cognitive interpretations and our normative expectations, and thus alters the way in which all these moments *refer back and forth* to one another.

Peter Weiss narrates an example of the kind of exploratory, life-orientating power which can emanate from the encounter with a great painting at a crucial juncture in an individual's life. He has his protagonist wander through the streets of Paris after his dejected return from the Spanish Civil War and anticipate in imagination his imminent encounter with Géricault's painting of the shipwrecked sailors in the Louvre. A specific variant of the mode of artistic reception I am talking about here is even more precisely captured in the heroic effort of appropriation described by the same author in the first volume of his *Asthetik des Widerstands* (Aesthetic of Resistance). He depicts a group of young people in Berlin in 1937, politically motivated workers who are eager to learn, who are acquiring the means of inwardly understanding the history, including the social history, of European painting through night school classes. Out of the obdurate stone of objective spirit they hew the fragments they are able to appropriate, drawing them into the experiential horizon of their own environment, one which is as remote from traditional education as it is from the existing regime, and turning them this way and that until they begin to glow:

Our conception of culture only rarely cohered with what presented itself to us as a gigantic repository of commodities, of accumulated insights and discoveries. As propertyless people, we approached this hoard with initial trepidation, filled with awe, until it became clear to us that we had to supply our own evaluations to it all, that we could only make use of it as a totality if it actually spoke to us about our own conditions of life, about the difficulties and the peculiarities of our own processes of thought.<sup>15</sup>

Examples like this, where the *expert culture is appropriated from the perspective of the lifeworld*, successfully preserve something of the original intention of the doomed surrealist rebellion, and more of Brecht's, and even Benjamin's, experimental reflections on the reception of non-auratic works of art. And similar observations can be made concerning the spheres of science and morality when we consider that the human, social and behavioural sciences have not been *entirely* divorced from the structure of practically orientated knowledge even now, and further that the concentration of universalistic ethics on questions of justice represents an abstraction which cries out to be connected to those problems concerning the good life that it initially excluded.

However, a differentiated reconnection of modern culture with an everyday sphere of praxis that is dependent on a living heritage and yet is impoverished by mere traditionalism will admittedly only prove



successful if the process of social modernization can *also* be turned into *other* non-capitalist directions, if the lifeworld can develop institutions of its own in a way currently inhibited by the autonomous systemic dynamics of the economic and administrative system.

### Three Conservatisms

Unless I am mistaken, the prospects for this are not encouraging. Virtually throughout the Western world a climate of opinion has arisen which promotes tendencies highly critical of modernism. The disillusionment provoked by the failure of programmes for the false sublation of art and philosophy, and the openly visible aporias of cultural modernity, have served as a pretext for various conservative positions. Let me briefly distinguish here the antimodernism of the Young Conservatives from the premodernism of the Old Conservatives, on the one hand, and the postmodernism of the New Conservatives, on the other.

The *Young Conservatives* essentially appropriate the fundamental experience of aesthetic modernity, namely the revelation of a decentred subjectivity liberated from all the constraints of cognition and purposive action, from all the imperatives of labour and use value, and with this they break out of the modern world altogether. They establish an implacable opposition to modernism precisely through a modernist attitude. They locate the spontaneous forces of imagination and self-experience, of affective life in general, in what is most distant and archaic, and in Manichaeic fashion oppose instrumental reason with a principle accessible solely to evocation, whether this is the will to power or sovereignty, Being itself or the Dionysian power for the poetic. In France this tradition leads from Georges Bataille through Foucault to Derrida. Over all these figures hovers, of course, the spirit of Nietzsche, newly resurrected in the 1970s.

The *Old Conservatives* do not allow themselves to be contaminated by cultural modernity in the first place. They observe with mistrust the collapse of substantive reason, the progressive differentiation of science, morality and art, the modern understanding of the world and its purely procedural canons of rationality, and recommend instead a return to positions *prior* to modernity (something which Max Weber regarded as a regression to the stage of material rationality). Here it is principally contemporary neo-Aristotelianism which has enjoyed some success, encouraged by the ecological question to renew the idea of a cosmological ethic. This tradition, which begins with Leo Strauss, has produced the interesting works of Hans Jonas and Robert Spaemann, for example.

It is the *New Conservatives* who relate most affirmatively to the

achievements of modernity. They welcome the development of modern science so long as it only oversteps its own sphere in order to promote technological advance, capitalist growth and a rational form of administration. Otherwise, they recommend a politics directed essentially at defusing the explosive elements of cultural modernity. According to one claim, science, once properly understood, has already become meaningless as far as orientation in the lifeworld is concerned. According to another, politics should be immunized as much as possible from the demands of moral-practical legitimation. And a third claim affirms the total immanence of art, contests the idea of its utopian content, and appeals to its fictive character, precisely in order to confine aesthetic experience to the private sphere. One could mention the early Wittgenstein, Carl Schmitt in his middle period, and the later Gottfried Benn in this connection. With the definitive segregation of science, morality and art into autonomous spheres split off from the lifeworld and administered by specialists, all that remains of cultural modernity is what is left after renouncing the project of modernity itself. The resulting space is to be filled by traditions which are to be spared all demands for justification. Of course, it remains extremely difficult to see how such traditions could continue to survive in the modern world without the governmental support of ministries of culture.

Like every other typology, this too is a simplification, but it may be of some use for the analysis of contemporary intellectual and political controversies. For I fear that antimodernist ideas, coupled with an element of premodernism, are gaining ground in the circles of the greens and other alternative groups. On the other hand, in the changing attitudes within the political parties there is evidence of a similar turn, namely of an alliance between the advocates of postmodernity and those of premodernity. It seems to me that no one political party has a monopoly on neoconservative attitudes and the abuse of intellectuals. For this reason, especially after the clarifications you provided in your opening remarks, Mayor Wallmann, I have good reason to be grateful for the liberal spirit in which the City of Frankfurt has awarded me a prize which bears the name of Adorno, a son of this city who as a philosopher and a writer did more to shape the image of the intellectual than almost anyone else in the Federal Republic of Germany, and who has himself become an exemplary model for intellectuals.

#### NOTES

This is the first complete English translation of the original version of a speech given by Habermas in September 1980, when he was awarded the Adorno Prize by the City of Frankfurt. The German text was published in Habermas's *Kleine*

*Politische Schriften I–IV* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981). Translated by Nicholas Walker.

- 1 W. Pehnt, 'Die Postmoderne als Lunapark', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 Aug. 1980, p. 17.
- 2 'Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewusstsein der Moderne', in H. R. Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 11ff.
- 3 T. W. Adorno, 'Ästhetische Theorie', in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 45.
- 4 Octavio Paz, *Essays*.
- 5 Adorno, 'Ästhetische Theorie', p. 41.
- 6 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), vol. 1.2, pp. 701f. In English see 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 261, 263.
- 7 Paz, *Essays*.
- 8 Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heinemann, 1979).
- 9 Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 65.
- 10 Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. 17.
- 11 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), para. 7.
- 12 *Ibid.*, para. 49.
- 13 Adorno, 'Ästhetische Theorie', p. 52.
- 14 D. Wellershoff, *Die Auflösung des Kunstbegriffs* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976).
- 15 Peter Weiss, *Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), vol. 1, p. 54.

would have the paradoxical result of discouraging debate between (say) anti-abortion activists, who appeal to a religious conception of family values with its attendant emphasis on the *natural* rights of the unborn foetus *qua* moral person, and pro-abortion activists, who appeal to utilitarian justifications of reproductive rights with its attendant de-emphasis on the personhood of the foetus. Cf. J. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 87.

- 11 J. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 201ff; in English as *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).
- 12 Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*, p. 205.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 222ff.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 229ff.
- 16 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, pp. 73–4.
- 17 According to Habermas, critical theory must refrain from ‘critically evaluating and normatively ordering totalities, forms of life and cultures, and life-contexts and epochs as a whole’; *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2: *System and Lifeworld*, trans. T. McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 383.
- 18 Habermas argues that ‘in place of the positive task of meeting a certain need for interpretation by ideological means, we have the negative requirement of preventing holistic interpretations from coming into existence’ (*ibid.*, pp. 354–5). Yet he also notes that ‘in place of “false consciousness” we today have a “fragmented consciousness” that blocks enlightenment by the mechanism of reification.’
- 19 The following remarks touch on no fewer than *six* problems of mediation: (1) the mediation of expert cultures and the everyday lifeworld; (2) the mediation of rationalization complexes with one another; (3) the mediation of distinct aspects of validity in everyday speech; (4) the mediation of distinct aspects of validity in specialized discourse; (5) the formal unity of argumentation common to all discourses; and (6) the mediation of discourse and action. Problems 1–5 are especially pertinent to this paper. (5) is problematic even by Habermas’s standards, and is explicitly rejected by Lyotard. (3) and (4) are given summary treatment by Habermas but comprise, as we shall see, the very core of Lyotard’s postmodernism.
- 20 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, pp. 62ff.
- 21 J. Habermas, ‘Wahrheitstheorien’, in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 174–6.
- 22 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, p. 398.
- 23 J. Habermas, ‘Questions and Counterquestions’, in Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity*, p. 203, emphasis added.
- 24 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, pp. 252–3.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–20.
- 26 Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*, pp. 199ff.
- 27 Habermas, ‘Questions and Counterquestions’, p. 203.
- 28 Lyotard’s defence of a pagan, postmodern Kantianism is given in J.-F. Lyotard and J.-L. Thébaud, *Just Gaming* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 89–90; original French edition, *Au Juste* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1979).

- 29 Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, pp. 97ff, 107ff, 114.
- 30 It is true that Lyotard sometimes invokes consensus on linguistic rules to emphasize Wittgenstein's point about the public (or social) nature of language *games* as a prior constraint on and condition of the personal (or *subjective*) choice of words. To this extent, he *seems* less radical than Davidson, who deploys Quine's model of radical translation to account for the context-specific understanding of malapropisms and other highly personalized and original usages. Appearances notwithstanding, Lyotard no less than Davidson rejects the idea that linguistic convention is an *absolute*, external constraint on individual creativity. Hence, contrary to Habermas, no rules – not even those governing rational discourse – are immune to change. However, whereas Davidson, deploying Tarski-style T-sentences as a basis for reconstructing radically localized 'passing theories' of behavioural meaning, generalizes the condition of radical translation and innovation – literally eliminating any conception of linguistic convention – Lyotard holds that innovative changes in the rules of the game occur mainly at the fringes of linguistic usage, and always presuppose at least some consensus on other linguistic rules. Cf. D. Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in E. Lepore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 433–46.
- 31 Habermas, 'A Reply', pp. 245, 254.
- 32 Derrida's deconstruction of the Declaration of Independence plays on the same *paradox of authorization*. For a comparison of this deconstruction with Lyotard's own deconstruction of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, see David Ingram, *Reason, History, and Politics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 346–53; and J. Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence', *New Political Science* 15 (1986), pp. 7–15.
- 33 The differences between Habermas and Lyotard on the subject of popular sovereignty and consensus have been exaggerated. Given the pluralism of liberal democracy, Habermas, too, voices scepticism about 'the people' as a placeholder for democratic self-determination. For him, consensus on formal constitutional provisions – in their abstract rather than concrete form – is practically all that remains of our shared identity; yet the 'subjectless' process of democratic dialogue still remains initially oriented towards reaching agreement on substantive ends, especially as these figure in the concrete meaning of constitutional provisions. Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*, p. 365.
- 34 PC, pp. 61–3; *Faktizität und Geltung*, pp. 74ff.; and J. Habermas and N. Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie – Was leistet die Systemforschung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971).
- 35 Lyotard, *Au Juste*, pp. 182ff.
- 36 I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 15ff.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 38 I. Kant, 'An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?', part 2 of 'The Strife of the Faculties', in Kant, *On History*, ed. L. W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 143.
- 39 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 123–38.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 82ff.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 136–7.

- 43 'As regards aesthetic feeling, the partisan of the universality of the beautiful demands a consensus that is identical to that obtainable for the true, and his adversary, in showing that it is impossible (because there is no concept corresponding to the aesthetic presentation), seems to renounce any universality whatsoever. The Kantian solution appeals to the feeling itself that one and the other necessarily experience, without which they would not even be able to agree that they were in disagreement. This feeling proves that there exists a bond of "communicability" between them' (*DF*, p. 243).
- 44 Lyotard, *Au Juste*, p. 52.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 46 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, p. 398.
- 47 Habermas thinks that speech-act theory ought not to sacrifice *universal* significations on the 'altar of contextualism' ('A Reply', p. 236). But when speaking of the 'heterological' impurity of everyday discourse (p. 263), he concedes that 'argumentational games do not form a hierarchy' that would enable us to adduce 'final reasons', since this would entail 'freez[ing] the context in which we here and now consider a certain type of reason to be the best' – in effect prematurely closing an inherently open process of dialogue (p. 248).
- 48 Lyotard's appeal to both rational purity (modernism) and aesthetic impurity (postmodernism) reflects a tension between two different critical standpoints. The *transcendental* standpoint presumes to offer *determinant* (prescriptive) judgements about the limits determining the valid deployments of specific types of reasoning. It therefore seeks to preserve the *autonomy* (incommensurability) of morality vis-à-vis science. The *immanent* standpoint, by contrast, modestly denies such spectatorial distance; immersed in the sea of speech, its judgement is as impure, contextual and metaphorical as the genres and regimens it mediates. Since it lacks the requisite autonomy to adjudicate the rights of other language games, it must resign itself to feeling the inevitable injustices and paralogies perpetrated by unbounded language games. In my opinion, both standpoints, when taken to their *logical* extremes, are incoherent. The transcendental standpoint proffers conditional (determinant) judgements *as if they were* unconditional assertions. Its own autonomy is purchased at the expense of abandoning any unitary basis from which to regulate conflicting discourses. The immanent standpoint proffers disinterested (reflexive) judgements *as if they were* partial and prejudiced. Its immersion in the impure contexts of speech is purchased at the expense of its critical autonomy (hence paralogical disruptions of hegemonic injustice are indistinguishable from hegemonic violations of autonomy). I contend that the only way around this dilemma is to deny the premise – common to both sides – that reason and aesthetics are purely opposed types.
- 49 Cf. notes 47 and 48 above. Habermas appeals to Davidson in criticizing the idea of *literally* incommensurable conceptual schemes. I argue – with Kuhn and against Davidson – that this idea is partially defensible (at least with respect to core concepts) and doesn't speak against the possibility of *metaphorical* commensurability. This means that *rational* dialogue between speakers inhabiting literally incommensurable conceptual schemes (world-views, etc.) is possible, so long as such dialogue allows for non-literal and non-univocal linguistic usage. It therefore means that logical criteria of literalness and univocity that play a valid role in *normal* scientific discourse might not apply in the *extraordinary* discourses characteristic of science in

- the throes of revolutionary crisis or in other multicultural contexts. Cf. J. Habermas, *Erläuterung zur Diskursethik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 213–18; D. Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 183–98; and Ingram, *Reason, History, and Politics*, ch. 8.
- 50 M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 3–30.
- 51 Lyotard, *Au Juste*, p. 188.
- 52 Some support for ascribing this *simple* view of justice may be found in Lyotard's reference to the temporary contract as an ambiguous tendency throughout all domains of life and his assertion that 'one must maximize as much as possible the multiplication of small narratives' (Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p. 59). Cf. S. Benhabib, 'Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard', *New German Critique* 33 (Fall 1985), p. 124; and S. K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 136.
- 53 For a defence of a dual-democratic vision within the American context, see B. Ackerman, *We The People: Foundations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 54 Cf. J. Fishkin, *Tyranny and Legitimacy: A Critique of Political Theories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).
- 55 Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, p. 398.
- 56 Habermas, 'A Reply', p. 226. Habermas discusses certain varieties of systematically distorted communication that bear a striking resemblance to the sorts of *différends* mentioned by Lyotard. One such variety involves covertly switching the context and meaning of an argument, so that, for example, it ceases to be about a cognitive assertion and becomes a justification for a moral prescription. See J. Habermas, 'Überlegung zur Kommunikationspathologie', in Habermas, *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen*, pp. 255–6; 267–9.
- 57 Habermas, 'A Reply', p. 226.
- 58 *Ibid.*





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